Corporeality and Ethics in the Fiction of J.G. Ballard

by

Andrew Richardson

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
September, 2004

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

To comply with the Canadian Privacy Act the National Library of Canada has requested that the following pages be removed from this copy of the thesis:

Preliminary Pages
- Examiners Signature Page (pii)
- Dalhousie Library Copyright Agreement (piii)

Appendices
- Copyright Releases (if applicable)

To Alyson, and to my mother and father

Table of Contents

Abstract

The thesis explores ethical dilemmas that follow in the wake of J.G. Ballard's early 1970s novels: *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*—a quartet which the thesis treats as a microcosm of the thematic preoccupations that, with variations, recur throughout Ballard's body of work. The argument I put forward is that forms of elemental corporeality appear in the quartet as an antidote to the technologically facilitated a-consequential thinking of Ballard's characters. Responding to poststructuralist criticism, the thesis acknowledges the fragility of the referential link between Ballard's fiction and an idea of corporeality anterior to cultural inscription and technological interaction, but insists on the importance of maintaining that link. Complicating the 'semiotic' body theorised by several of Ballard's poststructuralist critics, the thesis focusses on a form of corporeality which, if it signifies anything, signifies vulnerability, weakness or human limitation. Hence, while the quartet remains a seminal moment in the cultural construction of 'cyborgs,' the early version of this bio-technological figure found in the quartet has lasting significance because Ballard does not gloss over the possibility that its realisation in practical terms may beget victimisation or exploitation. Because the thesis is premised on the notion that ethical sensibility is enriched as one works through literary textures within narratives, its individual chapters feature careful considerations of episodic nuance. Together, these close readings show how explanations of Ballard's representation of psychopathological behaviour in terms of a figurative expansion of the category of 'the human,' and a rejection of the exclusionary violence implied in that normative category, must also account for psychotic limits—points where embracing the radical otherness of the psychopathic risks becoming merely irresponsible relative to the actuality of the characters' behaviour. Acknowledging these limits does not cancel the ethical value of a reading practice which normalises Ballard's psychopathic characters, but it does suggest that such deconstructions of categorical boundaries should not be undertaken lightly.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr Anthony Stewart for his guidance, words of encouragement, constructive criticism and patience; the members of the examining committee—Dr Nicholas Ruddick, Dr Dorota Glowacka, Dr Ken Paradis and Dr Ann Martin—for their insight and helpful suggestions; and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Killam Foundation for financial support. I also want to express my gratitude to family, friends and peers whose conversation, reassurances and support helped see me through the writing of this thesis; my parents in particular deserve special mention, and I hope they know I love them dearly. And finally to Alyson Stopps, who continued to believe in my abilities when I was too eager to doubt them: thank you for sharing your life with me.

Chapter One - Introduction

Corporeality, Virtuality, Ethics: J.G. Ballard's Early Seventies Quartet

Of the several scenes in David Cronenberg's 1996 film, *Crash*, that do not appear in the original J.G. Ballard novel, the most incongruous is perhaps an episode that takes place in a tattoo parlour. There, the film's central figure, James Ballard, watches as a "wound tattoo" is applied to the abdomen of his mentor, Vaughan (Cronenberg 54). The scene is not necessarily out of place relative to the novel; one can imagine Ballard's Vaughan paying for the same tattoo easily enough. It is, rather, the dialogue that seems to work against the overall aesthetics of the film. As Cronenberg's Vaughan observes the handiwork of the tattooist, he urges her to make the image more "dirty and ragged" because it is supposed to be a "prophetic" tattoo (54–55); but Cronenberg's aesthetic, at least in *Crash*, is curiously free of dirt and raggedness. Novelist Iain Sinclair has commented that Cronenberg's adaptation, unlike Ballard's novel, is a remarkably polished vision. Gone are "the strange particulars of London that Ballard had pressed into a Blakean mapping of his own"; in their place: the "netherworld of [. . .] Toronto" (Sinclair 11). For Sinclair, this not only drained Ballard's "wild-energy novel" of its intensity, by which he means the way the novel captures all the headiness of sixties-era social change (57), but also sanitizes it, discarding the novel's preoccupation with spilled bodily fluids, and replacing it with a "safe and elegant" pornography (122). Even though Cronenberg never shows car crashes in slow motion, and despite the fact that the characters on screen certainly talk dirty, have sex in junkyards, and wear the same soiled

clothes for days on end, the extremely mannered cinematography makes the characters' exploits seem curiously antiseptic and seamless. After the film's debut, Ballard enthused that Cronenberg had made an even more extreme *Crash* than his original novel (Cronenberg xi). One reason why Ballard might have responded to the film in this way is Cronenberg's seductively cool treatment of the subject matter. In effect, the 'look' that Cronenberg gave to Ballard's story doubled Ballard's characters' desire for 'life' lived within the glossy photographic or film image. If this is indeed the case with the film *Crash*, then Vaughan's comment to the tattooist can be read as strangely ironic, almost an admission on Cronenberg's part that the seamlessness of the film is a trap set for the viewer. That is to say, Vaughan's words should remind audiences that what they are witnessing in the unorthodox behaviour of the characters is a sanitised transformation of sensibilities, no matter how many directorial decisions have been made to lend the action on screen more immediacy and impact.

I have chosen to open this study of J.G. Ballard's fiction with this brief detour through Cronenberg's screenplay because it seems to me that Vaughan's tattoo-parlour commentary on prophecy has a certain resonance with the primary concern of the following study: that is, with the moral dilemmas that follow in the wake of Ballard's artistic vision. The study deals with the quartet of novels, including *Crash* (1972), that Ballard wrote between 1966 and 1975—the other three texts being *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *Concrete Island* (1974), and *High-Rise* (1975).[1] The argument put forward is that the complex representation of corporeality in these novels functions as a limit to the a-consequential thinking implicit in the characters' attempts to realise for

themselves an existence in excessively semiotic realms. In part, the study responds to extant poststructuralist interpretations of Ballard's work by questioning and augmenting the version of corporeality generated by their stress on Ballard's semiotics and apparent authorial stance of moral ambivalence. In general terms, the poststructuralist attempt to read Ballard's semiotics and ambivalence in terms of their potential to inspire theorisations of postmetaphysical ethics risks imparting to Ballard's representation of corporeality a 'safe and elegant' quality all its own. In effect, this kind of reading dissolves the imperiled referential link between Ballard's fiction and an idea of corporeality anterior to cultural inscription and technological enhancement, thereby producing out of Ballard's texts a strictly semiotic, textual and machinic body fully interactive with the world of technological objects—even when those 'interactions' are characterised by violent mutilation and dismemberment. This study does not seek to repudiate the cultural significance of this theorisation of the body—which will be referred to throughout the following chapters as the 'semiotic body'; indeed it accepts the notion that Ballard's evocation of this body is a seminal moment in thought and writing about the cyborg, a speculative subject position that has been the focus of much political and ethical discourse over the last decade and half, particularly on the part of feminist theorists such as Donna Haraway. The study does, however, try to demonstrate that the early version of this bio-technological figure intimated throughout the quartet is important primarily because Ballard refuses to gloss over the fact that a corporeal substrate is sacrificed en route to its realisation, with the attendant possibility that such 'sacrifices' might beget forms of victimisation. As a result, the following chapters look to the nature

of and interactions between Ballard's characters more than to his semiotics, principally because it is through them that the question of corporeality within an increasingly semiotic realm is dramatised and contested.

A response to specific applications of poststructuralist theory to criticism of Ballard's work makes up the bulk of chapter one, which voices my reservations regarding the concept of corporeality either promoted by or implied in these scholarly approaches. In anticipation of that discussion and the readings of individual novels, this general introduction sets out to theorise the notion of corporeality that informs this study, and the significance of that notion to ethical thought; then contextualises the quartet with respect to relevant socio-historical material and the author's literary and artistic influences; and lastly offers brief introductions to each chapter.

1. Corporeality and ethics after poststructuralism

Over at least the last decade and a half, poststructuralists have problematised theoretical attempts to ground ethics and politics on appeals to the materiality of the body. Practitioners of poststructuralist feminism, in particular, have set out to interrogate the logic animating notions of pre-discursive materiality and the not-always- obvious political implications of positing such a concept. It hardly needs to be said that asserting the ethical significance of an irreducible corporeality would necessarily be subject to similar scrutiny. Thus, because the following study centres on the representation of the corporeal in Ballard's quartet as well as the ethical implications of that representation, an initial encounter with poststructuralist discourse on the body is imperative. The theorisation of

materiality and its discontents advanced by Judith Butler in the title chapter of *Bodies That Matter* (1993) is an indispensable text in this respect.

After exploring several of the key points in Butler's analysis, I want to consider the merits of deploying—deploying "tactically" to use Butler's term (*Bodies That Matter* 29)—a provisionally universalising notion of 'pre-discursive' corporeality which would, nonetheless, have embedded within it the complexities and paradoxes foregrounded in Butler's text. For examples of such a concept and its use, the discussion will turn to the pragmatic notion of corporeality advanced by Vivian Sobchack in an essay responding to Jean Baudrillard's reading of Ballard's *Crash*, and to the mapping of the human sensorium at the centre of Susan Buck-Morss's analysis of forms of desensitisation associated with modernity's heavy reliance on technology. Lastly, the discussion will assess the applicability of these 'tactical' corporealities to a wider discussion of Ballard's response to late twentieth-century Western culture.

A key element of Judith Butler's poststructuralist theorisation of materiality is that it offers the reader an object of contemplation that is neither fully reducible to textuality, nor wholly exterior to signification, nor inert. Butler opens her analysis with a succinct statement of the fundamental conceptual dilemma involved in any assumption of a pre-discursive materiality: "The body posited as prior to the sign," she writes, "is always *posited* or *signified* as *prior*. This signification produces as an *effect* of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which *precedes* its own action" (*Bodies That Matter* 30, original emphasis). While to some readers this assertion might suggest a transformation of the solidity of bodies into a pure

effect of language, Butler herself is quick to point out both that her own understanding of the relationship between bodies and signification is predicated on an idea of "indissolubility" and that "to think through the indissolubility of materiality and signification is no easy matter" (30). In other words, the task of synthesising the idea of a solid but mutable substance with the significations that constitute the quality of its substantiality is a difficult undertaking (incidentally, one hears echoes of a second meaning in Butler's formulation: that to have to contemplate that synthesis using the necessarily limited body that the theorist *is* is, itself, an act and concept of immense complexity).

Positing these complexities raises the question that is central to Butler's analysis: If signification and materiality are inextricably linked to one another, then are notions of pre-discursive materiality not in fact "constructed through a problematic gendered matrix" (29)? In other words, when the critic, on behalf of feminism, and against or in ignorance of poststructuralist discourse, makes an ethical or political appeal to irreducible materiality, is he or she not necessarily caught in a form of false consciousness, regardless of how well-intentioned the appeal might be? Such questions, in turn, set the stage for Butler's analysis of the exclusionary violation of the feminine—defined by Butler via the work of Luce Irigaray as the other of the masculine's other (cf 35–36)—which founds much, if not all, philosophical discourse on materiality following Plato. A thorough exploration of that analysis is not necessary here, but a respectful outline of its salient points is needed if one is to get a sense of what is at stake in deploying a tactical corporeality that is internally contested.

In the first section of her analysis, Butler finds precedents for her understanding of the indissolubility of materiality and signification in the work of Aristotle and Michel Foucault. From the former's *De Anima* she borrows the idea of matter as the soul's substance *in potentia*, awaiting "actualization" (32–33). Thinking the 'material' in these terms is synonymous with observing a *process* of materialisation, which is the same as saying that materiality in Aristotle does not designate a pre-discursive and inert thing but rather a dynamic coming into being of that thing via language. Butler's reading of the latter's *Discipline and Punish*, meanwhile, opens a pathway toward re-conceiving that dynamic as an operation of power. The actualisation or materialisation of matter becomes a process of *normalization* according to a code or "historically specific imaginary ideal" by which bodies come to be known or are made intelligible (33–34). When perfected, the operations of power enforcing codes or imaginary ideals mask the process *qua* process "by constituting an object domain [. . .] as a taken-for-granted ontology" (34–35). Butler's main qualification concerning this Foucauldian materiality as process-of-normalization is that it is assumed to account for the total field of materialisation, and thereby steps around the possibility that there may be "*modalities* of materialization[,]" some of which implicitly delineate areas of unintelligibility as they produce bodies (35).

To redress this shortcoming and attempt an articulation of the excluded unintelligible, Butler turns to consider the deconstruction of Platonic thought about form and matter apparent in the feminist theory of Luce Irigaray. For Irigaray, philosophical distinctions between 'matter' and 'form as actualised matter' (eg. those of Aristotle and Foucault) are

founded on a fundamental exclusion of the feminine (cf. Butler 35–38). Plato's attempt in *Timaeus* to conceive the distinction between matter and form—or how the latter arises out of the former—in particular, associates the feminine with the 'matter' side of the dichotomy by figuring matter in terms of a series of substitute images: nurse, mother, *chora*, receptacle (40–42). However, the identification between *the* feminine and these metonyms can, according to Butler and Irigaray, efface the feminine through the attempt at signification of it: "In a sense," Butler writes, "the receptacle is not simply a figure *for* the excluded, but, taken as a figure, stands for the excluded and thus performs or enacts yet another set of exclusions of all that remains unfigurable under the sign of the feminine" (42). Thus, Plato produces what Butler terms a "specular" feminine internal to the dichotomy when he thinks he is representing the "excessive" feminine actually erased by that dichotomy; that said, Butler also qualifies her own distinction between *specular* and *excessive* by reminding us that any figuration of the latter will, itself, produce an effacement (39). The Irigarayan feminine, then, appears in Butler's analysis as something like an 'impossible-to-represent-within-phallogocentric-discourse.' Whatever *it* may be, it can only be, relative to that discourse, the thing whose erasure guarantees a paradoxical materialisation and disembodiment of masculine reason (cf. 39, 48–49). Hence, in Butler's reading of Irigaray reading Plato, the masculine is discovered to be the only gender category capable of materialisation, as both itself and its other. And here Butler points out a fundamental paradox about the form of the masculine in Plato's discourse, or rather about the form the masculine takes in it: because Plato both excludes the feminine from the process of materialisation that turns matter into form, and, at the same time,

figures matter as feminine, what he actually ends up with is "a body which is no body, in its masculine form, [and] a matter which is no body, in its feminine" (49):

> The body that is reason dematerializes the bodies that may not properly stand for reason or its replicas, and yet this is a figure in crisis, for this body of reason is itself the phantasmatic dematerialization of masculinity, one which requires that women and slaves, children and animals be the body, perform the bodily functions, that it will not perform. (49)

The final manoeuvre in Butler's deconstruction of pre-discursive materiality is, in a sense, to further radicalise the Irigarayan feminine itself, through a search for "the 'elsewhere' of Irigaray's 'elsewhere'" (49). In a very close reading (Butler admits it might be an "overreading" [257]) of Plato's language, Butler returns for one final time to the metonymic association between the feminine and matter, stressing his "prohibition" against the receptacle assuming forms other than 'her' own formless form; the receptacle's status as the substance out of which form emerges is predicated on its (forced) maintenance of its own internal homogeneity. The key term for Butler, here, is the verb *to assume*, which Irigaray strategically interprets as "to conceive," so as to highlight the myth of the masculine's self-generating power at the root of Plato's discourse (Irigaray ctd. in Butler 50). Butler, however, chooses to (mis)read the verb as "to have or to take a wife" (50). At the risk of greatly diminishing the scope of Butler's speculations, one might say that she reads Plato in this particular way in order both to evoke a formless femininity capable of exercising sexual agency and to gesture toward the liberating sex and gender confusions that might be inspired by such a counter-foundational concept. To this end, Butler evokes a sort of sex and gender carnival whose

reversals of stereotypical subject positions are performed at the expense of an anxious masculine principle:

> One might read this prohibition [against the assumption of form] that secures the impenetrability of the masculine as a kind of panic, a panic over becoming 'like' her, effeminized, or a panic over what might happen if a masculine penetration of the masculine were authorized, or a feminine penetration of the feminine, or the feminine penetration of the masculine or a reversibility of those positions—not to mention a full-scale confusion over what qualifies as 'penetration' anyway. (51)

Here, and in the other speculative gestures made in the final section of her analysis, Butler essentially leads by example—practising the counsel she gives other radical feminists and poststructuralist thinkers. The twofold task she imparts to her readers is to "refigure [the] necessary 'outside' [of all truth regimes] as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome[,]" and to work for "the preservation of the outside, the site where discourse meets its limits, where the opacity of what is not included in a given regime of truth acts as a disruptive site of linguistic impropriety and unrepresentability" (53).

One is tempted, at this point, to imagine a utopian moment in which the masculine ceases to panic, the feminine's exercise of sexual agency is not 'normalised,' per se, but welcomed, and the range of sex and gender fluidities following on from both transformations could be materialised—which might entail the complete dissolution of the semantics attaching themselves to these gendered terms. However, Butler's theorisations immediately encourage us to view such utopianism with suspicion—to treat it as the equivalent in theory of premature ejaculation. A genuine materialisation of as-

yet unimagined sexualities figured in the above 'carnival of penetration' would, surely, necessitate a new and complementary form of discourse as well. Barring a brief mention of Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic earlier in the chapter (41), there is nothing suggested in Butler's analysis that would approximate such a 'language-that-is-not-one.' Her call for theory and practice that continues to refigure and preserve the outsides of truth regimes is, then, a call to the joys of indefinite subversion, rather than a dream of a performative gender utopia or the ultimate conversion of the masculine.

Butler's theoretical meditations on the discursive constructed-ness of materiality are subsumed within a larger project of re-theorising "that irreducible specificity that is said to ground feminist practice" (29)—the political signifier 'women.' She insists that, like materiality, "the category of women does not become useless through deconstruction, but becomes one whose uses are no longer reified as 'referents,' and which stand a chance of being opened up, indeed, of coming to signify in ways that none of us can predict in advance" (29). Because of its semantic associations with the words *materiality* and *body*—and, following Butler, *women* as well—the term *corporeality* should also be seen to have undergone an interrogation, deconstruction or 'opening up' to unforeseen re-configurations, and yet still make itself useful as a tactical term in the face of specific contingencies. Hence, this opening detour through Butler's theory is meant to demonstrate up front that "to invoke matter [or corporeality] is to invoke a sedimented history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures" (49), and thereby to complicate up front the inherently problematic generalising use of the term *corporeality* contained in the following study. In other words, I want to move forward on the basis of Butler's

assertion that interrogating the sexual politics of discourse about matter does not necessarily make a term like *corporeality* unusable, even though it is always subject to internal contestation. One other advantage of an opening reference to Butler's theory of materiality as materialisation is that it provides us with an emblematic corporeality to keep in mind as we examine the complex interactions between the corporeal and the semiotic apparent in Ballard's novels.

Of course, the usefulness of a term is contingent upon the context in which it must be deployed. And in relation to Ballard's quartet and the realm it represents, one corporeality that may be deployed tactically is akin to both the body presented in Vivian Sobchack's "Beating the Meat / Surviving the Text" (1998), an essay that responds partly to the representation of bodies and technology in *Crash*, and the sensorium theorised by Susan Buck-Morss in "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics" (1992), an extensive meditation on the desensitising effect of modern technology. On the basis of what has been learned from Butler's text, one could say that both Sobchack and Buck-Morss ground their respective essays on an ethical and political pragmatics of under-theorised corporeality.

Sobchack's essay is aimed specifically at the work, person and body of French theorist Jean Baudrillard, but it also attacks "the self-exterminating impulses of the discourses of disembodiment" ("Beating the Meat" 314) that have attended the development of modern technology. Her argument is directed less at the concept of the 'cyborg' put forward by Donna Haraway, per se, than at naive manifestations of "cyborgism" (314)—of which she excuses Ballard, for reasons explored below.

Sobchack makes claims against cyborgism on behalf of a body lived as a subject, rather than thought of as an object (cf. 311). At the end of the essay, for example, she asserts that

> [b]oth significant affection and a moral stance [. . .] are based on the lived sense and feeling of the human body not merely as a material object one possesses and analyses among others, but as a material subject that experiences its own objectivity, that has the capacity to bleed and suffer and hurt for others because it can sense its own possibilities for suffering and pain. (319)

In other words, Sobchack grounds her ethical system in a phenomenology of the lived-body, and more specifically, of her subjective 'position' within and as her *own* body—a body which, by the time the essay had been revised from an earlier version,[2] had been through an amputation procedure, as part of cancer 'treatment,' and seen the addition of a prosthetic limb.

Her argument against a too-hasty idealisation of the figure of the cyborg thus carries a powerful sense of conviction in part because it is written in the form of a first-hand testimonial. But despite the force of its rhetoric, "Beating the Meat" does, technically, end up perpetuating the discursive 'false consciousness' outlined above, via Butler. Critic Bradley Butterfield—his own poststructuralism allied to Baudrillard's work and at least parallel to Butler's theory—observes rightly that Sobchack's theorisation of the subject is founded on "its materiality and its capacity to suffer as the real basis for ethical behaviour" but he also replies to this theorisation that the embodied subject *subject to* suffering "is determined as much by technology and economics as by suffering" ("Ethical Value and Negative Aesthetics" 71). Butterfield's critique is of course accurate. To

make her case, Sobchack must set aside questions of economics, technology, and gender. She must also set aside the contention that regardless of how hard she might try to identify herself with the flesh that embodies her—or, more accurately, dissolve the distance between the pronoun *she* referencing the subjectivity of 'Vivian Sobchack' and the organic matter signified by the word *flesh* by erasing the verb *embodies*—the form which that flesh takes at any given moment is historically determined and in part a discursive production. Sobchack herself admits as much in the essay when she implies, however ironically, that her diet and physiotherapy, and the use of everyday body technologies such as contact lenses, are examples of the Foucauldian process of materialisation deployed and critiqued by Butler (cf. 313–14). Hence, to set out to discuss the corporeal as a substance of vulnerability, limitation, weakness and unpredictability is necessarily to predicate one's discourse on an under-theorised corporeality. And this in turn risks carrying forward any one of the conceptual problems articulated above.

But does pointing out these limitations in Sobchack's implicit under-theorisation of the body necessarily diminish the usefulness of deploying an *imaginary*, undifferentiated and provisionally universalised corporeality, subject to suffering and at times uncooperative in its myriad interfaces with modern technology, and displaying these physical limitations in ways that are not readily recuperated under the Freudian notion of the pleasure of un-pleasure? How one answers that question would seem to depend on whether one perceives a serious enough crisis at hand, a crisis requiring that one put aside, but not dismiss or forget, the kind of linguistic contestations that concern Butler.

We need to keep in mind that the phenomenological body of which Sobchack speaks, from within which she speaks, is an urgent political statement rooted in distress—distress over the contemporary rush toward more and more intimate couplings between technology and human flesh, and the prevalence of, not theories of the post-human exactly, but a discourse that might be described as anti-mortal romanticism. Sobchack's corporeality may be an illusion, but it is nonetheless a pragmatic illusion.

Although Sobchack provides an account of the type of discourse she is reacting against, she tends to deal with the most contemporary manifestations of techno-romanticism. Of course, these contemporary examples are part of a much longer tradition, and the technological age that they respond to also stretches back into the recent past. Much of this history is contained in Susan Buck-Morss's reconsideration of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Buck-Morss's essay is a lengthy attempt to theorise the task of a radical political art. With Benjamin's essay "haunt[ing]" her, the thesis that Buck-Morss advances, and claims Benjamin knew very well, is that "sensory alienation lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics" (376)—which is perhaps similar to saying that a population with dulled senses is both docile and hardhearted and therefore easily manipulated. She is, of course, echoing the epilogue of Benjamin's essay, where he links futurism's aesthetic response to modern warfare and fascism's aestheticisation of politics, and points toward a future 'communist' art that would seek to challenge the sensory alienation expressed and celebrated by futurism, and managed by fascism (Benjamin 241–42, cf. Buck-Morss 376–77)). The word *managed* is key here, and Buck-Morss emphasises the

way in which Benjamin first deployed it: to indicate that fascist ideologues did not invent the sensory alienation of the masses but rather manipulated it to their own advantage. As a result, the sensory crisis does not simply disappear with the end of the ideological struggles between fascism, communism and liberal democracy, but manifests itself in new ways and at the hands of new masters. Hence, while Buck-Morss seeks to clarify Benjamin's ideas, she is also, and perhaps more importantly, attempting to update them for a world in which "politics as spectacle (including the aestheticized spectacle of war) has become a commonplace" (376)—a world dominated by television screens and myriad other forms of what she will go on to categorise as anaesthetic "technics" (390). As one possible counter to that technological context and the sensory alienation it perpetuates, Buck-Morss revives what she believes Benjamin was asking of radical art, that it "*undo* the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to *restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation*, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by *passing through* them" (377, original emphases). For Buck-Morss, the implications of the idea of such an art form—art *practice* is probably more appropriate—are sweeping. Aesthetics, itself, would be restored to its etymological roots in the Greek words *aisthitikos* and *aisthisis*—"perceptive by feeling" and "the sensory experience of perception" respectively—by such an art practice, and from there to its "original field": "not art but reality—corporeal, material nature" (378).[3]

To make its case for the urgency of an art practice that would re-awaken the senses in this way, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics" presents both a primer on the conceptual dissociation of reason and art from the corporeal accomplished by the Western

philosophical tradition (378–82), and, as a means to set up a counter-tradition, a detailed history of "the development, not of the meaning of terms, but of the human sensorium itself" (382). The latter task, however, turns out not to be quite what it says it will be. Buck-Morss does in fact trace the meaning of terms—those that have been used to theorise the sensorium within the various branches of 'natural philosophy' or modern science since, arguably, the Renaissance. There is, then, a fundamental contradiction underlying Buck-Morss's essay: it presents itself as partly a history of the corporeal, with all the evolutionary overtones such a project brings with it, but it also seems to posit a corporeality which is pre-discursive—the "synaesthetic system" (385). The way Buck-Morss deploys this system makes it not subject to change over time, nor differentiated by the subject's gender and sex, nor more or less acute based on the quality of the subject's acculturation, nor subject to improvement or deterioration through aging. Indeed, as we have just seen, the opening of Buck-Morss's essay in particular suggests that radically political art would ideally lead its creator(s) and audience, both of which may turn out to be one and same depending on how that radical art manifests itself, back to a prelapsarian corporeality. The body ideal in Buck-Morss's analysis is, to echo Sobchack, a body brought fully back to its senses (cf. "Beating the Meat" 312, 318).

Buck-Morss is not so much working a dialectic in the hope of a synthesis, as one might expect given her Marxism, but instead opposing a myth of her own to the one perpetuated by the Western philosophical tradition, and realised, for reasons both beneficial and detrimental, in the widespread application of anaesthetic technics. We have already encountered this myth briefly above: the self-generating man discussed in

Butler's deconstruction of phallogocentric discourse on materiality and the feminine. Buck-Morss terms him "*homo autotelus*" (380): "What seems to fascinate modern 'man' about this myth[,]" Buck-Morss writes,

> is the narcissistic illusion of total control. The fact that one can *imagine* something that *is* not, is extrapolated in the fantasy that one can (re)create the world according to plan (a degree of control impossible, for example, in the creation of a living, breathing child). It is the fairy-tale promise that wishes are granted—without the fairy-tale's wisdom that the consequences can be disastrous. (380)

Buck-Morss's perspective on the relationship between the masculine and corporeality created by the myth differs somewhat from Butler's view—which is itself cited in one of Buck-Morss's footnotes (380). Where Butler points out the paradox of a process of materialisation which is solely the privilege of the masculine and inextricably linked to the feminisation of matter, Buck-Morss stresses the armoured quality of the figure of self-generative man: "The truly autogenetic being is entirely self-contained[,]" she observes, "If it has any body at all, it must be one impervious to the senses, hence safe from external control. Its potency is its lack of corporeal response" (380); and in a Lacanian vein, Buck-Morss adds that "[i]n abandoning its sense, [*homo autotelus*], of course, gives up sex. [. . . I]n this castrated form [. . .] the being is gendered male—as if, having nothing so embarrassingly unpredictable or rationally uncontrollable as the sense-sensitive penis, it can then confidently claim to *be* the phallus" (380). To counter this myth and the philosophical tradition that institutes and celebrates it, Buck-Morss opts not to rework the established terminology of aesthetic theory from

Baumgarten through Kant to Nietzsche, but instead to theorise the synaesthetic system via the work of Vladimir Betz, Charles Bell, and Sigmund Freud, as well as mappings of cognition developed within the field of neurology (cf. 383–87).[4] On the basis of this 'counter-tradition,' the remainder of her essay describes the development of modernity from the late nineteenth century in terms of the rise and gradual perfection of anaesthetic technics (cf. 388–410).

Her starting point for the latter of these two discussions is, of course, Benjamin. The condition of modernity that he assessed in *Charles Baudelaire* was one in which, as Buck-Morss puts it,

> the synaesthetic system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. [. . .] Its goal is to *numb* the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become [. . .] one of *an*aesthetics. (390)

Here, the body (of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century factory worker) armours itself against the "overstimulation" of his or her environment (390). Concurrently, in medical and surgical science, in drug use, in the realms of private and public entertainment, and in some art forms, the 'anaesthetic' (non)experience of shock becomes "an elaborate technics" (390). Casting a wide net, Buck-Morss cites, among other things, the development of ether and local and general anaesthetics (391–93), the pandemic of opiate and alcohol use in modern societies (393–94), the "sensory distraction" of Victorian phantasmagorias (394), and Wagner's *Gesammtkunstwerk* (396–98). Clearly, her intention is not to

demonise all of these things by making them equivalent; rather, her overarching argument appears to be that the concentration of these and other developments within a given culture effects a radical transformation in thought about corporeality, materiality, bodies and masses and their relationship to and interactions with technology—a transformation that is at one and the same time a prerequisite for progress in specific areas and the origin of a potentially disastrous myth. Referring to the work of Ernst Jünger, Buck-Morss explains,

> In the 'great mirror' of technology, the image that returns is displaced, reflected onto a different place, where one sees oneself as a physical body divorced from sensory vulnerability—a statistical body, the behaviour of which can be calculated; a performing body, actions of which can be measured up against the 'norm'; a virtual body, one that can endure the shocks of modernity without pain. (405)

Thus, as with the subject-body Sobchack theorises, the fragile corporeality evoked in Buck-Morss's essay has theoretical limitations which do not necessarily diminish its potential as either an imaginary rallying point for political action or an object on which to ground ethical thought. The crucial thing to keep in mind is the pitfalls—what Butler might term the 'exclusionary violence'—inherent in any such universalising gesture. For Buck-Morss, paying heed to the fragility of the organic and reawakening the senses through the creation and / or experience of radical art are both urgently needed practices to undo what she sees as a pervasive failure on the part of the modern subject to respond to empirical evidence of suffering. The ethic of this argument is grounded in a sensed commonality existing between like organisms. In effect, she gestures toward a 'species solidarity' based in the subject's

identification of the experience of being a mortal body with the inaccessible experience of other subjects—an experience that the subject can only have faith is much the same as his or her own.

The preceding discussion of Butler, Sobchack and Buck-Morss has both problematised the thing signified by 'the corporeal' and looked at specific contexts in which that theoretical interrogation might have to be set aside in order to deal first with a greater and more immediate threat. Although such a discussion has the potential to act as a theoretical framework for the following study, it still remains to be seen in what ways—or even *if*—these theoretical approaches to the corporeal, in particular those of Sobchack and Buck-Morss, are relevant to Ballard's fiction, to the ethical dilemmas posed by that fiction, and to Ballard's representation of humanity's interactions with modern technology. The discussion now turns to consider those issues via a contextualisation of the quartet in terms of the socio-historical background to the novel's and Ballard's literary and artistic influences.

2. The quartet in contexts: responding to the pre-virtual

The quartet of novels Ballard published in the late 1960s and early 1970s reflect a transitional period in both the author's personal life and postwar Western culture generally. Ballard's wife Mary died unexpectedly, in 1964, while the couple were vacationing in Spain with their three children, after which he stuggled to advance his writing career and fulfill his duties as a single parent. In at least two interviews he has recalled a generally stable, if demanding, domestic life during this period, but

also a certain amazement at the stark contrast between this everyday situation and the preoccupations of the new fiction he was writing: "People used to come to this little suburban house expecting a miasma of drug addiction and perversion of every conceivable kind[,]" he commented in an interview in 1994, "Instead they found this easy-going man playing with his golden retriever and bringing up a family of happy young children. I used to find this a mystery myself. I would sit down at my desk and start writing about mutilation and perversion" (Self 361, cf. Vale & Juno 124).[5] Because Ballard has refrained from commenting on his wife's death in interviews and non-fictionalised autobiographical pieces, readers can only speculate on the effect the loss must have had on his writing career.[6] It seems significant, though, that after 1966, the year in which the last of his four global catastrophe novels was published (the four being *The Wind From Nowhere* [1962], *The Drowned World* [1962], *The Drought* [1964], and *The Crystal World*), Ballard's fiction entered what was, and arguably remains, its most experimental and controversial phase to date. No attempt is being made here to turn Mary Ballard's death into *the* defining factor in the author's decision to make these stylistic and thematic shifts; as we will see shortly, his impatience with the limitations of mid-twentieth-century science fiction was also key. It would be absurd, however, to discount Ballard's need to work through loss as one important catalyst among others. Hence, although it is not explicitly thematised in the following study, the notion that the quartet was part of the author's attempt, in his own words, "to understand his wife's meaningless death"

(*Atrocity* 125) haunts the following study, especially those sections which consider Ballard's problematic representation of women.

Ballard's comment on the connection between the loss of his wife and the preoccupations of his creative output in the late sixties is taken from an annotation to *The Atrocity Exhibition*; the remainder of the remark is as follows: "Nature's betrayal of this young woman seemed to be mimicked in the larger ambiguities to which the modern world was so eager to give birth" (*Atrocity* 125). The quartet certainly reflects these ambiguities and attests to Ballard's ability to absorb the iconography of the day. All four novels respond to specific social upheavals commonly associated with the period. *Atrocity* and *Crash* take the expanding televisual universe as a conceptual starting point, conveying both a fascination for the popular culture of stardom and international celebrity associated with the medium, and a concern with the implications and effects of televising modern warfare, violence and brutality. Meanwhile, the preoccupation in *Atrocity*, *Crash* and *High-Rise* with sex and sexuality can be linked to the wider sexual revolution of the sixties, although Ballard's concentration on sexual aberrance, the eroticisation of violence, and the mediation of both, tends to problematise, rather than make an ideal out of sexual liberation.

Additionally, the quartet is attuned to postwar shifts in urban demographics: *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*, particularly, reflect the rapid expansion of suburban organisations of space throughout Western societies, set as they are in peripheral zones that cater mainly to the isolated, automotive consumer; in turn, the

racial homogeneity of Ballard's characters is either reflective of, or the result of, the phenomenon of 'white flight' from Britain's inner cities. As well, *Atrocity* and *Concrete Island* are informed by a historical sensibility that treats the 'postwar' period as in fact not a period characterised by the movement away from war, but rather one haunted by a level of hostility it has yet to come to terms with. As one critic put it in relation to Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* (1984): "We can be certain of the end of the last global conflict only insofar as we more or less know that the nuclear arms emerging from the war can be disarmed, depending on whether or not we more or less use the free will we more or less have. Which is to say we have no certainty about the war's end and effect" (Caserio 306). In *Atrocity*, this post-atomic uncertainty is evoked through the novel's frequent references to Hiroshima and Nagasaki; while *Concrete Island*'s imagery of abandoned air-raid shelters brings to mind both the London Blitz and the nuclear stalemate of the cold war.

Although the quartet and selected other texts from Ballard's oeuvre should be taken as his most substantial response to this complex socio-historical context, Ballard has also, on occasion, sought to clarify his understanding of the era in essays and reviews. A succinct statement of Ballard's overall impression of the postwar era can be found, for instance, in the oft-quoted introduction he wrote to the 1974 French translation of *Crash*; referred to below as the "Introduction." Although Ballard would later change his mind about specific claims made in the piece,[7] it nevertheless remains useful to critics for its summary of his understanding of the far-reaching effects of the media and communications landscape of the postwar period, the

implications that landscape had in terms of the modern subject's experience of the world, and the impact it was having on the writer's role within society.

The "Introduction" is structured around two closely related subjects: one, science fiction's significance relative to other forms of literature in the twentieth-century, particularly when it comes to dealing with the fast pace of modern technological development; the other, the extreme imagery of sex and violence in *Crash*. Of particular importance to the present discussion, however, is the way in which Ballard contextualises his comments on *Crash* by detailing those 'larger ambiguities' he, at the time at least, linked to his wife's death: "We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind" he asserted

> —mass merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the pre-empting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. (*Crash* 8)

In response to this situation Ballard suggests that "[t]he 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" (8). Ballard is, here, describing a pervasive 'fiction effect' and also, in the figure of the 'node,' seeking an epistemological foundation for the often extremely subjective or perspectival narrative points of view in his fiction.[8] Critics have, quite rightly, linked Ballard's description of this 'fiction effect' to critical theories of postmodernity, most often to Jean Baudrillard's concept of the 'simulation society.' Referring to the same

passage from the "Introduction," Michel Delville, for instance, has expressed admiration for the "comprehensive understanding of a number of basic conflicts and contradictions underlying Western societies" apparent in Ballard's fiction—"contradictions that often tie in with the proliferation of mass-produced images and the ensuing disappearance of the real [. . .] resulting from the widespread influence of electronic technologies" (3–4).

The notion of a 'disappearance of the real' is of central importance to a study concerned with corporeality, for to posit that once-stable notions of the real are vanishing necessarily puts in question the assumption that the corporeal is a fundamental referent to which representations refer. One is, of course, reminded here of Buck-Morss's concern over the televisual aestheticisation of destruction, as well as Sobchack's contention that ethical behaviour arises out of empathy rooted in an awareness of the body's capacity to experience pain and suffering. Making these connections, in turn, raises the question as to how Ballard has handled the emotional implications of this loss of touch with the real. The "Introduction" offers us a useful primer on his ideas in this regard.

Near the beginning of the piece, Ballard writes of a concept which is, in a way, the sign under which the quartet was born, and which he had introduced in other earlier essays, and in at least one of the pieces that eventually made up *The Atrocity Exhibition*. The concept in question is "the death of affect" (cf. *Crash* 5, *A User's Guide* 91 & *Atrocity* 116)—a "demise of feeling and emotion" resulting from the technological amplification of humanity's "[v]oyeurism, self-disgust, [and] the infantile basis of our dreams and longings" (*Crash* 5): "Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams money can buy. Thermo-nuclear

weapons systems and soft-drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography" (5). A 'demise of feeling *and* emotion' might sound redundant at first, but based on the quartet's thematic preoccupation with corporeality, it is likely that Ballard had a twofold crisis in mind: withering emotions *and* something akin to Buck-Morss's notion of 'sensory alienation.' I think one can conclude from this that Ballard saw postwar Western life as being characterised by frequent, if not institutionally reinforced, suspensions of *responsibility* and *response-ability*—the former defined as ethical or political responsiveness rooted in emotional sensitivity to the plight of others, the latter as a complementary keenness of sensory perception maintained through a disengagement from technologies that mediate our experience of reality. Clearly, there are links to be made here between Ballard's culture theory and Sobchack's and Buck-Morss's respective analyses of sensory alienation, and in a way, the quartet documents a time in which the historical development of 'anaesthetic technics' reaches a point of near-perfection, near-total systemisation.

However, the state of *near*-totality needs to be emphasised. This study seeks to demonstrate that the quartet reflects a specific phase in the development of such a technics, a phase with which the increasingly globalized world of the early twenty-first century can still be identified: the pre-virtual. My sense of this term is rooted in the theoretical distinction Michel de Certeau makes, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974), between an 'empire of mechanics' and an 'empire of cybernetics,' a distinction that

hinges on the nature and role of various 'writing tools' within modern societies. "The grand mythical and reforming passion [of modernity]" de Certeau argues,

> functions on the basis of three terms that characterize it: first, a model or 'fiction,' ie. a *text*; second, the instrument of its application or writing, ie. *tools*; the third, the material which is both the support and the incarnation of the model, ie., a nature, essentially a *flesh*, which writing changes into a *body*. Using tools to make a body conform to its definition in a social discourse: that is the movement. (145)

The presence of well-functioning and effective tools within an earlier phase of modernity—the empire of mechanics—makes "ontological referentiality" possible, that is, the maintenance among its subjects of a sense of separation between a normative text presumed to constitute reality and an amorphous, unschooled material out of which that 'reality' is formed and then named as such (146); this is, of course, an alternate version of the Foucauldian process of materialisation which Judith Butler partly adopts, partly deconstructs. According to de Certeau's theory, so long as the divide between "the text to be inscribed and the body that historicizes it" (146) is perceived to exist, then one is living in a modern but pre-cybernetic system. The line into an empire of cybernetics is crossed when normative text and incarnating body coincide with one another seamlessly and "everything becomes a disseminated writing, an indefinite combinative system of fictions and simulacra" (146). 'Reality' within this hypothetical future would then be less and less machined from unreformed material, and become increasingly the effect of "chance modalizations of programmatic matrices determined by a genetic code" (146, n223). Put another way, the everyday reality of social relations in modern cultures—be they domestic, professional, recreational, etc.—would no longer stand as the field of the

real to which the normative texts of those cultures referred. (Essentially, we have here another version of the 'disappearance of the real' which Delville associates with Ballard's fiction; and not surprisingly, de Certeau cites Baudrillard as the authority on the subject [n223].)

The novels of Ballard's quartet speculate on what life might be like in the middle of such a paradigm shift, and figure the shift itself through their similar suburban settings, which mix together technological objects from both 'empires.' Dominated by the technologies and foundational logics of the "combinative system of simulations" (146), the quartet's fictional environments are nevertheless not so fantastical that technologies of the older regime are utterly obsolete or altogether missing from the scene. The manner in which Ballard represents the automobile is typical of this. Throughout the quartet it appears as a collection of glassy, shiny surfaces, body styling and artificial textures, or is a primary subject in the photographs taken and films shot by the characters. In this sense, it is depicted as a mobile site of the 'disseminated writing' of consumer society. But while Ballard emphasises the automobile's semiotic aspects, he never loses sight of the fact that it is still a machine born of an earlier industrial era. The fantasy element of Ballard's fiction does not lift the car beyond its status as an "orthopaedic and orthopractic instrument[,]" to borrow de Certeau's wording (147). In other words, through Ballard's handling of the automobile, one sees the two 'empires' in collision—and literally so in *Crash*.

Because the quartet deals with a world of technological limitations, Ballard's characters are forced to fulfill their destructive impulses using 'tools' that turn out to be

not virtual enough. The paradigmatic landscape of the quartet is made up of pervasive mechanical technologies and rapidly expanding communications networks which together promise an almost unlimited realm of new experiences and sensations. But it is also marked by a lack of practical virtual realities, that is, 'lived' technological spaces in which destructive impulses could be actively experienced and savoured without risking actual physical mortality—and moreover, experienced not in the manner of extant anaesthetic technics but rather through an engagement of the full spectrum of the human sensorium.

In Buck-Morss's terms, this virtual reality could never be anything *but* another anaesthetic technic because it would further perfect our alienation from the limitations and fragility of the flesh. Within the rubric of Ballard's quartet, however, this virtuality is treated with a mixture of fascination and suspicion, if not with a sense of possibility. For these reasons, the quartet anticipates cyberpunk literature and film, or at least those examples of the genre which display a wariness about the fate of the corporeal within the virtual world; one thinks of the physical damage inflicted on 'jacked in' characters in the recent *Matrix* films, a motif that distances the series' makers from the 'discourse of disembodiment' that unnerves Sobchack. Ballard's quartet anticipates this kind of cyberpunk by speculating on the ways in which older modern technologies might shape dreams in the future, en route to new virtual realities and simulation technologies capable of giving users, to paraphrase the "Introduction" and to point out the logical extreme of this trajectory, the opportunity to design the specifics of their children's deaths (cf. *Crash* 5), experience and even find enjoyment in the conflicted emotions or emotionlessness

involved in such a pathological endeavour, and yet return to 'reality' without having harmed actual children.

Positioning the quartet in these socio-historical terms, however, necessitates a clearer articulation of the manner in which the quartet actually depicts the 'pre-virtual' or technological environments saturated by anaesthetic technics. The theoretical discussion in section one pointed toward the kind of corporeality that the following chapters will be pursuing, but it is not deployed in the quartet for the same reasons that Sobchack and Buck-Morss rely on it in their analyses of the political and ethical implications of modern sensory alienation. To get a sense of where Ballard's work parts company with such analyses, it is necessary to outline the particular literary and artistic tradition with which Ballard identified himself and his work throughout the sixties and early seventies.

One important strand in criticism of Ballard's fiction has focussed on questions related to genre.[9] Much of the debate in this area centres on Ballard's relationship to science fiction, and in particular his role as a primary figure within the 'New Wave' of science fiction in the 1960s.[10] As seems to be the case with any critical delineation of a literary and artistic movement, the term 'New Wave' is very much an arbitrary designation. Critic Colin Greenland explains that

> the term 'New Wave' [. . .] signifies only that the writers *were* considered together, as a collective movement sharply distinct from and hostile to what they saw as the old order. This collectivity the writers themselves affirmed in editorials and in public. Though they now disclaim any artistic unanimity, they were associated at the time, and much [. . .] may be critically induced from that association, however unstable it proved. (14, original emphasis)

Greenland's own assessment of the movement hinges on the activities of a group of British and American writers—among them Ballard, Brian Aldiss, and Thomas Disch—who were frequent contributors to the science-fiction magazine *New Worlds*, particularly when it was under the editorship of Michael Moorcock, himself a leading figure in the movement. Under Moorcock's supervision, *New Worlds* published conventional science-fiction stories, more challenging s-f pieces that were sometimes referred to as 'speculative fantasy,' and avant-garde texts and artwork. In general, then, the New Wave can be thought of as a loose aggregate of writers who identified their work with the science-fiction genre, and thus defined themselves against forms of 'mainstream' writing—a term that Ballard uses in his non-fiction to denote both modernist and realist novels (cf. *Crash* 6)—but were also seeking to open up new avenues for science fiction by cross-fertilising its themes and imagery with stylistic innovations borrowed from other fields of aesthetic expression.

A vital part of Ballard's contribution to this movement were his reviews and short essays, several of which should be categorised as group or personal manifestos for the way they alternately identify his own work with the science-fiction genre, defend the genre in its entirety against the criticisms, favourable or otherwise, of individuals outside the field, and criticise the genre's limitations as a means to justify the concurrent genre revisions being undertaken by New Wave practitioners. Many of these pieces share a common theme that has bearing on the present discussion: Ballard's attempt to associate science fiction with a particular legacy of modernist and postmodernist avant-garde movements. From Ballard's idiosyncratic point of view, these fields shared a sense of

naiveté in relation to scientific and technological advances. One can see this point of view, for example, in "Fictions of Every Kind" (1971), Ballard's review of a scholarly study of the genre. In the piece, Ballard complains that the well-meaning authors of the book were seeking to dignify the genre by imposing on it a literary historical metanarration, a legitimating story that Ballard paraphrases as science fiction's supposed "attempt to place a new perspective on 'man, nature, history and ultimate meaning'" (*A User's Guide* 206). In Ballard's view, this was one of at least two such metanarratives that critics employed to validate specific texts that stood out from the field—the other being the attempt to "relate s-f to the 'mainstream' of social criticism, anti-utopian fantasies and the like" (207). In response to these appropriations and incursions, "Fictions of Every Kind" emphasises an aspect of the genre that Ballard believed went relatively unnoticed in such criticism, perhaps because it clashed with the liberal humanist ideals espoused by the critics: the genre's enthusiastic response to both the possibilities presented by technological innovation and the technological objects themselves. Ballard comments sardonically that "[s]cience fiction is much more concerned with the significance of the gleam on an automobile instrument panel than on the deity's posterior" (207), the point being that the genre's core attitude toward technology was neither dystopian nor mystical, but rather optimistic, or at least imaginatively absorbed even when it might have been projecting a degree of wariness.

At the same time that Ballard was expending energy in defence of science fiction, he and other leading figures within the New Wave were also, as Greenland has pointed out, intent on distinguishing themselves from what they perceived as the genre's internal

establishment. By 'establishment,' one should not think of specific authors but rather constraints placed on the genre, in terms of theme, imagery and settings, by commercial publications catering to a fan-based readership. In short, the New Wave was impatient with science fiction's trade in its own clichés. As early as 1962, Ballard was arguing in the pages of *New Worlds* that science fiction would be well served if its practitioners "turn[ed their] back[s] on space, on interstellar travel, extraterrestrial life forms, galactic wars and the overlap of these ideas that spreads across the margins of nine-tenths of magazine s-f" and concentrated instead on "becoming abstract and cool, inventing fresh situations and contexts that illustrate its theme obliquely [. . . becoming] all in all a speculative poetry and fantasy of science" (*A User's Guide* 197). Ballard was trying, then, no less so than the literary critics he eyed with suspicion, to encourage the genre to mature into a more serious art form, and its readership into a more sophisticated audience. And as a result, one might immediately wonder if there is anything substantive separating Ballard from the 'outsiders' whose arguments he challenged in print.

To answer that question, it is necessary to visualise the artist figure that Ballard consistently idealises in these essays and reviews: a figure he termed the "sophisticated naive" (*A User's Guide* 97). Ballard's idealisation of this figure became a means through which to connect science fiction with various avant-garde movements—primarily surrealism and pop art, although Ballard has also expressed admiration for cubism and futurism. In an essay on Salvador Dali, whom Ballard considered the archetype of the naive artist, we find a passage which is typical of his non-fiction of the period in the way it brings together diverse names and artistic movements under the banner of this ideal:

> [S]cience fiction, like surrealism [. . .] is an example of an art of the naive in mid-twentieth-century terms. [. . .] I regard Dali, like [H.G.] Wells and the writers of modern science fiction, as true naives, ie. those taking imagination and reality at their face value, never at all sure, or for that matter concerned, which is which. In the same category I place many other notable originators, such as William Burroughs—certainly a naive, with his weird delusions [. . .] that *Time* magazine is out to subvert our minds and language—and Andy Warhol, a faun-like naive of the media landscape, using the basic techniques of twentieth-century mass-communications, cinema and colour reproduction processes, for his own innocent and child-like amusement. (*A User's Guide* 97)

In effect, Ballard had given himself and the New Wave—writers who, as he described them in 1994, "had read their Kafka, their James Joyce [. . .] were aware of the larger world of the twentieth century experimental novel, [. . .] were interested in surrealism" (Self 349)—its founding mythology. The association of the movement's work with the child-like, with sophistication but not intellectualism or academia, allowed for a kind of motivating illusion (or self-delusion?): the New Wave science-fiction writer could work under the assumption that the resulting body of work, even texts as apparently experimental and difficult as those that make up *The Atrocity Exhibition*, would be accessible and appealing to the readership that had traditionally supported science fiction.

More germane to the present discussion, however, is the fact that Ballard's identification of himself and his fiction with the figure of the sophisticated naive draws attention to a specific kind of authorial responsiveness which he appreciated in the work of those he considered forerunners and contemporaries—a responsiveness that suggests the author's inability or refusal to discriminate between disparate cultural materials. In Ballard's mind, the work of the naive is to be admired because it evinces an authorial

stance of unquestioning receptivity to new ideas and new objects, particularly social trends and scientific and technological innovations—a stance that critic Hal Foster, writing of Warhol's media persona, has called the "blankly affirmative" ("Death in America" 362). The art of the sophisticated naive thus responds to a world of objects external to itself, and conveys the artist's familiarity with vocabularies and grammars borrowed from diverse disciplines, but the naive's posture of naiveté ostensibly precludes interpretations of the work which try to identify in it an element of critique and / or the workings a coherent system of morality.

The most emphatic statement Ballard has made on the subject of this refusal on the part of the artist to position his or her work as some form of morally situated social critique appears near the end of the "Introduction." There, Ballard completely dissociates fiction writing from moral agency, particularly when the writer is confronted with the 'fiction effect' outlined above: "I feel myself that the writer's role, his authority and licence to act, have changed radically[,]" Ballard writes,

> I feel that, in a sense, the writer knows nothing any longer. He has no moral stance. He offers the reader the contents of his own head, he offers a set of options and imaginative alternatives. His role is that of the scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory, faced with a completely unknown terrain or subject. All he can do is to devise various hypotheses and test them against the facts. (9)

Hence, Ballard's attempt to distinguish his own criticisms of science fiction from those of 'outsider-critics' rests upon an implicit repudiation of both 'utopian' and 'dystopian' labels, and an endorsement of this posture of neutral receptivity—a dispassionate but

fully curious gaze that he associates with the analytic eye of the scientist or laboratory technician.

Ballard's valorisation of the sophisticated naive's neutral receptivity and related rejection of the postwar (science-fiction) writer's moral agency mean that the quartet can never be comfortably placed alongside the critical theory of a Sobchack or Buck-Morss, primarily because they inform the way in which the 'death of affect' is represented in that fiction. In short, the quartet projects an air of resignation to and / or acceptance of the fact that sensory alienation and emotional atrophy are widespread and irreversible. The quartet's central characters—the multiple-named protagonist of *Atrocity*, James Ballard and Robert Vaughan in *Crash*, Robert Maitland in *Concrete Island* and Robert Laing in *High-Rise*—confront the death of affect, not by struggling to feel again, but by accepting that this is the new emotional and sensory 'reality,' and by searching for new experiences through that 'reality.' Although this recurrent trajectory is catalysed by the technologies these characters must live and work with, their imaginations far outstrip the technologically and corporeally limited environments through which they move. As a result, they are driven to overcome these limitations through either communion with its signs, signals and technological / mechanical objects (*Atrocity* and *Crash*), or a movement toward more primitive modes of existence which is initially facilitated by technology (*Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*). Because in certain cases these characters also take on messianic roles, instructing other characters—and the reader—in the ambiguous benefits of the path they are on, one might term them Ballard's *visionary* figures; and throughout the study I use that term, with slight modifications, in the manner

suggested by Edward Ahearn, who describes the visionary as an individual who "vehemently claim[s] that the world as we perceive it is an impoverished and dull thing, fundamentally delusory, and that [he] can put us in touch with a reality far more exciting, even 'infinite'" (*Visionary Fictions* 3). With respect to the quartet, the modification would be that Ballard's visionaries claim to have found that 'more exciting' reality within the interstices of their present one, that is, through the technologies that characterise their everyday lives, very often in moments when those technologies break down.

The appearance within the quartet of a fragile, 'pre-discursive' corporeality does not, then, lend itself to political agendas calling for a tactical retreat from interactions between technology and the body. Rather, readers are left to watch as these visionaries, to paraphrase Buck-Morss herself, 'pass through the new technologies,' and, if they choose, to take note of aspects of the fiction where elemental corporeality is implicated in comic reversals at the characters' expense, or, in a more tragic vein, reappears the moment of their downfall as a substance which resists absorption into the semiotic.

Before such a reading can be initiated in the present study, however, some further issues related to Ballard's characterisation and narrative style, and to the ways in which their bodies are in fact presented to us throughout the quartet, need to be addressed.

The first item is a fundamental question of narrative representation. Michel Delville has argued that Ballard's interest in 'the disappearance of the real' leads him to reject modes of writing that feature "stable representation" and "conventional narrative strategies" (4). In other words, in order to respond to the 'fiction effect' outlined above, the most appropriate aesthetic an author can choose is one which makes narrative

representation itself unstable. Although Delville is correct to assert that Ballard's fiction is founded on the assumption that the standards and conventions of the realist novel are unsuited to dealing with "the jumble of material and ideological elements that constitute contemporary culture" (4), the extent to which Ballard actually does away with those supposedly outmoded standards and conventions needs to be reevaluated, even in conjunction with an experimental novel such as *The Atrocity Exhibition*. The following study proceeds on the assumption that a residual realist mimetic (the realism in Ballard's sur-realism, as it were) remains an important facet of Ballard's fiction. Other critics have noted something similar: Bradley Butterfield has spoken, for instance, of the "representational" quality of Ballard's work ("Ethical Value and Negative Aesthetics" 73), even though, as we will see in the following chapter, he gives privilege of place to Ballard's semiotics. In a way, even Delville's implicit assertion that Ballard's fiction is an astute response to the 'jumble' that is contemporary society already involves an assumption of some kind of mimesis, even if the object subjected to the mimetic operation is unstable, fragmentary or itself composed of a complex of representations in the manner of the fiction-saturated 'reality' Ballard describes in the "Introduction." As well, the following study also highlights the significance of Ballard's "strong, almost obsequious adherence to narrative" (Punter 9) to an appreciation of the moral force of his fiction—a subject I return to in due course.

Ballard's approach to characterisation is also a potential stumbling block to such a reading. Critics have pointed out that, aside from the protagonists, Ballard's characters often amount to little more than symbols or ciphers (cf. Pringle 39), that overall his

fiction displays an "interest in types, rather than characters" (Delville 4), and that in general his narratives not only reflect the points of view of the 'visionary' characters but moreover treat their views and actions as the only meaningful response to the environments in which they find themselves (cf. Wagar 65–66). When considered together, these observations have the potential to produce a reading which imagines the 'action' taking place within the fiction as being totally within the purview of the protagonist's psyche, thus imparting to that action, to even its most violent and perverse modalities, a thoroughly imaginary quality. The present study, however, distinguishes Ballard's fiction from the solipsism apparent in, for example, a novel like Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*, with its isolated consciousness struggling to establish the nature of its own being and somehow make an end, by recourse to its sociological dimension. Ballard's narratives certainly reflect the points of view of the main characters, which in turn lends weight to the idea that the 'inner space'—Ballard's phrase for "that psychological domain [. . .] where the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality meet and fuse" (*Crash* 7)—depicted is wholly private. But when combined with Ballard's interest in "the dynamics of human societies" (6), a preoccupation he inherited from science fiction, the subjective or perspectival narrative can also be read as gesturing toward a 'public' space of shared fantasy, rather than an imaginative monopoly exercised by the isolated protagonist.

Also related to the quality of Ballard's characterisation is the importance of determinism in his work. Delville, for example, rightly asserts that Ballard's work "often enact[s] a radically desensitized response to life, tinged with a certain amount of Freudian

determinism that substitutes the primacy of unconscious drives for traditional (some will say 'humanist') notions of conscious motivation and individual autonomy" (5). I think one can hear in Delville's words an assertion that Ballard's emphasis on drive-based motivation, and moreover on drives that are influenced by signals external to the subject, effectively places his characters beyond the reach of most notions of personal accountability. Moreover, because practically all of the characters, major and minor, behave this way, it would be futile to judge them for acting on impulses that they really have no hope of resisting.

The following chapters, however, move forward with a different notion of the ethics of and in reading literature. On one level, the following study considers the possibility that the determinism Delville notes is part and parcel of the fragile corporeality that readers should take note of, even if the characters do not. Inasmuch as the characters' drives are partly rooted in their status as biological organisms, a critical focus on their uncontrollable impulsiveness only re-emphasises that the category of the human is limited in a variety of ways, and that the characters' re-conceptualisations of self, sexuality and gender might eventually clash with an element of the human that is immutable, incapable of being transformed through some form of technological intervention, or at least not so without immense difficulty.

On another level, this study proceeds on the notion that a reading which is attentive to nuances and ambiguities in Ballard's narrative is, itself, an open-ended process that cultivates moral awareness, which in turn demonstrates how the texts themselves are not solely monological 'proofs' of the various 'hypotheses' that Ballard's visionary characters

become the vehicles for. This approach is in line with the premise behind Aidan Day's recent interpretation of *Crash*: that a "close, detailed attention to features in the text is precisely that which reveals moral judgement at work in it" (278). Day adds that "one of the necessary activities for a reader considering a literary text is to engage closely with the subtle textures of literary language and structure, rather than merely to impose theoretical notions without regard to those textures" (278). I would only modify Day's formula by emphasising what is already implicit in his wording: that the reader's ethical sensibility is enriched by *working through* these literary textures, while the text itself might remain 'naive,' masking whatever morality the author might espouse. Ballard himself has claimed that his fiction resists closure, leaving his readers "to decide what the moral and psychological conclusions [. . .] should be" (Vale & Juno 42). Again I would slightly alter the formula. The re-assembly of meaning from his texts is not as capricious an activity as he implies it is; rather, one can find throughout the quartet nuances distinguishing episodes from one another, such that the visionary's ideas are put into practice and eventually allowed to 'succeed' in some, but also qualified by what occurs elsewhere—qualified by the limitations of other characters, of the characters' bodies, and of the technologies they use or, vice versa, which modify their behaviour.

The final issue that needs to be raised here, related as it is to the idea that Ballard's characters have little or no existence beyond their status as two-dimensional projections emerging from the protagonist's psyche, is his use of what Damien Broderick calls "structural metaphor" (96), which I take to mean objects or characters whose figurative meanings are strongly felt from the very beginning of a text. Our earlier example of the

automobile provides a useful illustration here as well. Ballard depicts the car as a tool which disciplines the bodies of characters entering its contoured interior; the bodies of *Crash*'s characters certainly undergo violent 'modifications' in car-crashes, and the imagery used to convey the crash scenes is, at times, vividly concrete. But the automobile is also, as Ballard asserts, "a sexual image" and "a total metaphor for man's life in today's society" (*Crash* 9). From that point of view, the automobile's figurative significance seems to trump attempts to link the Ballardian 'car' with the unstable and seductive real objects we drive on a daily basis—as if reading with such referentiality in mind lacks sophistication. My sense is that Ballard is intentionally playing the role of the naive in his appeal to total metaphor, for his narratives are punctuated with episodes staged in such a way that such appeals cannot easily redeem or explain away the monstrosity of certain outcomes or consequences. Put another way, the point at which the author's or the reader's appeals to total metaphor become merely a convenient excuse to indulge in scenes of brutality and victimisation remains at issue throughout the quartet. In turn, any effort one might make to justify Ballard's representation of psychopathological behaviour in terms of a metaphorical expansion of 'the human,' and the exposure of the exclusionary violence inherent in such normative categories related to such an expansion, eventually runs up against a psychotic limit—a point at which accepting eccentricity seems dangerously irresponsible relative to the terrifying actuality of the characters' behaviour. By acknowledging this limit, one does not diminish the visionary quality of Ballard's fiction, nor the ethical value of closing the distance between the radical otherness of the psychopath and the 'normal' reader (an alternate ethic

apparent in Ballard's fiction which we will consider in the following chapter), but it does encourage readers to approach the deconstruction of categorical boundaries with a certain amount of trepidation and delicacy.

The explorations of the novels' episodic nuances contained in the following chapters are predicated on the concept of unstable, contested corporeality explored above via Butler, Sobchack and Buck-Morss. Unfortunately, for rhetorical purposes this necessarily ambiguous ground will be presented in the following chapters in terms that are arbitrarily dualistic, playing a discursive, technologically modifiable body—the semiotic body—off against a corporeality that is relatively more elemental, resistant to (re)conceptualisation, vulnerable and unpredictable—overall a sign and / or materialisation of human limitations. In conjunction with the former 'half' of this dualistic corporeality, the close readings in each chapter take note of Ballard's idealised imagery of body–machine interfaces, his gestures toward a conception of gender as a 'surface' textual production, and his interest in the idea of a polymorphously pleasurable body and its unlimited sexualities. Also, although it is less directly related to these conceptualised corporealities, Ballard's idealisation of what Buck-Morss calls, following Benjamin, the anaesthetic state of being "past experiencing" (Benjamin qtd. in "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics" 390) is a primary concern of the chapter on *Concrete Island*. Meanwhile, in relation to the elemental body, we will have to consider imagery culled from the realms of physiology and neurology, intimations of sex essentialism, and the ways in which Ballard's characters do in fact recover, to paraphrase Buck-Morss, the 'instinctual power of the human bodily senses' by 'passing through the new technologies.' Overall, the

following study aims not to come to rest on one side or the other of this dichotomy. Instead, its foregrounding of the tension between these modalities of the flesh identifies the ethical import of Ballard's fiction with a conceptual 'working through,' rather than a moralistic disengagement from what Sobchack calls "the contradictory wish, on the one hand, to get rid of the body and to overcome its material limitations and demands and, on the other, 'to escape the newly extended body of technological engagement,' and to *reclaim experience through the flesh*" (318, original emphasis).

* * *

In an attempt to situate this study in relation to extant poststructuralist readings of Ballard's work, the opening chapter explores primarily the controversy surrounding Jean Baudrillard's interpretation (expropriation, to some) of *Crash*, and offers a critical survey of more recent interpretations that have presented either similar readings based on the notion that bodies in the novel, and signifiers for the body at its surface, are really one and the same semiotic 'substance.' The chapter seeks both to acknowledge the importance of these semiotics-based readings of Ballard's novel, and to consider contradictions internal to such readings which threaten to make the postmetaphysical politics and ethics that critics have sought to construct in relation to *Crash* less compelling.

Chapter two begins with an overview of the literary devices Ballard employs in *The Atrocity Exhibition* both to generate the illusion of a thoroughly semiotic landscape, and to manage reader response to the psychopathological ideas and behaviour of the central protagonist. The chapter treats these techniques as a masking strategy. On one level,

Ballard encourages his readers to support the emancipatory promise figured in the protagonist's artistic practices and in the nervous breakdown that is their psychological foundation, thereby associating the text with the postmodernist ideal of selfhood as a constant process of self-fashioning. On another level, Ballard undermines the very thing he manoeuvres his reader into idealising. Our attempts to metaphorise the protagonist's practices and the violence they entail run up against the repetitive nature of his actions, which associate histrionic selfhood with entrapment rather than liberation. The attempt to metaphorise is also undercut by Ballard's insistence on the destructive (sexual) instinct at the root of those repetitions—an emphasis which gains further impetus from his gestures toward a 'ghostly' corporeality, the flesh subjected to *Atrocity*'s exaggeratedly semiotic realm.

Chapter three adds another voice to on-going debates over the 'cautionary,' that is, moral content of *Crash*. As is the case in the chapter on *Atrocity*, the discussion of *Crash* begins with an articulation of the psychopathological points of view that constitute the text's visionary dimension: both the hallucinatory consciousness that the narrator gains following his first serious car crash, and the theoretical context given to that post-crash vision by the novel's main psychopathological figure, Robert Vaughan. The primary aim of this initial discussion is to highlight the fundamental contradiction at the core of Vaughan's plan to immortalise himself and transform the society of simulation through a celebrity car crash with Elizabeth Taylor: his goal of securing for himself an afterlife 'within' the image-world of television is fatally tied to the actress's physical presence, as opposed to her disseminated media persona. Part two provides a detailed reading of the

often-overlooked but pivotal role played by one of Vaughan's underlings, the stunt-driver Colin Seagrave. Seagrave's hasty implementation of Vaughan's plan, and more manifest brutality and sexual aggression, are the locus of *Crash*'s psychotic limit as well as a parody of Vaughan built into the text. The third and final section contrasts Baudrillardian and Lacanian approaches to the novel, showing in particular what each teaches us about Ballard's representation of the body and sexuality. The aim there is to show that the corporeality discussed above via Sobchack and Buck-Morss—a trope I associate more with Lacanian theory—exists in the novel as a check on the seemingly limitless capacity for conceptualisation displayed by the characters. In support of that claim, I analyse three sexual encounters that occur late in the novel. Together, these encounters demonstrate that Ballard does not represent 'car-crash sexuality' or the concept of the 'techno-body' in a uniform manner. The nuances separating these episodes from one another make the application of a totalising theory to the narrative's events far less credible, and thereby reinforce the notion that *Crash*'s visionary and cautionary modes cannot be readily disentangled.

Where chapters two and three open with considerations of the respective visionary modes of *Atrocity* and *Crash*, the discussion of *Concrete Island* in chapter four concludes with this aspect of the fiction. The analysis of *Concrete Island* carries forward the preoccupation with Ballard's representation of the body and materiality initiated in the previous two chapters, but shifts the emphasis toward the way in which the novel's architectural motifs might factor into the discussion. With reference to Roger Luckhurst's reading of the novel, I contextualise its landscape of motorways within

contemporary theorisations of 'non-place,' a term designating both specific material organisations of space under late capitalism and the subjective experience of moving through those spaces. It is in the midst of the non-place that the protagonist, Robert Maitland, is marooned following a serious car crash, and goes on to live out a latter-day Robinson Crusoe story. Maitland's island sojourn is read as a two-stage process. First, his experience of various physical ordeals (pain, hunger, fatigue) starkly contrasts with the emotional and sensory disengagement that had characterised his daily transits through west London's commuter zones prior to the accident, and thus projects a basic consequentiality. But while this initial phase of his stranding can be read as a comic reversal of his former lifestyle, it would be a mistake to conclude that the experience is solely a straightforward lesson on the emotional and experiential deficiencies of a commuter-consumer lifestyle. Subsistence-level living does not develop into an unequivocal regenerative experience for Maitland, but the extended grounding in his own reawakened senses does become the foundation for a visionary conclusion: through Maitland's later experiences on the island, in which the sensory overload of the initial phase of his sojourn brings him to another, different state of 'sensory alienation,' Ballard in effect sublimates the experience of being 'past experiencing,' and evokes a body beyond even basic forms of consumption.

Chapter five considers how these issues manifest themselves in *High-Rise*, a novel which recounts a transformation of the social structure within a London apartment complex, and the ensuing reversion of its affluent tenants to more primitive modes of existence. The first two sections present close readings of the trajectories of two of the

novel's main characters: first Robert Laing, the protagonist whose experiences are most closely related to the novel's working 'hypothesis,' and then Richard Wilder, who attempts to experience for himself the technologically facilitated lifting of instinct repression enjoyed by Laing, only to undergo a strange process of infantilisation that leaves him vulnerable to the same physical violence he perpetrates during an ascent of the high-rise. As is the case with Seagrave in *Crash*, Wilder must renounce his responsibilities as a parent in order to embark on this quest, and the fate that awaits him at the building's summit constitutes a more consequential counterpoint to Laing's putative success at accommodating himself to the new reality within the building.

The chapter's third section uses the representation of women in *High-Rise* as the starting point for a more detailed consideration of the limitations inherent in his approach to characterisation. Throughout the quartet, Ballard's female characters appear less agential than their male counterparts, and it therefore becomes increasingly difficult to see them as relatively equal participants in the psychopathological behaviour evident in each of the narratives. In *Atrocity*, women are not even allowed the luxury of marginalised agency, appearing mainly in victim roles—the theories and aesthetic practices of the protagonist exercised on the corporeality of his lovers. When women participate in a more active sense in *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*, meanwhile, visible signs of their behaviour are usually pushed to the periphery of the narrative. As a result, we need to view Ballard's representation of women in terms of the intensely subjective quality of the narratives. The predominance of male protagonists in Ballard's work, and his tendency to construct narratives restricted to their idiosyncratic points of

view—something true not just of the quartet but of his oeuvre in general—means that his female characters tend to appear as partial constructs of the male subject's fantasies, and therefore indirect reflections of the image culture which in part dictates what they will desire.

Finally, the conclusion is built around two summary observations, both related to the question of the role of instinct in the quartet. The first observation concerns the location of the present study within extant criticism of Ballard's work. Although this subject is discussed in chapter one, the conclusion reiterates the affinities between the close readings presented in the following chapters and the approaches put forward by Ballard's Lacanian critics. More importantly, the conclusion picks up where the discussion of characterisation at the end of chapter five left off, and discusses the function of Ballard's 'brute' characters—Vaughan and Koester in *Atrocity*, Seagrave in *Crash*, Proctor in *Concrete Island*, and Wilder in *High-Rise*. In particular, I suggest that Ballard's repeated use of these characters as a 'parodic mirror' of the central visionary protagonists dramatises an extreme pathological variant of the innate destructive impulse present in all four novels, but also, and more problematically, risks becoming a too convenient prop facilitating Ballard's own indulgence in the imagery of violence and sexual perversity.

Notes

1. Throughout the study, this group of novels is referred to as 'the quartet' but Ballard did not necessarily conceive of them as a set. The designation is somewhat arbitrary and done largely for the sake of discursive convenience. That said, the four novels do display marked similarities in terms of setting, imagery, theme and character.

2. The first version of Sobchack's essay appeared in the journal *Science-Fiction Studies* as part of a special 1991 issue on science fiction and postmodernism; the revised version appeared, in 1998, as a chapter in *The Visible Woman: Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science*, edited by Paula Treichler.

3. Much of Buck-Morss's argument regarding radical art and the 'return' of the field of aesthetics to its roots in corporeality and sensory perception is derived from her reading of Terry Eagleton's *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

4. From Freud, Buck-Morss adopts the notion that human consciousness is 'located' not in the brain but on the surface of the body; cf. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Norton, 1989: 26–28). For Buck-Morss, Freud's speculative mapping of consciousness evokes an organism inextricably connected to its world through sensory perception. In a manner of speaking, the organism *needs* the world of sensory stimuli in order to have sensations to respond to. Instead of working from within a conceptual framework based on the principle of a split between subject and object world, Buck-Morss adopts a model of experience in which brain, sensory apparatuses and object world are all part of a unified circulating system. Clearly, this notion is a vital part of Buck-Morss's humanistic sense of the subject's profound belonging to and in the world.

5. Incidentally, novelist Michael Moorcock's memory of Ballard during this time is not entirely sympathetic. He recalls a man obsessed with banalities and spending an inordinate amount of time in front of the television (cf. Iain Sinclair *Crash: David Cronenberg's Post-mortem on J.G. Ballard's 'Trajectory of Fate'* 85–86). One is tempted to imagine Ballard dealing with profound loss by retreating inward, or even responding with despair to the feeling of having been cheated by death, even though Ballard's own memory of the period conflicts with such a view.

6. In fact, part two of Ballard's 1991 fictionalised autobiography *The Kindness of Women* is really the only piece of writing in which the event is recounted in any detail: In the book, Jim and wife Miriam are holidaying in Spain's Alicante region, some time in the early sixties; after spending an afternoon with a young bohemian, during which he contemplates marital infidelity and smokes marijuana in a feeble attempt not to be "too bourgeois" (151), Jim returns by boat to the beach cabin he and Miriam have rented, only to watch helplessly from off shore as she slips on a set of stone patio steps and cracks her skull in the resulting fall, never to regain consciousness (*Kindness* 151–54). Ballard has said of *Kindness* that it recounts his "life seen through the mirror of the fiction prompted

by that life" (Self 360), and so obviously one should not be too quick to equate the fictionalisation with the actual event. But if it is true that the book presents Ballard's life overlaid with elements taken from his fiction, then Miriam's death is striking in its uniqueness relative to the deaths of his other characters: it is painfully abrupt, unsensational, unglamorous, represented in markedly unsymbolic terms, and not tied in any way to the violence of modern technology. For these reasons, one wonders whether Ballard's representation of Miriam's death is not in fact a straight telling of Mary Ballard's passing.

7. In 1994, Ballard dismissed his comments about the central importance of science fiction to twentieth-century literature and his justification for *Crash* on unspecified moral grounds (Self 348); these qualifications are considered in greater detail in chapter three, and indirectly in chapter one.

8. Incidentally, readers should be suspicious of Ballard's notion of the 'node.' By making the individual's consciousness the measure of the real within a negotiable and perspectival 'reality,' Ballard has essentially veers into self-contradiction, conjuring an Archimedean psychological point beyond the pervasive fictionalisation of reality that he posits. The 'node' implies a subject whose psyche is more insular than that of the characters in *Atrocity* and *Crash* certainly, both of which suggest that the subject's psyche is open to infiltration by signals coming from the landscape of signs and objects; and so one suspects that Ballard has constructed this compensatory fiction to console not ordinary individuals per se but fellow writers and artists—the real 'us' to which he refers. Through this sleight of hand, Ballard saves for himself an imaginative autonomy that his fiction does not always extend to the postmodern subject.

9. In the last few years, critics concerned with the question of genre have preferred not to categorise Ballard's work under a single, convenient heading at all, opting instead to acknowledge and, in some cases, theorise its generic instability. Roger Luckhurst, for instance, in *'The Angle Between Two Walls': The Fiction of J.G. Ballard* (1997), explores the ways in which Ballard's work "plays on the border, along its normally effaced edge, and forms something like a metacommentary on his 'place' in the genre" (28). In this reading, the generic instability apparent across Ballard's oeuvre is put to work as a postmodernist, self-reflexive literary device. Of course, the risk here is that what may in fact be a relatively un-self-conscious, mercurial approach to genre on Ballard's part is unduly enlisted in a totalising theoretical attack on the idea of genre. I suggest this only because Ballard's use of self-reflexive writing has been relatively limited over the course of his career. Texts such as those that make up *The Atrocity Exhibition* and many of his experimental short fictions certainly draw attention to the materiality of their own signifiers, but the bulk of Ballard's writing remains tied to fairly conventional modes of narration.

10. The brief history of this movement is well documented in Colin Greenland's *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British 'New Wave' in Science Fiction* (1971), in Nicholas Ruddick's *Ultimate Island: On the Nature of British Science Fiction* (1993), and in Luckhurst's *'The Angle Between Two Walls'*.

Chapter Two

Poststructuralism, *Crash* and the Semiotic Body

Nearly two decades ago, Wlad Godzich, in his introduction to Michel de Certeau's *Heterologies* (1986), considered the possible adverse effects that poststructuralist philosophy has had on the practice of criticism, specifically, the complaint that it signals the return of a religious dimension to critical discourse in the form of "notions of unthinkability, undecidability, and paradox" (xvii).[1] Godzich raises these concerns in order to legitimate what he considers the middle way taken by de Certeau between poststructuralist religiosity and a tradition of universalist rationality stemming from the Enlightenment—between the heterological (xviii) and the gnostic (cf. xv) traditions, respectively. According to Godzich, de Certeau is associated with the heterological, in that his work operates on the basic premise that the scope of knowledge is qualified by the materiality of language. But de Certeau also stands apart from that school by virtue of the fact that he refuses to see literature as a privileged "mode of language," choosing instead to view it as simply "a mode of language use" (xx), that is, something we practice rather than contemplate objectively. In this way, de Certeau's discourse on otherness operates within ongoing heterological challenges to the gnostic tradition, but without turning otherness, itself, into a transcendental figure around which an overly pious ethical system would be erected and / or enforced as morality.

I open this chapter with reference to Godzich's argument because the concerns he raises are at issue in any consideration of the influence poststructuralism has had on

criticism of Ballard's fiction—that influence being the primary concern of the discussion to follow. Ballard's fiction has been particularly attractive to critics practising deconstruction or influenced by poststructuralism largely because it is amenable to interpretations celebrating the refusal of semantic closure. That is to say, the various indeterminacies within the work have, in a way, coalesced into a principle of Indeterminacy, and that principle has, in and of itself, become a Ballard theme. This development has, in turn, generated a substantial amount of anxiety over the political and ethical implications of Ballard's writing—especially in relation to the novels of the quartet, with their imagery of technological violence and perverse sexuality. To date, this critical focus has been contained within two related kinds of reading: either interpretation that moves toward figures of indeterminacy as ends in themselves, or analysis that seeks to position the undecideability of Ballard's work, particularly *Crash*, as a counterpoint to the instrumental reason of the technocracies represented in the fiction—both of which risk, in their respective ways, a perpetuation of the religiosity that Godzich questions.

The aim of this chapter is to engage with extant scholarship, mainly on *Crash*, that displays the influence of the 'heterological' tradition. More specifically, it grapples with the ethical implications of treating *Crash*'s narrative as a sustained exercise in non-referential semiotics, an approach associated primarily with Jean Baudrillard's essay "*Crash*" (1981). Baudrillard's 'ultra-semiotic' reading of *Crash* both performs and makes the novel perform a 'revolutionary' aesthetic, in which the relative value of binarisms is dissolved through a reading process—a use of Ballard's text—that seeks to promote all terms effectively excluded or devalued as threats to the normative term in

every opposition. The resulting aesthetic practice figures a radical acceptance of otherness by embracing metonyms for otherness internal to systems of signification, at the same time that it supposedly exposes the exclusionary violence at the heart of those systems. While the following discussion acknowledges the importance of this theoretical approach to critical discourse on the political and ethical significance of Ballard's fiction, and to our understanding of *Crash* in particular, it also articulates the limitations that are inherent in such an approach. More specifically, our consideration of the 'Baudrillardian' interpretation refutes its summary dissolution of *Crash*'s critical force by the contradictions attending the 'semiotic body' it promotes.

1. Over-determined indeterminacy

The only book-length study to consider Ballard's entire oeuvre through the frame of poststructuralism is Roger Luckhurst's *'The Angle Between Two Walls': The Fiction of J.G. Ballard*. Luckhurst does not necessarily deconstruct Ballard's work as he does demonstrate how that work performs deconstructively. In the book's preface, he promotes his approach as a viable alternative to "single-thesis" explanations of Ballard's work (xvi), specifically those interpretations that explore the theme of transcendence, and their "immanental" antitheses, that is, readings which focus on "immersion in a contemporary 'postmodern' order of simulation" (xvi). Luckhurst counters these supposedly reductive approaches with his own extended analysis of the Derridean 'hinge-effect' of Ballard's work (xiii)—the way his fictions, either internally or relative to one another, try to occupy the "non-place between categories" (xiv), "suspensive Zones" (xv),

the space of "athesis" (xvi), etc. From this starting point, Luckhurst goes on to subsume a wide range of issues related to categorisation—e.g. the genre of Ballard's fiction, *The Atrocity Exhibition*'s links to avant-garde movements, the potential of his media fictions to function as cultural critique, the signature 'Ballard' style—under the sign of athesis.

By trying to distinguish his deconstructive approach from the work of other critics, Luckhurst veers toward self-contradiction: while he questions the wisdom of single-thesis explanations, he also announces that Ballard's oeuvre is "*nothing other* than a prolonged meditation on the question of protocols, boundaries, frames and the evaluations they set in train" (xiii, emphasis added). In effect, he sees indeterminacy as the *centre*, the "irreducible core" (xix) of the writer's oeuvre and, whether he is willing to admit it or not, produces another single-thesis explanation—an all-encompassing argument meant to compensate for the inherent inadequacies and limitations of extant interpretations. As a result, Luckhurst could be accused of promoting an outmoded form of deconstructionist literary criticism. Additionally, Luckhurst's fascination with figures of indeterminacy—'oscillation' being the primary trope in his study—actually brings his analysis closer than he might want to the spirit of the 'single-thesis' of transcendence. Where Luckhurst tends to focus his attention on stylistic and genre ambiguities, the 'transcendental critic' highlights Ballard's recurrent dramatisations of the lone individual's movement toward inscrutable experiences. Warren Wagar, for example, notes in many of Ballard's works "the same ambiguous destination [. . .]: the fulfilment of a spiritual quest" (55). In the quartet specifically, the characters are said to transcend "the technological landscape [. . .] by passing *through* it rather than *around* it" (Wagar

64)—presumably ending up in what David Pringle, another critic who responds to Ballard's transcendentalism, calls "a rapturous forgetfulness of self" (Pringle 58). Regardless of how the critic phrases such experiences, the quality of the experience remains, in part at least, beyond representation, and the ambiguity surrounding these moments of transcendence would seem to be analogous to, rather than distinct from, the space of 'athesis' that Luckhurst claims his readers are placed in by the 'oscillatory' quality of Ballard's texts.[2] I point out this analogy between Luckhurst and the 'transcendentalists' not to diminish the importance of specific sections of Luckhurst's study, nor to distinguish my own interest in the ambiguities surrounding Ballard's representation of the corporeal from Luckhurst's preoccupation with oscillation (they are of course complementary); rather, the point is simply that Luckhurst's deconstructionist approach is no less totalising than any other plausible interpretation of Ballard's work.

Because one of the main focuses of this discussion is the way in which critics have put Ballard's figures of indeterminacy to work, it is crucial to point out the gestures in this direction that do appear in Luckhurst's study—that is, his attempts to articulate the possible ethical or political significance of Ballard's hinge-effects—even though they tend to be outweighed by his general fascination with indeterminacy-for-its-own-sake. In his chapter on *The Atrocity Exhibition* and the avant-garde, for example, Luckhurst concludes an introductory theorisation of the term *avant-garde* by asking whether "indeterminability, lack of fixity, could form a 'politics'" (85). In answer to this question he seems to present *Atrocity* itself: the text responds to capitalism's absorption of "'pure' states of affirmation and negation" with a "strategy of playing on the edge between

affirmation and negation[,]" and this in turn "troubles simple accounts of the 'political' spaces of art" (85). In other words, the text's oscillation between postures of critique and endorsement of the system it represents is generally unsettling for the politically engaged reader, and this uncanny effect is, itself, a self-reflexive political statement. Similarly, in his chapter on Ballard's "media stories" (119)—by which he means the quartet as well as selected short fiction—Luckhurst tries to articulate, or produce, the political or ethical content of the quartet. There, his strategy is to find a critical response to the media landscape not within individual fictions necessarily, but in the way they signify differentially from one another, refusing as a group to offer a monological response to that landscape; the supposedly celebratory mode of *Crash* is, for instance, played off against the relative sobriety of *Concrete Island*, and in this way the indeterminacy generated by the space between texts is deployed as a figure for the destabilisation of the smoothly circulating flows of commodities, images and information through the media / consumer landscape depicted in both novels. In a sense, Luckhurst reads Ballard's media stories as a kind of wish- fulfilment that the system will remain imperfect, that is, less than total in its reach, indefinitely.

The poststructuralist approach that Luckhurst takes in relation to Ballard's 'media stories' has, in a slightly different register, also been applied solely to *Crash* with remarkable results; in effect, criticism that has taken this particular tack makes up the second of Luckhurst's two 'single-thesis' explanations—readings which focus on the nature of Ballard's response to the order of simulation. Whereas Luckhurst describes the narrative of *Crash* as "monologic" in its celebratory rhetoric (129), other critics have

sought to open up the text through sophisticated readings of its semiotics, and derive an ethics and / or politics of indeterminacy from the 'lessons' of its style—a response that is of course very similar to Luckhurst's own attempt to derive a politics of indeterminacy on the basis of *Atrocity*.

The following section will explore this approach via the controversy that has surrounded Jean Baudrillard's response to *Crash*, which first appeared as a chapter in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Baudrillard's essay is, on one level, the seminal text in what Luckhurst calls the 'immanental' group, but it can also be read as an ironic enactment of the very stylistic features that it claims to find in Ballard's novel. Below, we will try to articulate the ethics of indeterminacy inspired by the stylistics of Baudrillard's essay and Ballard's novel. But we will also have to address the contradictions that stem from the 'semiotic body' at the centre of Baudrillard's and other similar critical approaches—contradictions which might extend the very indeterminacy that inspires poststructuralist ethical deliberation, but which ultimately lead to selective, and therefore misrepresentative, interpretations of Ballard's novel.

2. Indeterminacy, irony, ethics: Baudrillard's "*Crash*"

Baudrillard's "*Crash*" is divided into seven main sections of argument separated from one another by block quotations from Ballard's novel. If a distinct 'thesis' can be derived from "*Crash*," it might be that the novel's stylistics and the imaginary world it represents exist as part of a single, continuous, semiotic field, in part because of the nature of that imaginary world. This thesis is implied, for example, in Baudrillard's extension of the

category of *technology* in *Crash* not just to the machine world figured in the automobile but also to the human body, photography and cinema. Within the scope of Baudrillard's essay, all these things are treated as equivalent components of the same hypothetical environment, which we supposedly see in Ballard's novel. Baudrillard writes of a "body confused with technology" (111) in *Crash*, and of photographic and cinematic images no longer functioning as second-order representations of the real (116–17). Also included in this semiotic field would be Ballard's depiction of a "sexuality without a referential and without limits" (111), a concept that effectively expands the range of possible erogenous zones across the length and breadth of the body's surfaces (114–15).

Baudrillard's overall impression of Ballard's depiction of the technological environment is one of smooth functionality. He writes of *Crash* figuring the car accident as the norm within that environment, rather than something "that would appear only at the margins of the system" (112–13). In effect, the distinction between technological functionality and (violent) dysfunction ceases to generate meaning in either direction (113). Rather, if we believe Baudrillard, the system in *Crash means* for individuals to be involved in 'accidents,' and to reinforce the idea of this hyper-functionality, he dismisses practically every extant theorisation of motivation capable of explaining why individuals might be partly responsible for their own crashes: "No affect behind all that, no psychology, no flux or desire, no libido or death drive. [. . .] No repressed unconscious [. . .] except in a second reading that would still reinject a forced meaning, based on the psychoanalytic model" (112). In other words, crashes just happen in Ballard's novel, and

the characters, nay, a collection of semiotic bodies are involved in them—brought to the "banality of the anomaly of death" by the system of which they are a part (113).

On the basis of this identification between technological function and dysfunction, and the dismissal of various forms of affectivity, Baudrillard is able to normalise the perverse behaviour of Ballard's characters. The dysfunctionality ordinarily conveyed by the designation 'sexual perversion' no longer makes sense in relation to a present or implied normative category because all of Ballard's characters, if not all of the automotive citizens circulating in the background of the narrative as well, appear to share the same erotic interest in car crashes (cf. 113). In this respect, the clinical language in Ballard's text is a key feature for Baudrillard. He sees it as a new, cool form of pornography, drained of the "intimacy" (116) usually given to sexual violence by the street slang of more generic forms of pornographic fiction. That is to say, Ballard's application of clinical language to pornography reinforces the total normality of 'perversion' within the novel's semiotic environment (116). The words, like the sex acts and body parts they describe, generate no heat, communicating only a vision of bodies operating in synch with their technological partners.

Baudrillard concludes his response to *Crash* with the claim has made him the object of several critics' anger ever since. On the basis of the above content and stylistic features, he asserts that the narrative of *Crash* studiously avoids passing judgement on the system it reflects—or rather of which it is a part: "Few books, few films reach this resolution of all finality or critical negativity," he writes, "this dull splendour of banality or of violence. [. . .] *Crash* is the first great novel of the universe of simulation, the one

with which we will all now be concerned" (119). The following may be an over-reading that statement, but one notes in Baudrillard's summation that *Crash* is *of* the universe of simulation, rather than *about* it, that is, not a second-order representation. Ostensibly, like the photography and cinema depicted in the novel, the novel cannot reserve for itself the privileged status of critical distance from its apparent object—it is part of its own object. And in the absence of any reference points for judgement internal to the text, Ballard's readers can only respond to the novel with vacant, non-judgmental fascination (119)—a response that brings to mind, incidentally, the blank receptivity of the sophisticated naive already touched on in the introduction.

As a primer on Ballard's novel, Baudrillard's essay is replete with inaccuracies. His reading of the novel is predicated on a refusal to distinguish between Ballard's characters, and an insensitivity to the nuances separating both Ballard's representations of the specific bodies of those characters and the uses to which those bodies are put. Baudrillard's "*Crash*" also elides the context of the novel's narrative, that is, the stylistic illusion that we are listening to one man's memories of a specific phase in his life, with the perspectival limitations and distortions that attend extremely subjective first-person accounts. And finally, while Baudrillard's rigorous denial of conventional forms of subjective motivation is intriguing, it willfully ignores what actually happens in the novel: there are, for example, moments in the narrative when the character Vaughan stops behaving as if his body were already a semiotic 'material' posed in photographs, and begins to act in ways that are disturbingly aggressive and therefore suggestive of an overactive libido rooted in the flesh; his attempt to run down the narrator after they have

sex together is a case in point (cf. *Crash* 157). The extensive discussion of *Crash* in chapter three will redress some of the misrepresentations that arise from Baudrillard's essay; in the present context, however, we need to consider the possibility that Baudrillard's misreadings are not the result of poor scholarship, but rather subsumed within a sophisticated 'performative' poststructuralist theory, which itself has startling implications in terms of ethical deliberation—and thus cannot be summarily dismissed as it has been by other critics, Vivian Sobchack among them.

Despite being controversial, Baudrillard's reading has had several eloquent defenders. Scott Durham has acknowledged the relevance of Baudrillard's theories of simulation to Ballard's novel, although the chapter in his *Phantom Communities* (1998) dealing with Ballard and Baudrillard seeks to open up substantial differences between them, in addition to criticising their apparent dystopianism. Luckhurst, meanwhile, applauds what he sees as Durham's courageous effort to "rescue" Ballard from the clutches of Baudrillard's theory, but ultimately sides with the French theorist's take on *Crash*, claiming that the novel reflects "an indifferent circulation of equivalent signs trapped in a single logic" (127) while expressing "the ecstatic mode of immersal" within that logic (129). Baudrillard's most persuasive ally, however, is Bradley Butterfield, whose recent *PMLA* article "Ethical Value and Negative Aesthetics" (1999) uses the critical controversy sparked by Baudrillard's reading of *Crash* as the catalyst for speculation on the ethical value of philosophical and literary *aestheticism*—"Ballard in a literary tradition with Huysmans, Wilde, Gide, Artaud, and Burroughs; Baudrillard in a philosophical tradition with Nietzsche, Bataille, Blanchot, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard,

and Adorno" (65)[3]—as well as, one might add, the ethical potential of Baudrillard's idealisation of the semiotic body that he claims to find everywhere in *Crash*.

Butterfield's main premise is that an understanding of Baudrillard's particular approach to aestheticist theory is a prerequisite for grasping what is really going on in his essay on the novel. With reference to David Carroll's *Paraesthetics* (1987), itself a study of Nietzsche's influence on contemporary French thought, Butterfield has in mind a type of theory that undermines the truth claims of metaphysical philosophy through self-reflexivity, that is, by drawing the reader's attention to the stylistic aspects of its own discourse. The resulting *paraesthetic* theory refuses to "reject or ignore theory, but rather to undo the closures constituted by theory *from within* and to develop critical strategies that are capable of pointing to, or linking up with, what is 'beyond theory'" (Carroll 3, qtd. in Butterfield 71, original emphasis). For Butterfield, the ethical value of the aesthetic turn, and of Baudrillard's work in particular, emerges from this resistance to closure (Butterfield 75): the aestheticist's refusal to acknowledge category boundaries can be taken as a symbolic gesture of openness to difference and otherness, and in turn, can take on an emblematic role in future social interactions.

The starting point of Butterfield's essay is a debate staged in a 1991 issue of the journal *Science-Fiction Studies*. The issue's topic was ostensibly the relationship between science fiction and postmodernism, but much of the discussion centred on the morality of *Crash*, and on the related matter of the novel's representation of the relationship between the body and technology under late capitalism. Baudrillard's "*Crash*" was re-printed along with his "Simulacra and Science Fiction" (which also

appeared originally in *Simulacra and Simulation*), and both were followed by responses to Baudrillard's ideas from various critics, and an abrasive paragraph by Ballard himself, entitled "Response to the Invitation to Respond." As Butterfield points out, the majority of the respondents took issue with Baudrillard, criticising both his vision of the technologically enhanced body in *Crash* and his failure to see the moral purpose of the novel's satire on consumer society (66).

The responses of two critics in particular, N. Katherine Hayles and Sobchack, appear to be the primary catalysts for Butterfield's defence of Baudrillard. His concern is that certain value judgments implicit in their responses fail to meet the novel and the theoretical underpinnings of Baudrillard's interpretation on their own terms. Hayles's claim that *Crash* critiques the society it depicts by revealing how "technology's drive toward transcendence [. . .] does in fact culminate in flight, a flight to death'" (Hayles 323), is apparently suspect for the way it fails to grasp the valuation of death in Ballard's and Baudrillard's respective texts. Butterfield counters that "all post-Nietzschean thinkers see the preference even of life over death as arising from a prejudice rather than a truth" (66–67), and so Ballard's characters' flights toward death are to be taken as longed-for consummations rather than comic / tragic reversals. Sobchack, whose response was later revised into the essay discussed in the introduction to this study,[4] takes exception to Baudrillard's insistence that *Crash* celebrates the union of body and technology and the apparently limitless sexuality that results from that union. Her reply to this conceit is that the semiotic body which Baudrillard finds in Ballard's novel is actually the object of Ballard's moral outrage, and not, as Baudrillard would have it, a

concept that *Crash* idealises (cf. Sobchack 328–29). Butterfield chooses, here, to question the relatively under-theorised quality of the corporeality on which Sobchack's criticisms are predicated; as we noted in the introduction, he questions whether the fragile body she presents as evidence in her case is not, itself, an object "determined [. . .] by technology and economics" (71) and thus no less a discursive production than Baudrillard's techno-body.

Overall, Butterfield's response to all of Baudrillard's detractors is that an "insist[ence] on the continuing existence of real bodies and real suffering [is] either missing the point or falling for it" (66). But to imply that perceptive critics have somehow been duped by Baudrillard's sophistication, and perhaps by Ballard's as well, demands further substantiation. Anticipating this, Butterfield opts to provide readers with more context, devoting the bulk of his essay to an explanation of the theoretical underpinnings of Baudrillard's aestheticism, and the affinity between the ethics following on from that aestheticism and the agendas of the left-wing political community that Baudrillard broke with during the late 1970s: "Baudrillard's aestheticism[,]" it is asserted at one point, "leads him back to Marx's fundamental moral alliance with the weak" (71). Yet how does this happen?

In taking up Baudrillard's cause, Butterfield must on some level adopt the theorist's four-stage history of the image, articulated in *Simulacra and Simulation*. There, one finds the following declaration:

> Such would be the successive phases of the image:
> it is the reflection of a profound reality;

> it masks and denatures a profound reality;
> it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
>
> it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (Baudrillard 6, original emphasis)

For the sake of clarity, it should be pointed out that Butterfield, in a recent electronic essay, has identified Baudrillard's use of the term *image* with "all that the words representation, reproduction, and simulation have in common" ("The Baudrillardian Symbolic" par. 6). If Baudrillard's developmental history of the image is credible, one might conclude from it that late twentieth-century Western society is caught somewhere between the third and fourth phases, in a multi-dimensional time where certain manifestations of the image suggest the advent of the fourth, while much in the communications landscape remain remnants of previous orders—an environment synonymous with the 'pre-virtual.' The critical strategy Baudrillard adopted in the late seventies, however, is to write from a hypothetical position within the fourth stage. Scott Durham writes of Baudrillard "staging [. . .] late capitalism as a totalitarian operational system" and suggests that it makes more sense to understand this *mise en scène* as "a fantasmatic fiction, which attempts to imagine (and often to identify with) the realization of this tendency as coextensive with the social totality" (*Phantom Communities* 62). Butterfield does not necessarily promote this fantasmatic fiction as an accurate description of that total social fact, but he does suggest that "moral agency" is trivialised within late capitalist culture by its "reduc[tion] to coded responses and opinion polls" and by the way it is "constructed and enlisted by the great aestheticizing machines of the times—advertising, politics, entertainment" ("Ethical Value" 66). In effect, Butterfield

identifies media networks, career politicians and advertising firms as forces of insincerity and then concedes to them a monopoly on the construction and dissemination of value; and conceding this monopoly, in turn, justifies, if not demands, attempts on the part of artists and philosophers to instigate a revolution in moral feeling "in negative aesthetic terms" (66).

For Butterfield, the key to unlocking the mysteries of Baudrillard's particular practice of negative aesthetics is *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), in which the theorist's "opposition to traditional deep-value theories (Marxism, psychoanalysis, linguistics, anthropology)" was first formulated (67): "Countering Freud's and Marx's theories of exchange (libidinal and economic)," Butterfield explains,

> [Baudrillard] proposed a [. . .] theory of symbolic exchange, based jointly on Mauss's illustration of the potlatch, on Bataille's theory of expenditure, and on a deconstruction of Lacan's symbolic-real-imaginary triad. [. . .] Baudrillard's revolutionary symbolic relies on [. . .] an agonistic reciprocity among all agents in exchanges that can be made to enlist the system against itself, to effect reversals and implosions of terms and forces locked in opposition. [. . .] In the wake of these implosionary tactics Baudrillard hopes there will arise [. . .] a liberated and continuously creative new set of relations, governed not by semiotic or economic codes but by a symbolic code, defined as the simultaneous ex-termination of all terms coded in opposition and the reinvention of value according to the law of the gift, which he terms symbolic exchange. (67–68)

Baudrillard's self-appointed role within such exchanges is to align himself with various symbolic underdogs within systems of signification, that is, with signifieds which are devalued in binary oppositions that are themselves tacitly or explicitly endorsed by mainstream society: e.g. "the imaginary, the abnormal, the perverse, the dead" (Butterfield 71). In turn, this discursive strategy exposes the exclusionary violence of

metaphysical thinking—the way in which it organises terms according to "the conception of the norm" (69). In *Symbolic Exchange*, death and the dead stand out among these figures of 'weakness,' becoming blanket signs for the excluded, the unwanted, the devalued (cf. *Symbolic Exchange* 125–31). Arguing 'on the side of death,' then, equates to an all-out assault on the value-systems that found and motivate consumer society itself.[5] Through theory, the aestheticist practices acceptance of difference through symbolic speech acts which identify him or herself with one or more figures of otherness, and thereby implicitly rejects both outright prejudice *and* legislated and manufactured tolerance of difference, which aims only to repress and mask prejudice instead of working to overcome it. Butterfield puts it this way: "Far from promoting the idea that real people do not deserve compassion, Baudrillard's hypermoral vision is in fact of a world where metaphysical otherness (all that is cruelly excised by the rule of the norm) can no longer be stigmatized as morally inferior" (69).

At this point, one might wonder how such a practice manifests itself in specific Baudrillard texts. More in keeping with the present discussion: how is Baudrillard's plan to "trap the system or code in a death exchange that will reverse and thereby deconstruct the force of its signification" (Butterfield 69) carried out in "*Crash*"? How does that particular essay alert its readers to the fact that Baudrillard is arguing from a position of 'strategic weakness'? Butterfield claims that "[m]any of Baudrillard's most amoral statements seem calculated to provoke a moral response" (71)—but how to account for the theorist's *seeming*?

For those readers acquainted with the theory of symbolic exchange, Baudrillard's "*Crash*" can be read as an illuminating response to the use of language in Ballard's novel. Although Baudrillard's essay pays attention to both the actions of the characters within the narrative and the semiotics of the text, it should be kept in mind that his assertions follow on primarily from the novel's surface effects—the way in which Ballard seems to be playing with signs of the body, of technology, of sexuality, and so on. From even the brief outline of the essay offered above, one can see that Baudrillard's "*Crash*" emphasises the fusions, or interrelated and cumulative re-valuations of opposed terms which supposedly take place in Ballard's novel. *Technology* no longer derives its meaning, in part, through a differential relationship to *body*—and vice versa; instead, both are resolved into a fully operational "body without organs" ("*Crash*" 111). Similarly, technological *dysfunction* (the car crash) is joined to the order of the fully *functional* (113). These examples of semiotic mayhem are, presumably, the key component of Baudrillard's practice of symbolic exchange. And yet, which are the 'weak' terms and which the 'strong'? My sense is that Butterfield, if not Baudrillard as well, is assuming that *technology* and *dysfunction* are the 'death' terms in "*Crash*"—the former conventionally devalued relative to conceptions of the sanctity and wholeness of the human body, and the latter traditionally the enemy of instrumental reason. Hence, by raising the relative value of the 'weaker' terms, Baudrillard cheerfully dispatches what were once established certainties. Bringing this back to the *SFS* debate over the morality of Ballard's novel, one could say that Baudrillard strategically dissolves various metaphysical foundations on which liberal humanist critics might have constructed

frameworks to contain *Crash* (and Ballard); this dissolution is, in effect, Baudrillard's 'gift' to them. As Butterfield points out, though, the gift demands reciprocation on the part of the 'system' and thus we must assume that Sobchack's threat of physical violence in the name of fragile corporeality and moral principle—"I wish Baudrillard a little pain (maybe a lot) to bring him to his senses" ("Baudrillard's Obscenity" 329)—is just such a response. By simultaneously criticising Baudrillard's insensitive approach to violence and wishing violence be done to him, Sobchack risks hypocrisy and diminishes the 'force of signification' of her own theoretical system. In this manner, Baudrillard supposedly seduces his critics into error and, by taking on the role of scapegoat through the sacrifice of his own credibility as a theorist, either strengthens the moral convictions of others or encourages them to reflect on the prejudicial tone implicit in their expulsion of 'the dead.'[6]

What happens, though, to readers uninitiated into this symbolic manipulation of opposed terms? Are there any signposts within Baudrillard's "*Crash*" to tell them that the author is, in fact, playing the role of devil's advocate? If Baudrillard writes aestheticist theory, as Butterfield claims, then one should be able to look to the style of his discourse for indications that he is seeking to 'undo the closures of theory from within.' If we are dealing with a form of irony, then readers should be able to produce that irony based on something more substantial than their own hope that the writer is saying one thing and meaning another—or, to paraphrase Fredric Bogel on the rhetoric of irony, saying one thing and meaning *two* (cf. Bogel 67).[7] Alan McKee, responding to Ballard's own reputation as an ironist,[8] argues that "[i]rony is problematic primarily

because it can only ever exist as a possibility in a text; it is a reading rather than a certainty"—and, more crucially, a reading based on "certain signals" (65). Linda Hutcheon, writing on the politics of ironic discourse, makes a similar assertion: "Someone attributes irony; someone makes irony happen" (6). Irony is, then, something readers construct, rather than simply feel, in relation to a text, and hence it should be possible to account for such signals in Baudrillard's essay or else he could be said to fail not necessarily as a theorist but as an *artist*—and as an ethicist, too, for Butterfield's defence of his aestheticist ethics is based on his status as an ironist.[9]

I would suggest that when Butterfield speaks of the 'calculated' appearance of Baudrillard's statements, he is referring not only to the amorality conveyed through the conflation of terms valued in opposition, but also to the sheer excess of provocative assertions, and their compression within what is a relatively brief piece. Over just the first two pages one finds the following statements in rapid succession:

> [In] *Crash*, technology is the mortal deconstruction of the body [. . .] the dismemberment and cutting to pieces, not in the pejorative illusion of a lost unity of the subject [. . .] but in the explosive vision of a body delivered to 'symbolic wounds[.]' (111)
>
> Technology is never grasped except in the (automobile) accident, that is to say in the violence done to technology itself and in the violence done to the body. It is all the same: any shock, any blow, any impact, all the metallurgy of the accident can be read in the [. . .] semiurgy of contusions, scars, mutilations, wounds that are so many new sexual organs opened on the body. (112)
>
> The non-meaning, the savagery, of this mixture of the body and of technology is immanent, it is the immediate reversion of one to the other, and from this results a sexuality without precedent—a sort of potential vertigo linked to the pure inscription of the empty signs of this body. (112)

While McKee cautions that "[e]xcess is not, in itself, an unmistakable signal" of irony (65), I do not see why it cannot be taken as a fairly reliable indicator. As passages like those above quickly accumulate, their insistence on the smooth functioning of *Crash*'s semiotic body generates an overarching rhetorical effect: we are not hearing reasoned argument but instead a kind of harangue, full of totalising gestures. The effect is reinforced by Baudrillard's reckless use of quotations: his assertions alternate with extensive block citations from the novel, but the content of the quotations does not always make its status as supporting evidence immediately recognisable. The resulting (performance of) interpretation is more declarative than demonstrative, even though the essay's structure maintains a tenuous link to the rhetorical conventions of academic argumentation. N. Katherine Hayles writes of the "exciting, stimulating, giddy" effect of Baudrillard's discourse (323), and this sums up well his adoption of the persona of the theorist transported by theory itself.

Just because potential signals of irony can be located in Baudrillard's text, it should not be concluded that "*Crash*" the essay is not serious enough to tell us anything meaningful about *Crash* the novel. Rather, the playfulness evident in Baudrillard's discourse should only add to the reader's conviction that the voice of the theorist is undermining his own gestures of closure. Hence, the "extramoral sense" (Butterfield 75) inspired by indeterminacy, which Butterfield identifies as a valuable response to aestheticism in philosophy, can be cultivated on the basis of Baudrillard's essay even by readers unfamiliar with the workings of symbolic exchange. One question that remains, however, is: where does all this leave *Crash*? If Baudrillard's playful essay tells us

something significant about Ballard's novel, then what is it? Does that 'lesson' have any limitations that need to be foregrounded? And if so, how might a critic respond to them without re-producing Sobchack's unconstructive limitation of *Crash* to just one 'ethical' reading—her own? The final section of this chapter will try to answer these questions with reference to not only Baudrillard's essay but also commentaries on the novel which display a 'Baudrillardian' perspective but without the apparent irony. The discussion will situate these Baudrillardian perspectives as useful descriptions of Vaughan's, that is, of the 'Ballardian' visionary's semiotic perception of his own body and those of others—on which quite remarkable interpretations of the novel have been founded. But it will also caution that a reduction of all possible bodies in *Crash* to the ideal of the semiotic body risks misrepresenting the text's complexities in ways that cannot be recouped as another indeterminacy deployed by the poststructuralist critic in the pursuit of 'strategic weakness.'

3. Semiotic bodies and their others

After having read Baudrillard's "*Crash*" for the irony apparent in its discourse, it would now be self-contradictory to fault him for misrepresenting Ballard's novel as I tried to do above; one would always have to consider the possibility that the essay's inaccuracies are another component of the ironic performance. So, rather than dismiss his essay on the basis of apparent inaccuracies, it seems more productive, and in keeping with our overarching discussion of the corporeal, to suggest that Baudrillard's premise that *Crash* lacks a "moral gaze" (Baudrillard 119) is predicated on selective rather than

inaccurate readings. These readings are selective because they extract what is essentially the novel's most visionary passages—specifically those which feature the most fully operational semiotic body—from their context, and then treat them as the general condition of Ballard's narrative. That said, Baudrillard is not the only critic to have put forward the kind of reading apparent in his essay, and where similar interpretations have been put forward by other critics, this has not been done in the 'performative' manner explored above. As a result, what in Baudrillard's essay might be a strategic misrepresentation of the novel—one that has the potential to tell us more about the workings of theory than about the content of Ballard's novel—has, to my mind, become something of an established misrepresentation, and is therefore in need of, not rejection, but modification.

First, a recap of the specific version of the semiotic body one finds in Baudrillard's essay: Baudrillard emphasises the semiotic 'substance' of the bodies readers see in *Crash*, to the point at which the corporeal is not to be understood as a material given preceding its production in / through discourse, let alone something as complex as the unrepresentable referent of Judith Butler's notion of materialisation—that mutable, animate thing that *is* the indissolubility of 'pre-discursive' flesh and the process of signification that gestures toward that flesh in the process of making the corporeal intelligible. Instead, the semiotic body that Baudrillard recovers from *Crash* seems to be, as Sobchack suggests, only an abstract object of contemplation, and perhaps a non-referential sign as well: "Baudrillard's body is *thought* always as an object and never *lived* as a subject. And thought rather than lived, it can bear all sorts of symbolic abuse

with indiscriminate and undifferentiated pleasure. This techno-body [. . .] is a porno-*graphic* fiction, objectified and written beyond belief and beyond the real" (Sobchack "Beating the Meat" 311). By dissociating the signs of bodies from their referents, Baudrillard is able to witness *Crash*'s 'fusions' between human flesh and the machine world, and, without flinching, comment that the violence and violations involved are "empty of the sensorial" (119). And for readers whose immediate response to *Crash* is or was visceral, Baudrillard's evocation of the semiotic body can perhaps only sound like the product of a lifetime spent in sensory alienation.[10] Baudrillard's *sang-froid* thus leaves him open to accusations that his writing merely reproduces "all that's wrong with Vaughan" (Sobchack "Baudrillard's Obscenity" 327); but, of course, that openness is also part and parcel of the brilliance of his performative writing: figuratively speaking, Baudrillard invites the novel's central psychopathological figure into his own theory, or allows Vaughan to 'come' into him as the case may be, and thereby refuses to use the rationality of theory to demonise the weak (naturally, this approach is predicated on the critic's positioning of Vaughan as first and foremost a figure of weakness rather than, say, predatory or exploitative, as he tends to appear in my own reading of the novel in chapter three).

Baudrillard is not the only commentator to have extracted this semiotic body from the pages of *Crash* as part of a sophisticated interpretation. Butterfield's own comments on *Crash*, for example, entail a similar notion of the immaterial body. His account of the novel is, by his own admission, not "a detailed explication" (72) but rather a succinct overview of three ways in which the novel resonates with Baudrillard's theory. The first

two deal with matters of content. He notes that Ballard's characters seem to be practising "a neoprimitive [symbolic] exchange with death" through their eroticisation of car-crash victims (73), doing so within an environment dominated by simulated events (72–73); here, Butterfield would appear to be arguing that the novel is *about* the society of simulation, rather than *of* it. The point he makes that supersedes both claims, however, pertains to Ballard's prose style. Butterfield links it to Baudrillard's notion of 'the poetic,' the literary mode of symbolic exchange, and basically reiterates the observations made in Baudrillard's "*Crash*" (73): citing one of many passages from the novel where "signs of the body and technology, of nature and culture, of sex and death impale and envelope one another[,]" Butterfield concludes that, "[t]hough still representational [. . .] the world such passages represent is one where *signs perform their death rites*" (73, emphasis added). By asserting the primacy of this 'poetic,' Butterfield's reading curiously detaches signs of the body, nature and sex from the characters *as* they are symbolically exchanging their sexual energies with the dead (and sometimes becoming the dead themselves as a result of that process of 'detachment'). And in the wake of the earlier explication of Baudrillard's aestheticism, it is not hard to see that, for Butterfield, Ballard's novel can inspire a similar form of ethical deliberation, by generating aporias through its joyous and anxiety-free "dissemination and absolution of value" (70); one could say that by playing signs related to bodies off against signs of technology, Ballard's *Crash* works toward a position that implicitly attacks established notions of the sanctity of the human body, indeed, of the idea that our bodies are 'ours'—a presumption of private ownership which certainly grounds Sobchack's response to Baudrillard: "He

needs a little pain [. . .] to remind him that he has a body, *his* body, and that the 'moral gaze' begins there" ("Baudrillard's Obscenity" 329, original emphasis).

Yet another version of the singularly semiotic body can be found in Paul Youngquist's recent electronic essay "Ballard's Crash-Body," which constructs a 'Baudrillardian' reading on the premise that in *Crash* "semiotics subsumes substance" (Youngquist para 4).[11] Bringing Ballard's novel into dialogue with Renaissance representations of the crucifixion, Youngquist argues that the Christian afterlife, the idea of a realm to which the spirit goes once it has transcended both the body's suffering and sexuality, has been replaced by a semiotic hereafter within late industrial culture, where the notion of an immortal human spirit has passed into history. Where the crucifixion of Christ once stood as *the* icon of an earlier paradigm, the car crash—the media event that the accident site becomes—now stands as the defining image: "[T]he human body is transformed, best revealed by the banal, pervasive catastrophe of a crash. The crash serves our culture as the crucifixion served the Christian West, its images circulating to sustain the possibility of another life. For Ballard's crash-body cannot die" (para 27). The novel, then, reveals the workings of this "body conceptual" (para 4); and, though Youngquist does not put it in these words exactly, it can be understood as a latter-day gospel according to the Apostle James (the narrator James Ballard, that is)—relating the life, death and resurrection of late industrial culture's newest messiah, Vaughan.

On the basis of Baudrillard's, Butterfield's and Youngquist's respective readings, there can be little doubt that a focus on the semiotic body clears paths toward highly

sophisticated interpretations of Ballard's text. However, those readings have certain disadvantages that need to be articulated.

First, the production of the idea of the semiotic body, in whatever terms it is couched (techno-, sign-, concept-body), is predicated on an approach to *Crash* that arbitrarily dissolves the associative link between the signs of bodies, body parts and bodily fluids from Ballard's characters, and thereby sets aside the relevance of narrative context too hastily; Youngquist is perhaps least guilty of this, but it is still implicit in his argument. When critics presuppose that the entirety of Ballard's narrative signifies in a uniform manner, they lose sight of the fact that particular passages within the narrative signify through a differential relationship with other sections of the same narrative. Put another way, when specific 'surface' effects of Ballard's prose are disjoined from 'James Ballard's narrative' to produce the concept of the semiotic body, and are not contextualised by the critic *as being* selected passages from that story, then the effects they produce differentially relative to other textures and the voices of other characters are lost. Arguably, the text can only appear 'poetic' in the sense Butterfield suggests—"poetic in Baudrillardian terms [. . . but] not poetic in Baudrillard's strong sense of 'the insurrection of language against its own laws,' which can only devolve into nonsense" (73)—if specific sections of it can be contrasted with more 'prosaic' passages that indicate the (relative) norms the characters and readers are leaving behind in their attempt to grasp the visionary's dream. In an analogous fashion, Youngquist's assertion that *Crash*'s narrative is from beginning to end "[s]tylistically and analytically [. . .] photo-Kantian" (para 2), that is, writing which replicates and idealises the 'flattening'

effect of the photographic image, effectively identifies Vaughan's view of the car crash with the author's view of it, and completely elides the filtering effect of the participant narration and the persona evoked through that narration.[12] In this way, the 'moral gaze' that can be generated through a contrast of narrative textures is *actively discarded* by Baudrillard and company, rather than being something that cannot be generated by the reader on the basis of specific textual evidence.

A second concern pertains to the role of sacrifice both within the narrative of *Crash* and as part of the aestheticist reading of the text. A certain amount of sacrifice is implicit in all three of the 'Baudrillardian' interpretations of *Crash* that we have been looking at here: Butterfield asserts that Ballard's characters are practising symbolic exchanges of sexual energy with death and the dead, which sometimes lead to their own deaths; Youngquist describes a form of transcendence in which the characters would necessarily have to leave behind the last remnants of the 'body-substantial' that bars their way to the mediated 'afterlife'; and even Baudrillard suggests at the close of his essay that the novel's universe of simulation, "through a sort of reversal of the mass-mediated substance (neon, concrete, car, erotic machinery), appears as if traversed by an intense force of initiation" (119). In each case, the characters are either using their physical vulnerability symbolically, risking violation, injury and death in order to experience a profound sense of intimacy with dead crash victims, or transcending their physical limitations en route to the promised land of the televisual image. And yet, the privileging of the semiotic shared by all three critics would seem to deny the element of ordeal inherent in such sacrificial acts. Butterfield admits as much when he writes of Ballard's

characters "seek[ing] in each crash [. . .] entry into a symbolic realm that no longer values distinctions like conscious / unconscious, normal / perverse, and living / dead in opposition" (72). His reading is incisive, but to posit an undefinable 'beyond' of an existing system necessarily invokes the existing system itself, a realm in which bodies are not just signs valued in opposition to signs of technology, all of them moving inexorably toward a semiotic 'immolation,' but rather, and to recall Judith Butler's theories, flesh indissociable from its production through discourse undergoing a (painful) transformation into 'pure' semiotics.

There is a reader-response dimension to this problem as well. The feeling of aporia that Butterfield associates with the experience of reading *Crash* could be expressed as emotional, sensory and perhaps intellectual paralysis on the reader's part—a suspended animation resulting from *Crash*'s rapid-fire juxtapositions of signs valued in opposition. The problem is that Butterfield's brief commentaries on the text imply that readers are to perceive the characters and their bodies in semiotic terms at all points in the text. To completely dispel the illusion that Ballard's characters have physical as well as signified bodies has the potential to produce a situation in which there are no established values for the text to 'transvalue' in its most demanding passages. This qualification is only in keeping with the notion of an aporia or ambivalent suspension between two sides of a binary. In order for the text to generate such an effect, it would still have to engender a conviction that the representational quality of the text has, or once had, an important role to play. Having idealised such a suspension, Butterfield cannot then privilege the stylistic side of the dichotomy without losing the ambivalent 'ground' on which he stakes his

ethical claims. He may applaud Ballard for refusing to resolve contradictions (cf. 74), but his own rendition of the aporia generated by the novel threatens to become the kind of closure he wants to see (re)opened. Because I sense that Butterfield is aware of this potential problem, I would want to modify his approach by placing it within the framework of a reading progression: the unsettling images and scenarios in *Crash* are received initially with seriousness, but their sheer repetition over the course of the narrative eventually produces this terrifying paralysis of judgment, and perhaps incredulity, puzzled laughter, and boredom as well. *Crash*'s process of transvaluation, then, might be understood as the reader's movement through successively declining levels of shock, toward a moment when the text's referential link with its imaginary world, let alone with the real world beyond the text, seems to vanish. In this way, the reader's production of the text results in a form of de-sensitisation analogous to the 'death of affect' that Ballard's characters are subject to—but at least the possibility remains that readers will experience this loss with some amount of anguish.

Overall, finding the sacrificial element in *Crash* requires a recognition of the complexity of (with a nod to Luckhurst) its oscillations between provocative 'poetry' and residual realist mimetic. On the basis of such an approach, readers could acknowledge the 'successes' of characters who seem to have passed into a totally semiotic, immaterial realm, but also refuse to discount the potential significance of the more problematic fates of others. One direction shows us the way toward a dreamworld where the body and machine make seamless transfers of energy, fluids, capabilities, etc. between one another, and in which individuals gain a kind of immortality through the dissemination and

circulation of their image. The other direction leads not so much to an unwanted, shameful grave (the 'scandal' of death that Baudrillard's theory seeks to redress), as it does toward victimization, and worse, a realm in which individuals no longer have the linguistic tools necessary to articulate for themselves that they are, in fact, being victimised, because action has become a matter of depthless posturing, and language has been set adrift on the raft of its own indeterminacy.

By now it should be fairly evident that I see the representation of the corporeal in *Crash*, and in the other novels of the quartet, as more multi-dimensional than the 'Baudrillardian' approach is capable of acknowledging on account of its highly specialised focus. One wonders, though, whether the poststructuralist positions articulated by Baudrillard and Butterfield, and in a slightly different form by Youngquist, might be augmented by a re-conceptualisation of their 'depthless' and limitless techno-, sign- and concept-bodies in terms of Judith Butler's idea of the indissolubility of materiality and signification; indeed, I am willing to concede that such a view of the corporeal is already implicit in their arguments but glossed over for the sake of concision. What such an approach might do is emphasise that something imaginary, but no less important for being so, is sacrificed en route to the dissolution of value that Baudrillard's essay performs, and makes *Crash* perform along with it—moreover, is necessary as the starting point for a movement into a (conceptual) space where the sudden absence of recognisable rules and values produces a terrifying and exhilarating sense of vertigo. From there, readers might be better able to grasp the curious mixture of amoral posturing and awareness of consequence rooted in corporeality that is a key feature of *Crash*'s

satirical dimension. Although the following chapters provide close readings that suggest the novels of the quartet are amenable to such an approach, and thus go some way toward substantiating the claims regarding corporeality made by Sobchack and others, the remainder of our discussion here will suggest, by way of a conclusion, that the body which concerns *Crash*'s Lacanian critics offers us a figure of mediation between the fragility that seems absent from the semiotic body and the sublimity of limitless potential that is the semiotic body's primary feature. Dennis Foster's essay "J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses" (1993) provides an account of the workings of this figure in Ballard's fiction, and, perhaps more importantly, restores a critical force to the representational 'content' of *Crash*—the implicit critique of the system that exploits the pleasures of the Lacanian body conveyed by James Ballard's narration.

Foster's understanding of *Crash* builds on an earlier essay by Robert Caserio ("Mobility and Masochism" [1987]) which links the perversity of Ballard's characters with a specific theorisation of masochism. Masochism, for Caserio, is an archetypal situation in which the readers of narrative and the fictional characters with whom they identify (unwittingly) gain momentum from experiences of binding, disciplining or punishment: "I cannot avoid the idea" Caserio writes, "that [. . .] there is an experience of violent arrest, of a suffering of a text's revelatory determinations or disambiguations of meaning, which our critical theory has not yet appreciated for its *vital* importance" (297, original emphasis). In *Crash*, it is the car crash itself which figures this forced confinement, and according to Caserio's theory, it places the individual closer to the origins of "the vital order"—those "nonambiguous coordinations of instinct, aim and

object" associated with the fulfilment of primary needs in childhood (299). In other words, crash victims re-discover the infantile body they have lost, and, if they survive the ordeal, experience the pleasures of that body's helplessness. From there, the crash survivor can, as Foster phrases it, "reconstruct an adult world of action and mediation" (524). Helplessness itself becomes inspirational, propelling the masochistic subject forward to embrace new experiences.

Interestingly, Caserio's theorisation of the car crash as a binding experience is a prime example of the kind of theory that, in Judith Butler's terms, materialises what it claims to find prior to the sign. Caserio is describing a flesh anterior to its intelligibility through signification, but can only produce a rough equivalent of that unrepresentable substance through signification. Additionally, the theory that crashes in *Crash* take the characters back to an infantile time of perfectly coordinated instincts implies that they accomplish through technological accident something akin to what Susan Buck-Morss believes radical art should aim for: the reawakening of the instinctual powers of the human sensorium, as well as an awareness of the fragility of the human body outside of and within the anaesthetic armour of modern technology ("Aesthetics and Anaesthetics" 377).

For Foster, there are two potential problems in Caserio's response to Ballard. The first stems from a weakening of referentiality. The drift of Caserio's interpretation of Ballard's fiction is toward the primacy of metaphor over literal meaning; in terms of *Crash*, he appears to accept the primacy of structural metaphor, and this allows him to view Ballard's representations of car crashes as thoroughly figurative. Foster, meanwhile, cautions us against a singularly figurative interpretation of the novel, and,

quite rightly, questions the implicit identification of reader and character in Caserio's essay. Ballard's fiction may in some way remind readers of this "early paradise" (524) of unmediated contact and wholeness associated with the mother's body's provision of basic needs, but their 'experience' of the pleasures of such a 'binding' remains vicarious and a far cry from the imaginary 'reality' experienced by Ballard's characters, who not only savour this binding as fantasy but also must 'live' it out—oftentimes to their deaths. One always needs to keep in mind then that Ballard's "restaging of that early pleasure can be fatal" (524).

Foster also expresses a concern over Caserio's basic presumption of a "human willingness to move repeatedly away from the passive position of childhood pleasure into the symbolic activity of adult life" (Foster 524). According to the psychoanalytic model espoused by both critics, the child matures from instinctual motivations geared toward the vital order, to the displacement of that order by various "symbolic compensations" (Foster 520). Ideally, by the time the psychoanalytic subject reaches full adulthood, this process of displacement is more or less complete and the subject is content with the diminished pleasure to be found in these symbolic substitutes—pleasure as distinct from more excessive forms of enjoyment (*jouissance*). Something quite different has happened to Ballard's characters if we believe Foster's claims: they tend to deny their own confinement within (consignment to?) the (Lacanian) symbolic and live in ignorance "of genitality, of the limitations to pleasure, of the father, of the law" (531 n3). In other words, the helpless, infantile body that (re)emerges during the car crash becomes the

source of *too much* pleasure for Ballard's characters; it figures limitless potential rather than, or in addition to, corporeal limitations.

If this were as far as Foster's analysis were to go, it would suggest only that Ballard's fiction allegorises a particular psychoanalytic theorisation of perversion.[13] What Ballard adds to the basic theory, however, is a sociological point of view that focusses on the potential for this perversity to be exploited under the sign of late capitalism and rationalist technocracy. Foster clearly sees this more sinister possibility reflected in novels such as *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, where Ballard "seems troubled by the deep persistence of the images of perversity and by the ways the world of technology and consumption appeals to them" (525). This is the same as asking how the binding experience Caserio articulates can be endorsed as a viable process of revitalisation if it all-too-often becomes the source of addiction and a lever through which the forces of, in Foster's reading, Reason and Capital (cf. 520) exercise control over the public.[14] From Foster's point of view, Ballard's characters eagerly remain in a state of disavowal regarding limits to pleasure mainly because the consumer society of which they are already a part is conspiring against them, persistently enticing them back to a *limited* range of acceptable binding experiences (520). In this way, Foster derives a less-optimistic picture of perversion from Ballard's fiction than Caserio does, and, in the process, puts the 'Lacanian Ballard' to work as a key component of his own critical theory of postmodernity.

The body theorised in Foster's response to Ballard's fiction provides us with a useful supplement to the more strictly semiotic body at the centre of the 'Baudrillardian'

interpretations outlined above. My sense is that Baudrillard, Butterfield and Youngquist, in their respective ways, articulate the experience that a Lacanian point of view would most likely describe in terms of its potential to become *jouissance* both for the characters—the act of being involved in crashes—and for readers—the "dissemination and absolution of value" (Butterfield 70) through Ballard's 'poetic' prose. That experience can never become pleasure or *jouissance* for the characters within a Baudrillardian frame, however, because, as we have seen, that particular theoretical frame denies them all forms of affectivity both before and after the crash. From there, the Baudrillardian approach totalises the narrative on the basis of these specific 'visionary' episodes or moments in the reading process, extending this quality so that it becomes the condition of the text as a whole. On the basis of this approach, the Baudrillardian reader arrives at the idea that *Crash* lacks a critical component and can be said to exclude a 'moral gaze.' The Lacanian approach, meanwhile, presupposes that Ballard's characters come to the crash site without affect (emotionally and sense dead under the sign of Ballard's 'death of affect') only to have their emotions and senses re-awakened by the violence of the crash—that is, if they survive the impact. From there, two things happen in succession: first, the crash survivor finds excessive, transgressive pleasure in the helplessness of his or her injured body; and following that, the survivor finds him or herself drawn to, identifying with, or seeking to 'enter' the realm of mass-produced images of sex, violence and celebrity. It is that realm which effectively repackages the crash survivor's perverse enjoyment for more palatable consumption, and thereby perpetuates a vicious cycle of violence and destruction, and the aestheticisation of that

violence and destruction. From the Lacanian point of view, it is the exposure of that cycle, through a naive enactment of its workings, that constitutes the critical dimension of *Crash*.

This discussion of the impact of poststructuralism on Ballard criticism began with reference to concerns over the implicit religiosity of criticism that dwells on indeterminacy and analogous figures for it. By opening the discussion up to 'ultra-semiotic' readings of Ballard's work and refusing to dismiss the interpretations that result from such approaches, I have, of course, risked producing this religiosity here, too—through a reluctance to judge what has both merit and limitations. The preceding discussion was not meant to leave various critical perspectives in a perfect equilibrium, though, but instead to, in a manner of speaking, relegate the 'Baudrillardian' approach to *Crash* and its idealised semiotic body to those particular textures in Ballard's narrative which they illuminate so well. What will be seen in subsequent chapters is that the novels of the quartet, not just *Crash*, frustrate arbitrary theoretical dissociations of the (pre-symbolic) corporeal and the semiotic production of the body, and thus figure interactions between the human and the technological in ways that remain complex and troubling—perhaps thankfully so, given the smoothly operational cast that attends extant theorisations of the semiotic body. The next chapter in particular furthers the current exploration of these issues within the context of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, a novel that presents the most thoroughly semiotic and a-consequential fictional landscape in the whole of the quartet; and yet, even it contains within its pages signs of a residual corporeality that must be heeded.

Notes

1. Godzich was in fact responding to objections raised by Edward Said in *The World, The Text and The Critic* (cf. Certeau *Heterologies* xvi–xvii).

2. Incidentally, Wagar tries to redeem the (perhaps inevitable) obscurantism of Ballard's transcendentalism by wedding it to left-wing political concerns about the social imaginary. The ideas and plans of Ballard's visionaries, no matter how potentially dangerous (or impractical) they may be, are said to parallel the left's traditional interest in working toward a utopian future (67); similarly, Ballard's preoccupation with "psychic transformation" may be blind to the economic and cultural determinants of identity, but, as Wagar argues, at least his attempts to envision a new consciousness for his characters can be taken as metaphors for the kind of psychological changes that would follow on from a leftist revolution. In other words, Wagar finds a generalised utopian spirit in Ballard's work which he believes is necessarily antithetical to capital. The lavishness of Ballard's "mystagogic and escapist and even decadent" 'utopias' is reinterpreted as imaginative excess capable of overwhelming the current system (67). In this way, Wagar brings together Ballard's Nietzschean 'transvaluations' and the revolutionary utopianism commonly associated with Marxist ideology. There is an irony in this, because Ballard's Marxist critics have generally rejected his idealisation of self-dissolution, treating it as the aesthetic terminus of capital itself—the equivalent in metaphor of the over-production and rapid consumption of images and commodities synonymous with Western free-market economies. Fredric Jameson, for instance, has suggested that this ideal is in fact nothing more than the "rich and corrupt" fantasy of "a dying class—in this case the canceled future of a vanished colonial and imperial destiny—seek[ing] to intoxicate itself with images of death" ("Progress Versus Utopia" 245).

3. Butterfield cautions that such a diverse group of artists and thinkers should not be too hastily corralled into one pen; nonetheless, he senses in their work a shared "preference for the aesthetic as a mode of existence and interpretation over bourgeois morality and metaphysics" (65).

4. One interesting difference between the two versions of Sobchack's response to Baudrillard is the addition of a sarcastic fantasy about her prosthetic leg and its erotic possibilities (cf. "Beating the Meat/Surviving the Text" 313–14). The addition of this passage suggests that she later came to realise how the earlier version's strident rhetoric might have been received by readers. As a result, it remains odd that Sobchack would not have gone on to consider that Baudrillard's "*Crash*," too, might have been deploying irony to produce an ambiguous rhetorical effect.

5. Baudrillard's position, as it is filtered through Butterfield's essay, presupposes a particular response of Capital to the Nietzschean 'death of God' and the negation of the possibility of revelation in the afterlife: the forces of capital try to compensate for the loss of the meaning which death once conferred on the living (that human suffering in this life

would be made meaningful in the next) by steering conceptions of the Good toward the ceaseless accumulation of (mere) goods—which works in Capital's favour. In turn, being dead becomes increasingly 'scandalous,' death's pointlessness becomes a source of shame, and those who (unconsciously) fear oblivion after death take to the practice of consumerism in a manic search for consolation. At the end of this trajectory stands the aestheticist theorist: he or she uses the medium (or disguise) of rational thought, which has in the past helped to exclude the dead and their analogues—for instance, by relegating communication with them to the realm of irrational superstition—to speak what sounds like heresy. Thus, against a widespread reduction of 'the Good' to the consumption of goods, the aestheticist opposes 'the Good' of an agile imagination capable of affirming both the living and the dead.

6. Of course, placing Sobchack's initial response in this position amounts to presuming the absolute sincerity of its rhetoric, and thus there appears to be a double-standard in Butterfield's essay: Baudrillard is permitted to deploy strategic insincerity as part of his overall theoretical project, while possible rhetorical modulations in Sobchack's essay (in this case, what might be a concluding shift into a sarcastic tone) are seen as a fatal flaw.

7. Bogel links irony and satire via their mutual double structures, but as with satire he has his own specific version of irony. Traditionally, he claims, irony's doubleness arises from the distinction theorists of irony make between the latent and manifest, apparent and actual, surface and depth of ironic discourse (67). For Bogel this doubleness is habitually denied by critics even though they profess its existence, because they will invariably assert that one of the two registers is preferable as the 'real' meaning. What Bogel wants instead is a definition of irony in which both levels signify at once: ironic discourse is saying one thing that means two (67). "[T]he decision to prefer either of these meanings over the other[,]" Bogel argues,

> cannot be scripted by the text itself but is a matter of interpretive activity, and that even in cases where the ambiguity is less than paralysing and the probability of one meaning is significantly greater than that of the other, the shadow of the second meaning, and thus of irony's intrinsic structure of doubleness, can never be obliterated entirely. (67–68)

8. It has become almost accepted practice in Ballard criticism to assume that the tone running through his work is ironic but expressed in such a way that readers cannot find specific evidence in any given text to support such a reading. Descriptions such as "the Ballardian wit which redeems so much" (Pringle 39), "unyielding irony" (Greenland 120), "deadpan earnestness" (Caserio 303) and "terminal irony" (Luckhurst *'The Angle Between Two Walls'* 107) have become almost truisms. David Pringle at least mentions the presence in Ballard's work of some kind of exaggerated rhetoric that might signal rhetorical duplicity (52), but he produces no textual evidence to substantiate the claim. My concern is that in the absence of such evidence appeals to Ballard's irony risk becoming overly convenient excuses for the more disturbing aspects of his work.

9. In fairness to Butterfield, he avoids a close reading of Baudrillard's "*Crash*" most likely for the sake of concision. Nevertheless, the omission sets up what Hutcheon calls, following Wayne Booth, an "amiable community" (Hutcheon 54–55) between the reputed ironist and the chosen few of his or her admirers who are 'in the know.' This leaves both Butterfield and Baudrillard open to accusations of elitism and exclusionary posturing, and potentially undermines their respective attempts to critique the exclusionary violence inherent in systems of signification.

10. One need only compare Baudrillard's rhetoric to the response Brooks Landon submitted for the *Science-Fiction Studies* debate to get a sense of Baudrillard's relative (posture of) nonchalance: "Reading *Crash* makes my knees hurt, my teeth ache, my skin crawl, my stomach turn, my balls shrivel because [. . .] the book is so perfectly, so threateningly *right*, even [. . .] *normal*" (Landon 327).

11. I have described Youngquist's essay as 'Baudrillardian,' but it appears to have been written without an awareness of Baudrillard's essay on *Crash*; Youngquist neither quotes Baudrillard, nor cites any of his works in his bibliography. Be that as it may, the similarities between Youngquist's comments on Ballard's novel and those of Baudrillard and Butterfield are striking enough to warrant his inclusion here.

12. Coincidentally, the premise behind Youngquist's reading of *Crash*, i.e. that Ballard's characters seek an afterlife 'within' the realm of mass-produced and disseminated images, bears a remarkable similarity to Scott Durham's argument in *Phantom Communities* that the novel is a postmodern version of the myth of Actaeon. The key difference between the two versions is that Durham *does* pay close attention to the progression of Vaughan through the narrative, and, on the basis of that attention, rightly concludes that Vaughan's own attempt to enter the realm of images ends in an ironic fall—Vaughan's fiery crash into a busload of tourists, which revises Actaeon's destruction by his own hunting dogs: "Vaughan's trajectory toward the event that would once and for all propel him into the image-sphere of which the consuming public can only dream [. . .] is interrupted by his encounter with that dreaming public itself" (71).

That said, might Youngquist be attempting an ironic performance, similar to the one apparent in Baudrillard's "*Crash*," of the loss of critical distance within late industrial culture? It seems unlikely. As has been suggested earlier, the ironist–critic would have to be able to utter academic heresies and, at the very same time, signify that all is not what it seems: that despite appearances, the academic text is still (trying to) generate a space of fraternity with its readers; and furthermore, that within this common ground the critic and his or her reader are together resisting the dominant system. Where Baudrillard develops a style to suit this new form of 'analysis'—more declarative, exaggerated provocations; less demonstration, material evidence and logical progression—Youngquist adheres to the much safer conventions of academic writing: measured arguments, careful assemblage and presentation of evidence, and so on.

13. Bruce Fink's essay "Perversion," published as part of a recent collection entitled *Perversion and the Social Relation* (2003; co-edited by Dennis Foster, incidentally), is instructive in this regard. Following Lacan, Fink distinguishes between three different psychoanalytic categories based on theorisations of 'psychic structures' rather than clinical descriptions of behaviour: neurosis, perversion and psychosis. Each psychic structure pertains to a different position relative to the fact of diminished enjoyment within the symbolic world of adulthood, and apart from the (fantasy of) unlimited enjoyment identified with the figure of the unified mother and infant. The *neurotic* resists containment within the disappointments of the symbolic by developing symptoms; he has had enough of the law of the father, and his neuroses are veiled attempts to escape it and return to the illusion of wholeness he enjoyed at the mother's breast. The *pervert* was never confronted by the law, never fully accommodated himself to life within the symbolic as a result, and also feels overwhelmed by the possibility of unlimited pleasure because it threatens to overwhelm his sense of independence. Unwittingly trapped within the second phase of the Lacanian triad of real–imaginary–symbolic, the pervert seeks to bring the law into being through transgressions which he hopes will result in some kind of punishment; that said, he also does not want the law firmly (re)instated because that would put an end to the pleasure found in the fetish objects necessary in each transgression. Lastly, the *psychotic* is untouched by all laws and therefore believes that pleasure is unlimited and can be found in any and every action (cf. Fink 38–42).

14. According to Foster, Reason and Capital encourage the individual to give up "passion" so as to attain "clarity, progress, and bounty" (520); that is, they promise compensatory pleasures to those who submit to their hegemony. Foster gives the following examples: the insurance adjuster comes to enjoy the role he plays in the grief of others; the censor gets to watch and secretly enjoy pornography (520). On the surface, we submit ourselves to these processes by tacitly agreeing that the pleasure is not the object of the work: we are only "counting, classifying, adjusting" (520). The task of Ballard's fiction, however, is to show that these "alibis [. . .] insert perversion into every aspect of an enlightened world" (520). Essentially, Ballard's characters abandon the ruse that the supplemental pleasure is an unfortunate by-product, and begin acting as if it were the sole aim. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, for instance, the perverse pay-off of scientific experiments is ruthlessly satirised in the figure of Dr Nathan. His psychiatric practice has become, in his own mind, so abstract that he sees little in the way of an ethical dilemma in asking a woman to pose for a set of obscene photographs as part of her husband's treatment (7). Or take Vaughan in *Crash*: his entire sexuality is built on the pleasure 'left over' from the supposedly clear-sighted analysis of crash tests, and he responds to those tests as if they were first and foremost fantasies of pain, mutilation and death.

Chapter Three

'The Contours of a Corpse': Residual Corporeality in *The Atrocity Exhibition*

J.G. Ballard's experimental novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) presents several problems for readers trying to articulate how his work manages to communicate a sense of consequence within a fictional world where accepted codes of morality no longer seem to have any purchase. Among the novels of the quartet, *Atrocity* presents the most de-corporealised realm because its unconventional narrative style, perplexing setting and provocative representations of the human body and sexuality work together to preclude the idea of a common reality shared by the characters, on the basis of which a reliable standard of judgement could be formulated. Instead, the narrative offers a vision of a realm where constantly shifting 'surface' details seem more important than the substance of things, and where, in turn, practically any outrage imaginable can be perpetrated with impunity and without guilt. This fantastical realm, or rather the state of mind that sustains it, is simultaneously idealised and pathologised throughout the narrative, and for this reason *Atrocity* remains typical of the quartet in spite of its stylistic novelties.

The majority of the short pieces that make up *Atrocity* centre on the protagonist's often bizarre attempts to make sense of this world without limits. This enigmatic figure, whose name modulates from chapter to chapter—Travis, Talbot, Traven, Tallis, Trabert, Talbert, Travers (for the sake of convenience Colin Greenland's abbreviation "T—" will be used throughout the following discussion [cf. *The Entropy Exhibition* 92–120])—takes

the heavily mediated nature of his reality very much to heart, and has good reason to do so: the landscape T— moves through is saturated by image—giant billboards, reels of film, flickering television screens, etc.—to the point where it is no longer possible to distinguish between the referents for these images and the images themselves. This extreme perceptual confusion is then presented to the reader as both a revelation and a delusion.

Over the course of the text, it becomes increasingly difficult to lend credence to the emancipatory potential within T—'s dual obsession with the surface aspects of his world and the seemingly limitless possibilities suggested by its apparent depthlessness, because we cannot fully disentangle these things from his contempt for both the human body's inherent limitations and the well-being of other individuals in his immediate environment. Thus, T—'s longing to enter and somehow live within the realm of images that makes up the media landscape of late capitalism strikes us as both the visionary's breathtaking dream and the psychopath's chilling disregard for the well being of others.

The next chapter will deal more specifically with Ballard's fusion of visionary and psychopathological states of mind, within the context of *Crash*. The goal in relation to *Atrocity* is primarily to demonstrate that a residual corporeality is evident even in those of Ballard's works which appear to be the most anti-materialistic. While it is important to acknowledge, as critics such as Warren Wagar have done, that Ballard's narratives tend to move toward experiences of transcendence, it is also crucial to articulate what it is in a given Ballard text, and especially in a novel as experimental as *Atrocity*, that alerts us to the fact that we are still reading something partly satirical, even though the bulk of the

text might be telling us otherwise; in *Atrocity*, the narratives in most of the chapters actually follow T— toward a state of mind that is better likened to momentary tranquillity than transcendence, but his obsession with images disseminated through the media accords nonetheless with the pursuit of transcendence articulated in chapter one via Paul Youngquist. The discussion here, then, explores the division in *Atrocity* between the general trajectory of T—'s behaviour and ways in which Ballard's dramatisation of T—'s obsession prevents us from ignoring that the body's vulnerability, more specifically, the vulnerability of other characters, is invariably at issue. We will need to consider, in turn, aspects of the novel that encourage a slackening of reader apprehensiveness rooted in conventional systems of morality, and elements within the text, linked mainly to the representation of corporeality, that compel readers to replace such apprehensiveness with a less-defined wariness. In a way, the following chapter will listen in *Atrocity* for what Michel de Certeau calls "the cry" of the flesh, paying attention to various analogies for this "incongruous voice in the indefinite combinative system of simulations" (*The Practice of Everyday Life* Vol. I 144–46). Although much in the novel works to suppress this voice, it can still be heard whenever the text evokes a resistant substance that confounds T—'s attempts to commune with the public realm of images.

Our consideration of *Atrocity* begins by exploring the methods Ballard uses to shape reactions to T—'s idiosyncratic responses to the postwar communications landscape. Throughout this period in his career, Ballard argued that several key components of the realist novel had expended themselves, and numbered among them the writer's sense of entitlement to "preside over his characters like an examiner, knowing all the questions in

advance" (*Crash* 8–9). Ballard certainly refrains from overtly judging T— and the various other characters who come to imitate his practices. But while Ballard refuses to manage reader response, adopting instead an aloof authorial stance, he does try to influence it in the opposite direction, using specific stylistic and rhetorical techniques to invalidate the apprehensiveness that would lead readers to make such judgments. As a result, recovering the satirical content of the novel becomes, to a degree, a matter of resisting the text or at least becoming aware of Ballard's strategies for shaping reader response.

Our examination of 'reader management' in *Atrocity* will touch on Ballard's use of experimental narrative form to normalise T—'s psychopathological thought and behaviour. What we notice is that the overt fragmentation of the text insists on a reading strategy which parallels the interpretative dilemma that characterises T—'s nervous breakdown. While this twinning of approaches to interpretation sets up an implicit identity between reader and protagonist, the reader's grasp of T—'s artistic interventions into the communications landscape is also shaped by the novel's chorus figure, Dr Nathan. Nathan's voice is a prominent feature within the narrative, and it contextualises and justifies T—'s state of mind and behaviour according to the larger socio-historical background of the novel. But his interest in T—'s state of mind, an interest perhaps better characterised as fascination than clinical objectivity, places him in a contradictory position: advocating a creative nihilism on the basis of his reading of T—'s behaviour, and yet still presuming his own psychiatric authority. Lastly, Ballard also manipulates reader concern via his postmodernist approach to characterisation. In short, Ballard's

characters come to seem like little more than assigned plot functions as well as deathless and disembodied entities, attributes which are reinforced by the repetitive quality of the book's first nine chapters. This 'dehumanising' of character facilitates readings in which the aggressive and violent behaviour of T— and his imitators might be understood as mainly or entirely conceptual.

Ballard should be credited, however, for not representing T—'s nervous breakdown solely as a condition synonymous with artistic genius, and also for generating a certain amount of doubt in the reader's mind about the immateriality of T—'s world. While *Atrocity* points toward a greater acceptance of radical otherness by identifying the reader's interpretative dilemma with T—'s own version of the same, and toys with the idea of a thoroughly conceptual, inconsequential form of violence, other aspects of the text work against these tropes, and are the subject of the second section of the discussion. There, I examine aspects of the text that function as counterpoints to the de-pathologisation of insanity and constitute Ballard's chilling mechanistic vision of postwar Western subjectivity. One is brought up short in particular by the strong element of predatory sexuality, directed primarily against women, in the novel's repetitive scenarios. As several critics have pointed out, in *Atrocity* these problems can be traced back to the media landscape itself, because T—'s pathological behaviour is, in part, a response to orders or compulsions he receives from that landscape. The signals that issue forth from that realm work upon aspects of the corporeal that are the opposite of a conceptualised and alterable body and identity: instinctual drives rooted in the flesh. T— often strikes us, then, as little more than an automaton—a possibility which at least complicates Dr

Nathan's, and Ballard's, idealisation of the psychiatric patient as artist. More generally, my exploration of this satirical dimension in *Atrocity* will be concerned with how Ballard goes about undermining two of the novel's idealised concepts; the notion of a coming technological utopia in which role-playing and surface appearances *are* the essence of selfhood is undermined not just by the repetitive narrative scenarios but also by the fixed apportioning of roles among his characters; meanwhile, the 'semiotic body' generated by the prevalence of anatomical terminology throughout the narrative is countered by the opposite effect of that specialised diction: an obsessive pointing toward a properly un-representable, pre-discursive corporeality.

1. Opinion-forming form; or, notes towards a mental breakdown as reason

In terms of genre, *The Atrocity Exhibition* occupies an uncertain position between the novel and the short-story collection in that it brings together several short pieces that were originally published separately in science-fiction magazines throughout the late 1960s. The first nine chapters are variations on a core story, and of the final six, four are mock-scientific reports, one a genealogy of hypothetical assassinations, and one an homage to Alfred Jarry's "The Crucifixion of Christ Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race," titled "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race."[1] This genre instability is doubled by the text's narrative innovations. Excepting the latter two, each chapter is arranged into series of blocked paragraphs either with bold-faced 'headlines' or interspersed by bold-faced fragments of a theme sentence. One overall effect of this arrangement is an air of regimentation: the uniform shape and repetition of

the blocked paragraphs (referred to as 'text-blocks' in the following discussion) suggests a work generated through a process of mechanical reproduction or cut into portions for efficient consumption. The text-blocks also approximate the photographic still-frame, and so perhaps Youngquist's description of the prose in *Crash* as "that of the camera—flat, mechanical, omni-detailed, 'hyperreal'" (par. 2)—is actually more appropriate to the style of *Atrocity*. In any event, despite their formal regimentation, the text-blocks still generate mystery: the gaps between them, coupled with the relative lack of expository information within them, give the entire narrative, such as it is, an elliptical quality.

Ballard's formal innovations, in turn, demand a specific kind of reader, one willing to do a substantial amount of reconstructive work. In a prefatory remark to the novel, Ballard suggests that

> [r]eaders who find themselves daunted by the unfamiliar narrative structure [. . .] might try a different approach. Rather than start at the beginning of each chapter, as in a conventional novel, simply turn the pages until a paragraph catches your eye. If the ideas and images seem interesting, scan the nearby paragraphs for anything that resonates in an intriguing way. Fairly soon, I hope, the fog will clear, and the underlying narrative will reveal itself. In effect, you will be reading the book in the way it was written. (*Atrocity* vi)

Ballard's idea of finding 'eye-catching' paragraphs amid hundreds of others which look more or less alike may be simply tongue-in-cheek, but the suggestion nevertheless introduces the idea of reading in a non-linear manner. Hypothetically, as the reader moves around *Atrocity*'s narrative at will, he or she would generate its meaning by accumulating isolated bits of prose and filling in the spaces between them with a

'content' that he or she brings to the text. The process is by turns active and passive: specific chains of associated imagery work upon the reader during any given reading, but the reader's interest in a specific chain would be dictated by some element of curiosity which they bring to the work. Perhaps *Atrocity*'s religious diction becomes the focus during one reading, only to give way in the next sitting to a preoccupation with fleeting images of T—'s childhood experiences of war, only then to be replaced by the numerous art historical allusions in the narrative, and so on. Before one jumps to the conclusion that the novel opens itself up to endless, radically divergent readings, however, it should be pointed out that this non-linear reading strategy ends up recovering something remarkably ordinary, at least from the author's point of view: an "underlying narrative" (vi). Regardless of the way in which specific chains of images and ideas might inflect a given reading, the accumulation of fragments re-produces a storyline 'buried' within. Additionally, that underlying narrative is more or less the same in each of chapters one through nine: T— is involved in an extramarital affair; he suffers a nervous breakdown and leaves his lecturer's position at the psychiatric teaching hospital at the centre of the novel; he is confronted by figments of his unconscious, linked to various events of the 1960s (Vietnam, the Congo Civil War, the assassination of JFK, etc.), which reveal the novel's landscape to be a paradoxical amalgam of 'spaces' inside and beyond T—'s psyche; he responds to these events through various collage- and conceptual-art projects; and finally, after a limited amount of interference from other characters, he carries out a symbolic re-enactment of one of the events listed above, but ends up killing one or more of the other characters in the process. However unusual the text's arrangement on the

page may look to an uninitiated eye, it renders up this linear story again and again—although clearly readers will receive it with some level of variation. *Atrocity* thus implies a forensically minded reader: the body of the text has, in a sense, already been dissected and needs to be reassembled through the examination of its component parts.

Atrocity's forensic quality makes it typical of the 'writerly' text promoted by earlier generations of literary critics, Roland Barthes foremost among them, who argued that it provides the reader with an illusion of increased agency during the otherwise passive activity of reading. In this particular context, however, our interest in the writerly aspect of the novel has more to do with the way it implicitly identifies reader and protagonist than with the benefits of the 'authorial' position it bestows upon the reader. *Atrocity*'s fragmented narrative fashions an identity between the writerly experience of reading and the psychopathology suggested by the protagonist's actions—a connection which can be appreciated as emblematic of a liberation from the 'control' of the linear narrative only so long as one overlooks the nature of T—'s actions.

By adopting or by being forced into this reconstructive model of reading, we take up a position relative to the text that is analogous to T—'s interpretative relationship to his image-saturated surroundings. Like him, we find ourselves "trying to build bridges between things" (*Atrocity* 50). This bridging is necessary to overcome the gaps between text-blocks, but is also a necessity in making sense of the blocks in and of them themselves. Take for instance the following passage from chapter two, "The University of Death":

> **Journeys to an Interior.** Waiting in Karen Novotny's apartment, Talbot made certain transits: (1) Spinal: 'The Eye of Silence'—these porous rock towers, with the luminosity of exposed organs, contained an immense planetary silence. Moving across the iodine water of these corroded lagoons, Talbot followed the solitary nymph through the causeways of rock, the palaces of his own flesh and bone. (2) Media: montage landscapes of war—webbing heaped in pits beside the Shanghai–Nanking railway; bargirls' cabins built out of tyres and fuel drums; dead Japanese stacked like firewood in L.C.T.s off Woosung pier. (3) Contour: the unique parameters of Karen's body—beckoning vents of mouth and vulva, the soft hypogeum of the anus. (4) Astral: segments of his posture mimetized in the processions of space. These transits contained an image of the [renascent] geometry assembling itself in the musculature of the young woman, in their postures during intercourse, in the angles between the walls of the apartment. (27)[2]

The compression of heterogeneous semantic material forces the reader to speculate wildly on possible connections. Roger Luckhurst has placed this hermeneutic within the art historical tradition of the collage.[3] In opposition to the way viewers perceive "organic form," he writes, these "[b]izarre juxtapositions demand a 'closing' response, the 'spacings' between fragments necessitating an explanation of their proximity: an active, allegorical interpretation" (*'The Angle Between Two Walls'* 88). In practice, this means that it is up to readers to provide the phrase, or limited number of plausible phrases, that would satisfactorily link the *mise en scène* of Karen Novotny's apartment with the landscape represented in the Max Ernst painting, the landscapes of war in China, the surface contours of Novotny's body, and elements of T—'s own posture. The thing to note, however, is that within the fictional setting, T— is doing something quite similar. Readers make these 'transits' with him. Luckhurst puts it this way: "[T—'s] search for a 'modulus' is a search for an allegorical reading that would link the fragments into

narrative. This is doubled by the reader's constant attempt to decode the compacted sentences" (89). In other words, *Atrocity* seeks to identify reader and protagonist by presenting the former with an epistemological problem similar to that of the latter, rather than by, say, generating emotional sympathy.

But while the text sets up this parallel between protagonist and reader, the similarity between their respective hermeneutics is not a complete identity. There is a substantive difference between Luckhurst's notion of an "allegorical interpretation" and T—'s search for a 'modulus,' and it needs to be highlighted. T—'s hermeneutic moves toward the purity of abstraction ('the geometry assembling itself' in Novoty's apartment). Readers, meanwhile, are more likely to add linkages that make the progression from one 'transit' to the next less abrupt, as if the scant details offered by the above passage were imagined within the framework of an absent realist narrative which would accord each of them its 'proper' place. By invoking what might be called a default realism on the part of the reader, I am trying to suggest that what should concern us most is not whether our own interpretative efforts are mirrored in T—'s, but rather what distinguishes us from him. En route to that, however, we need a better grasp of what abstraction does for T—.

In its most benign or therapeutic manifestation, abstraction is a route to "neural calm" (*Atrocity* 36) for T—. By reducing disparate semantic material to a common, geometrical denominator, he effectively sidesteps emotional entanglements with, and the physical actuality of, other human beings (Novotny), and also avoids the painful work of sifting through, coming to terms with, and moving beyond traumatic memories (eg. the war in China). As semantic materials are extracted from their local, historical contexts, and as

three-dimensional objects, like Novotny herself, are robbed of their individuality and solidity by T—'s will to abstraction, the whole world of things (and signs of things) takes on a measure of interchangeability. T—'s radical analogical thinking produces a sense of generalised equivalence among once-disparate things, which may be the same as saying that T—'s perception of his surroundings suggests that he espouses a general relativity of value. The passage quoted above, for example, implies that Ernst's painting, Novotny's body, and the war landscapes appear to T— as equivalent surfaces as he makes his 'transits' through them—or across them. This hyperbolic analogy is also the means through which T— tries to wrest back a sense of subjective control over his apocalyptic world of mediated events. The mathematical certainties of geometry guarantee a kind of order where before there was only a flood of chaotic images and anxiety-filled encounters with other individuals. Although *Atrocity* makes reference to non-Euclidean geometries on several occasions, and thereby invokes the intellectual conundrums posed by paradoxical spaces and figures, the point to be made here is that mathematical models of any stripe carry a simplicity of form for T—, which he finds preferable to seeing things as they perhaps really are. A convenient example of T—'s 'use' of geometry can be found in a text-block in chapter four where the curves of Novotny's breasts and buttocks are identified metaphorically with "Enneper's surface of negative constant curve" (56); with a certain amount of bawdy humour, the connection succinctly conveys the idea that T— relates to bodies, to female bodies in particular, with less anxiety when their structures are translated into mathematical terms.

The question for readers becomes whether or not they are willing to accept this general equivalency and thereby endorse the identification between themselves and T— which the text is trying to manufacture. There are at least three options open to readers in this respect. One approach would see in the idea of general equivalence the possibility of profound liberation from accepted truth regimes, a possibility that will be spelled out in greater detail momentarily, via a consideration of Dr Nathan. Alternately, one might endeavour to read against the grain of the numbered list and associative chain, and re-hierarchise the items named by imposing some sort of evaluative framework. Such a refusal to accept that the compression of fragments necessarily brings about generalised equivalency would open the way toward a reassessment of the effect of abrupt juxtaposition within the collage, that is, a consideration that it might in fact be intensifying differences between terms, objects, images, etc. A third, more holistic approach would entail accepting the fact that *Atrocity* opens itself up to both possibilities at the same time. The reader would then have to reflect on what may or may not be at stake in seeing the contiguity of fragments one way or the other. My own sympathies lie with this last, holistic approach: T—'s logic of general equivalence certainly liberates objects, images and texts from established semantic frameworks, and is an essential part of his intrepid search for new meanings, but it would be naive or even irresponsible for readers to celebrate T—'s radical approach to meaning without acknowledging that the state of mind which is its prerequisite also leads to repeated acts, not just metaphors, of violence—the murders which bring to a close each of the first nine chapters. Regardless of how contested the divide between the conceptual and the real might or should be in our

contested reality, T—'s inability or unwillingness to make arbitrary distinctions between disparate things enables the violence he directs toward other individuals because it effectively relegates the category of the human to the status of one more object among other equivalent objects.

Atrocity moves in two opposite directions at once, then: it pathologises the capacity to see analogies between practically anything, even though it continues to endorse its possibilities as an artistic innovation. The similarity between the writerly reader's interpretative approach and T—'s practices, in part, normalises T—'s state of mind and behaviour—and thereby brings to mind the practice, discussed in the previous chapter, of acceptance of radical otherness synonymous with Jean Baudrillard's theory—but it also leads to an ethical dilemma: by celebrating the artistic potential of T—'s radical analogical thinking, one risks playing down the potential pitfalls of the paralysis of judgment which it entails.

Ballard puts a great deal of effort into persuading readers not just to see things from T—'s point of view, which is almost inescapable given that the narrative tends to reflect his perspective, but also to accept his way of thinking as a reasonable—perhaps the *only* reasonable response to a 'reality' saturated by fictions. To this end, the text features an embedded guide figure, Dr Nathan. Nathan is the lead psychiatrist on T—'s case, but because he works at the same institute as T—, he is in effect analysing a patient who is also a colleague. To an extent, his commentaries betray the conflicted loyalties of such a situation. Nathan does not diagnose T—'s state of mind exactly, which would presuppose that something is in fact clinically wrong with him, but instead explains T—'s

projects to the other characters and to the reader in such a way that they sound like reasonable and defensible attempts to create order and meaning out of a fundamentally chaotic and pointless universe. To a degree, therefore, Nathan is representative of Laingian anti-psychiatry, which had gained a certain amount of popular currency in the late 1960s.[4]

Nathan's explanatory function is bound up with a rhetoric of invalidation. At least one of several secondary characters—T—'s wife Margaret, the policeman Captain Webster, Dr Catherine Austin, and Nathan's assistant Nurse Nagamatzu—is usually present when Nathan speculates on his patient's state of mind and behaviour, and his exchanges with them are meant to silence or discredit their collective voice of scepticism. Take Webster and Margaret for example. At one point in chapter three, Webster is shown one of T—'s collage kits consisting of "(1) a spectroheliogram of the sun; (2) tarmac and take-off checks for the [. . .] Enola Gay; (3) electroencephalogram of Albert Einstein; (4) transverse section through a pre-Cambrian trilobite; (5) photograph taken at noon, August 7th, 1945, of the sand-sea, Qattara Depression; (6) Max Ernst's 'Garden Airplane Traps'" (46–47). The policeman's response to Nathan's implied explanation is one of basic bewilderment: "You say these constitute an assassination weapon?" (47). I would guess most readers would respond, at least initially, in a similar way. While it is possible to link all the items to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, it requires more of an imaginative leap to see how they might coalesce, as Nathan has apparently suggested, into a functional weapon, be it conceptual or real, or what kind of target such a (concept) weapon would be effective against. One of Margaret's key questions is no less blunt:

"Was my husband a doctor, or a patient?" (6) she demands in chapter one. Margaret is in effect raising a matter of basic boundary policing. Out of what appears to be genuine concern for her husband's well-being, Margaret looks to Nathan to make an informed ruling on her husband's mental health. If the doctor views insanity as primarily a social construction, a designation that proscribes modes of thought and action which society at large refuses to accommodate, then Margaret's question expresses either anxiety over the resulting loss of categorical integrity, or a pragmatic view of such proscriptions as necessary for social cohesion, despite their more derogatory connotations. In sum, the questions that these secondary characters pose can be seen as reflecting doubts and concerns which readers may have about T—'s intentions—and about Nathan's explanations as well.

Nathan's replies to the concerns of his fellow characters are invariably given with a sense of impatience.[5] His response to Margaret's demand for a clear-cut answer is typical of this, and sets the tone for the entirety of the novel. "Mrs Travis," Nathan insists, "I'm not sure the question [Was my husband a doctor, or a patient?] is valid any longer. These matters involve a relativity of a very different kind" (6). This dismissal is reinforced by the manner in which Margaret is depicted throughout the novel—as a woman motivated primarily by misplaced concern: twice, for example, she rushes after her husband in an attempt to prevent him from carrying out his experiments, only to be killed in the process (13, 73–74), and the implication is that she is meddling in affairs which she simply does not, or cannot, understand. However, I am interested less in the implications of

Margaret's character than in the foundation of Nathan's invalidation of her question. Here, in full, is the remainder of his reply:

> What we are concerned with now are the implications—in particular, the complex of ideas and events represented by World War III. Not the political and military possibility, but the inner identity of such a notion. For us, perhaps, World War III is now little more than a sinister pop art display, but for your husband it has become an expression of the failure of his psyche to accept the fact of its own consciousness, and of his revolt against the present continuum of time and space. Dr Austin may disagree, but it seems to me that his intention is to start World War III, though not, of course, in the usual sense of that term. The blitzkriegs will be fought on the spinal battlefields, in terms of the postures we assume, of our traumas mimetized in the angle of a wall or balcony. (7)

Perhaps Nathan has in mind the collage kit from chapter one, already quoted above, with its references to the nuclear energy of the sun, the fossilization of extinct species, and the bombs detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki (cf *Atrocity* 1–2). But regardless of which aspect of T—'s experiments Nathan has in mind, he seems to have accepted that nuclear annihilation, as a set of ideas, is emblematic of the end of the system of values on which Margaret's distinctions between 'doctors' and 'patients' is based. Scientists have handed us the vocabulary of images necessary to dream a *realisable* end to the species, Nathan seems to be saying, and the active pursuit of the technological means to accomplish this feat signifies an emptiness at the heart of modernity, as if the very idea of such a project cheapens life irrevocably or leads the modern individual to value it no differently from death. Thus, the philosophy that Nathan derives from T—'s behaviour, or imposes on it, is that the iconography of nuclear war is the semiotic space in which scientific progress, signified by Einstein's relativity theory, finds common ground with a

specific form of nihilism.[6] Perhaps it is no coincidence that Nathan's name is almost a homonym for *nothing*.

In effect, Nathan is trying to describe to Margaret, and explain to the reader, an ontological condition that is apparent in most, if not all of Ballard's fictional representations of the order of simulation—a condition which Robert Caserio has named "universal death" (306). "[T]o remain within the uncertainty of freedom of choice not to disarm[,]" Caserio writes,

> is to have already lost the last war—and life itself. Ballard [. . .] suggests that we have not survived the war, but have survived our collective death. Individual life appears to go on, in all its immediate vitality; but the collective commitment to nuclear war nullifies this life. The living have become restless ghosts playing dangerous games with their posthumous condition. (306)

We would be hard pressed to find a more apt description of T—'s ontology than that last sentence, although it is still debatable whether T— is even aware of the element of danger in the games he plays; although Caserio's argument is derived principally from a reading of *Empire of the Sun* (1984), it certainly has bearing on *Atrocity*'s thematic linkages between America's use of nuclear arms at the end of the Second World War and the postwar 'death of affect.' As for Nathan, his rebuttal to Margaret suggests that his self-appointed role is to articulate how this ontological problem constitutes a green light to all manner of transgressions, or more accurately, to practices that would have been considered transgressions under a previous paradigm. An important distinction needs to be made, then, between Nathan's characterization of post-nuclear nihilism and Caserio's account of postwar death-in-life. In Nathan's opinion, T—'s existential predicament is

not necessarily a cause for despair, nor is the nihilism attending it a philosophy of futility. Rather, the doctor seems to think that if it is unrealistic to believe such a pervasive condition can be reversed, then individuals who feel deeply affected by it should seize on it as an opportunity for a bold assertion of will in the face of a patently absurd situation.

Nathan is, then, the voice of a paradoxically optimistic nihilism. Based on his observations of T—, he advocates that individuals overwhelmed by the horrors perpetrated by modern, technologically advanced societies should allow their imaginations to use those horrors as the raw material for (destructive) creative acts. If Nathan admires T—, it is because T— is at least trying to confront this multifaceted crisis through his art. The doctor's view of T—'s endeavours rests on the assumption that T— is seizing control of the processes of abstraction and juxtaposition evident in the various forms of visual media that make up such a significant portion of the novel's setting, instead of remaining a passive recipient of their effects. In support of Nathan's optimism, it should be noted that T—'s various artistic endeavours can be categorised as either abstraction or juxtaposition: his posing of his and Novotny's bodies is meant to isolate an abstract form, which he perceives in other aspects of his surroundings and believes is loaded with significance (81); his collages combine both compositional techniques, in that specific items must first be extracted from their original context and then brought into close proximity with others; and lastly, when T— re-stages a particular media event, he is, in effect, removing it from the circulation of (undifferentiated) images within the media landscape, and re-contextualising it to suit his idiosyncratic taste.

Because Nathan's explanations are so prevalent throughout the narrative, it is tempting to assume that his various speculations concerning what is motivating T— are accurate assessments. This is certainly how other critics have approached his prominence within the novel. Colin Greenland has identified Nathan with Ballard himself, associating the doctor's admiration for T— with Ballard's own conviction in the relevance of his personal obsessions (119). Luckhurst, meanwhile, argues that Nathan is one important "'thetic' voice" among others within the text, all of which pre-empt the reader's own attempts at critical exegesis (*'The Angle Between Two Walls'* 73–75). While Luckhurst eventually goes on to wonder whether Nathan is not also "the paranoid's ideal doctor" in that "he agrees [*sic*] and shares [T—'s] delusion" (93), his interpretation, on the whole, assumes that the doctor is acting in good faith. Michel Delville, finally, is even more trusting: in his reading of the novel, Nathan "emerges as the last repository of scientific objectivity[,]" because he is supposedly able to maintain a dispassionate clinical perspective on his patient's ideas and actions when several of the other characters are more actively participating in T—'s experiments (23). Critics' trust in Nathan is bolstered further by Ballard's own assessment of the doctor's role. In an annotation to chapter six, he asserts that "Nathan represents the safe and sane voice of the sciences. His commentaries are accurate, and he knows what is going on" (*Atrocity* 89). It is hard to argue against such a direct statement, especially coming from the author of the book; and yet, Ballard adds that "reason rationalizes reality for [Nathan], as it does for the rest of us, in the Freudian sense of providing a more palatable or convenient explanation" (89). In effect, this qualification implies that there is something in T—'s ideas and

actions that the doctor is either failing to understand or refusing to see, presumably because he is no less intrigued by the possible outcomes of T—'s experiments than the other secondary characters who take part in or mimic T—'s activities.

I would go even further in questioning Nathan's reliability as a diagnostician. As in essence the Doctor of Nothingness, he places his profession in a precarious position. The very world-view he espouses, or imposes on T—'s thought and behaviour, effectively removes the underpinnings of his own authority as a scientist. There is a risk that the relativistic nihilism that he develops by observing and defending T— will compromise the credibility of his own statements. Is it possible to endorse a form of relativistic nihilism and still speak from, or presume to speak from, a position of scientific objectivity? I am not trying to suggest that Nathan's arguments and theories do not matter, nor that they have no validity as scientific statements; rather, one needs to keep in mind that the relativistic arguments Nathan makes also relativise his own clinical practice. By effectively endorsing the rejection of all standards of judgment, Nathan sets his own profession adrift in the novel's circulating flows of images, and risks accusations of diagnostic faddishness in the process—a charge that is supported whenever characters such as Webster, and even T— himself, parrot his theories (cf 50, 85). Reinforcing this dilemma even further is the way in which Nathan is actually presented throughout the text, which suggests that the strength of his credibility is dependent on his *performance* of the role of dispassionate observer. He may base his various statements on open-minded observations of T—'s actions and thoughtful appraisals of his art, but his position of authority is, to a degree, a matter of posturing in the same way that T—'s exploits with

Karen Novotny are dominated by the posing of their bodies. Ballard draws Nathan in such a way that his behaviour blurs the line between the emotional detachment necessary for an objective assessment of data and a stylishness more appropriate for the fashion industry than the medical field. Nathan's for the most part enlightening comments on T—'s ideas and behaviour are juxtaposed with signifiers of fashionableness, as if he were seeking to persuade us more through suavity than intelligence. The gold-tipped cigarettes he is invariably smoking while prognosticating are the most obvious sign in this respect; this detail gives Nathan a debonair quality that is closer in spirit to a secret agent in a Hollywood film than a practising psychiatrist. As well, Nathan's aggressive attitude toward women contradicts his role as dispassionate observer, and tellingly, this is an aspect of his persona that he keeps largely to himself: the silent hostility he directs toward Nurse Nagamatzu is a case in point (cf. 42, 47). Taken together, these aspects of Nathan's character do not completely negate the clinical accuracy of his statements, but they do make us question his motivations and overall credibility.

Narrative style and Dr Nathan's commentaries are not the only strategies Ballard uses to manage the reader's concern. *Atrocity*'s non-realist characterisation, too, contributes to this effect in several substantial ways. First, it points the way to an ideal of selfhood that is no less problematic than Nathan's suggestions that T—'s nervous breakdown is fertile ground for artistic genius. In specific terms, the shifting of T—'s name through a range of graphic and phonetic modulations, and his self through a succession of personas chapter to chapter, gestures toward a concept of selfhood understood as a constant process of self-fashioning. This concept of the histrionic self is then reinforced somewhat

by the events that transpire in each of the first nine chapters, in which the characters become role-players in an unfolding scenario. Secondly, Ballard's reiteration of the same scenario has the tendency to dehumanise the characters, bringing their ontological and physical status into question, and making the need for a sense of concern over the violence that T— and several of his disciples inflict on the other characters seem much less urgent. Lastly, Ballard places a heavy emphasis on physiological terminology throughout the text. From one perspective, this tends to make bodies appear solely as semiotic constructs no longer subject to pain or mortality—the 'semiotic body' discussed in the preceding chapter. Thus, where the twinning of T—'s and the reader's respective interpretative strategies has the potential to bring both closer together, Ballard's approach to characterisation seems intent on precluding an identification between reader and the characters generally.

In a study entitled *Reading (Absent) Character* (1983), Thomas Docherty comments on the importance of obtrusive naming and plotting to postmodern characterisation, and his thoughts help shed light on what Ballard accomplishes in *Atrocity*. On the issue of naming, Docherty argues that the "post-Modern" writer manipulates or eliminates proper names in an attempt to undermine the illusion of a unified self affixed to the name, and, with it, the character convention one finds in realist fiction, and many modernist texts as well (cf. 80–86). If postmodern characterisation retains a didactic function, it would be as a lesson about the internal multiplicity of (contemporary) selfhood. From Docherty's point of view, postmodern novelists, through conventions like the unorthodox naming of characters, encourage their readers to think about subjectivity as an unfolding and

unpredictable process of self-fashioning. He writes specifically of "instantiations" of self (84), a concept that resonates both with T—'s modulating name and with Ballard's suggestion that his protagonist appears throughout *Atrocity* "in a succession of roles, ranging across a spectrum of possibilities available to each of us in our interior lives" (*Atrocity* 138). It is, then, possible to see T—'s appearances as "an element in a geometric equation," "his mundane and everyday self[,]" and "the second coming of Christ" (138; chapters four, seven and nine, respectively), among other instantiations presumably, in terms of this postmodern romance of the histrionic self.

Docherty's comments on plot, meanwhile, centre on the fondness that some postmodernist writers (Thomas Pynchon foremost among them) have shown for deliberate over-plotting.[7] He argues that this technique, which he identifies specifically with the appearance of several, often preposterous plots within a single work of fiction, responds to "a contemporary desire for multiplicity and the discontinuities between temporal organizations of characters and indeed even within them" (150), and effectively heightens the artificiality of the fiction itself (cf. 150–52). It also serves to "dehumanise" the characters to a degree even greater than they may already be (cf. 152–53). So instead of striving for the illusion of autonomous individuals, postmodern writers, according to Docherty, tend to emphasise that their characters are little more than plot imperatives within a fiction whose very *fictionality* has been heightened.

Docherty's general comments on postmodernist writing techniques are echoed in Brian McHale's more specific consideration of *Atrocity* in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). McHale links Ballard's manipulation of names—indeed, his approach to characterisation

generally—to his handling of plot, or what McHale calls "story-content" (70). Characterisation in *Atrocity* is, in McHale's view, a recapitulation of the serial and modal quality of the storylines in each chapter. Ballard's characters are said to be "all obsessed with the problem of isolating a 'modulus,' a single abstract form which is repeated in a series of unrelated and apparently formless or irregular phenomena: photographs, erotic poses, urban landscapes" (70). However, the characters and various recurrent motifs are themselves Ballard's moduli: "This theme of the 'modulus' at the level of story-content [. . .] exactly duplicates the formal organization of the stories, in which a fixed repertoire of modules, many of them repeated from the earlier apocalyptic novels [*The Drowned World*, *The Drought*, *The Crystal World*], are differently recombined" (70). McHale points out that each story in *Atrocity* features a "mentally unbalanced researcher whose name always begins with the letter T [. . .]; a woman whom he 'experimentally' murders [. . .]; a demonic former student of his, whose name always begins with the letter K (Kline, Koester, Koster [. . .])" as well as recurrent urban backdrops and art historical allusions (70). Despite some minor inaccuracies—Austen is only murdered once, Kline is not a former student but instead an emissary from T—'s unconscious, and the name 'Koster' never appears in the text at all—McHale's point is well taken. His comments imply that Ballard accomplishes something similar to Docherty's concept of 'over-plotting' but through a slightly different methodology. In essence, Ballard dehumanises his characters by obsessively reiterating the same underlying story through a series of variations, rather than juxtaposing a multiplicity of different, potentially unrelated stories. If each chapter were read separately, as a self-contained short story, there would be little

cause to think that this basic story, in and of itself, robs the characters of their autonomy or humanity, that is, robs *readers* of their choice to believe that the characters have these things. However, when the chapters are read in sequence, the repetition of storyline does appear to have a corrosive effect on the representational status of the characters, intensifying readers' awareness that they 'represent' only their own status as elements within a preset progression of events.

The novel's fragmented narrative has a role to play in this dehumanisation as well, in that it could be taken as a means to 'lighten' the weight of death. As characters die violently at the end of one chapter only to be resurrected at the beginning of the next, the ontological status of death within T—'s reality is called into question.[8] These cycles of death and resurrection may be more pronounced when the novel is read linearly, but the effect is the same even when readers move about the text more erratically. In short, death begins to lose its connotation of finality as well as its aura of gravity.[9] Because certain of Ballard's characters seem untouched by common mortality, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine them as credible representations of individuals living in a realm where actions have real consequences. With *Atrocity* there is always a temptation to believe that every last representational link between T—'s world and our own has been severed, and in this way, Ballard's postmodernist characterisation reinforces Dr Nathan's generally optimistic response to 'universal death.' It seems to matter little what happens to us in the end, so long as we have lived with intensity up to that point. And for Nathan, as we have already seen, the idea of a 'postural' Third World War (6–7), which should be read as a metonym for the full set of T—'s artistic practices—from body sculpture, to re-

enacted events from the 1960s, to film, photography, and collage—is a prime example of what such intensity can produce: a provocative aesthetic revolt against the absurdity of his own ontological situation.

The notion that *Atrocity*'s characters are somehow beyond mortality gains further impetus from the kind of language Ballard uses throughout the text to describe the body. The text abounds with anatomical terminology: medullary, thorax, axillary fossa, buccal pout, iliac crest, urethra, aureola—to cite only a few examples. The presence of this technical language means that the body is articulated in a double sense in *Atrocity*: first it appears as an object produced through discourse, and second, the discourse which produces it, in turn, divides it into isolated and seemingly independent parts. Of course, *Atrocity*'s anatomical diction is not alone in producing this double articulation. Projections of the body which pre-date modern systems of physiological nomenclature and create an illusion of wholeness, symmetry and proportion also compartmentalise to a certain extent. What *Atrocity*'s anatomical lexicon dispenses with, though, is the hierarchical relationship between the body's various parts that is apparent in more holistic representations of bodies—the head as de facto leader, the heart as the seat of the soul and the emotions, the genitals as an area of shame, etc. That said, the rejection of such hierarchical mappings of the body implied by *Atrocity*'s anatomical diction is not replaced by a more 'democratic' alternative but instead by an excess of naming. Where T— often finds himself overwhelmed by the body as a "nightmarish excrescence" with its "monstrous extensions of puffy tissue" (89)—a body that is all too physical—readers may find themselves overcome by the body, too, but this time as an excrescence of words.

Atrocity's thoroughgoing textualisation of the body presents us with two profound implications which actually reinforce the way T— wants to see the world around him. On the one hand, the physiological terminology tends to de-sacralize the body, draining it of its residual warmth and leaving it fair game for all manner of manipulations. As we saw in the previous chapter, Jean Baudrillard makes a similar point in his reading of *Crash*, a text that is also replete with technical terminology for the body. Speaking specifically of Ballard's representation of sex, Baudrillard writes that "[h]ere, all the erotic terms are technical. No ass, no dick, no cunt but: the anus, the rectum, the vulva, the penis, coitus. No slang, that is to say no intimacy of sexual violence, but a functional language" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 115–16). Although one does not usually think of slang as something that endears us to our bodies, my sense is that Baudrillard is correct to locate a warmth in street language that is removed through Ballard's preference for technical jargon (of course, much of this aura of intimacy would depend on the individual reader's performance of the text; it is conceivable that one could breathe heat back into the technical terms simply by reading in a sexually suggestive voice). On the other hand, when *Atrocity*'s textualisation of the body is combined with its appearance throughout the text in extremely abstract photographs, an overall impression of a 'form' totally divorced from flesh is created. Together, these two, seemingly opposed effects—de-sacralization and total formalization—pave the way for T—'s artistic experiments, and for the murderous moments that conclude these experiments, because both seem to invite violation. No longer thought of as the stereotypical 'temple,' no longer perceived as vulnerable and fragile, no longer flesh but sign-material, the body in *Atrocity* is

effectively opened up to all manner of abuse because its semiotic quality seems to place it beyond consequentiality.

To bring this discussion back around to the issue of characterisation, we could say that Ballard encourages his readers to see his characters as walking signs, or rather walking amalgams of signs. That said, my interest in *Atrocity*'s satirical dimension necessitates that this impression be re-inserted into T—'s point of view. Whether he is aware of it or not, this is how he sees other people around him, and it is the delusional perception which provides the foundation for his mistreatment of them. Although it is challenging for readers to try to perceive things as he does, it is also important to identify those aspects of the text that lead us to believe that these new ways of seeing the world are inextricable from, not merely eccentricity, but moreover psychosis—and a particularly sadistic variant at that.

2. The mechanised subject, sexualised violence and ghostly corporeality

The first section touched on the more radical ideas which *The Atrocity Exhibition* promotes: specifically, T—'s tendency to bring disparate objects, texts and images into proximity according to a logic of radical analogy; the reformulation of selfhood as a constant process of self-fashioning; and the re-conceptualization of the human body as not just partially a product of discourse but moreover a semiotic substance itself. I now want to consider ways in which the text also undercuts these ideas and thereby qualifies the emancipatory promise they might hold. Much of this discussion will focus on what precisely is motivating T— to carry out his experiments / artistic projects. A number of

critics have argued that T— is acting on orders from anonymous authorities somewhere 'out there' in the communications landscape of late capitalism. My own close reading of the text seeks to clarify Michel Delville's statement that elements within Ballard's fictional landscape "trigger unconscious drives" (26). Delville's concept of the trigger seems to be an improvement on the metaphor of 'implantation' used by other critics because it balances a construction of the psychoanalytic subject as a fully mechanised entity with a theorisation of the unconscious as, in part, a deeply personal realm. The space of T—'s psyche becomes, then, a contested area where the unique memories and perspectives of the individual are confused with material originating in the public realm. In *Atrocity* this dynamic usually has disastrous results because, more often than not, signals from the media landscape work upon the protagonist's most destructive impulses. Thus, the very things that speak to Dr Nathan of radically new ways of seeing the world of the late twentieth century also appear as a form of incarceration in *Atrocity*'s pages.

In the discussion of Dr Nathan above, I cited Ballard's own caution that the doctor's explanations of T—'s behaviour are somehow insufficient, that is, rationalisations "in the Freudian sense of providing a more palatable or convenient explanation" (89). The distinction Ballard makes between accurate analysis and rationalisation is crucial to understanding what is taking place in the novel, because it implies there is something about T—'s thought processes and actions which Nathan either does not grasp, or refuses to acknowledge. What makes his glosses on T—'s various exploits rationalisations is that they presuppose a subject who is able to respond with a measure of autonomy to the challenges presented by the world in which he lives. Even if T— is acting partly on

impulse, Nathan still seems to believe that he is able to channel those drives into creative avenues—his experiments, assemblages, re-enactments, etc. It is interesting to note in this respect that Nathan frequently describes T—'s idiosyncratic behaviour in active terms: [T—'s] *intention* is to start World War III"; "even more disturbing is Talbot's *deliberate* involvement in the narrative scenario"; "the patient is *reacting against* [. . .] the phenomenology of the universe"; "presumably by a cathartic collision, Talbot *will try to* reintegrate space" (7, 24, 46 & 73, emphases added). Through even this brief cross-section of commentary we hear Nathan describing his patient and former colleague in agential terms, and imposing relatively reasonable theorisations on everything he does. The question is whether other dimensions of T—'s behaviour, subjectivity or psyche are revealed in the text, which would point up the limitations of Nathan's explanations and allow readers to speculate on the origins of those aspects of T—'s exploits that may be less palatable.

One substantive counterpoint to Nathan's explanations comes to us via a number of ghostly figures who are sometimes present during T—'s scenarios or re-enactments. They include a bomber pilot and a woman with radiation burns in chapter one; a helicopter pilot and a woman with a wounded mouth in chapter two; and a trio of figures named Kline, Coma and Xero, who appear in chapters three through five. None of the characters except T— can see or interact with these figures, and this fact lends weight to T—'s own speculation that they are "couriers from his own unconscious" (4)—key components in what is essentially a psychoanalytic fantasy. But T— is only partly correct: although these courier figures may have emerged from his head, the messages

they carry originate in the public space of the media landscape. In each case, their appearance is linked to the iconography of the postwar period. Chapter one's preoccupation with the "complex of ideas and events represented by World War III" (6)—and a familiar enough nightmare from the cold war era—is emblematised in the bomber pilot and the woman with radiation burns. The helicopter pilot's presence in chapter two makes sense in terms of the novel's many references to the Vietnam War—the helicopter being an iconic piece of military hardware from that particular conflict. As for Kline, Coma and Xero, their shifting appearances and cryptic activities invariably relate to whichever event from the 1960s Ballard is focussing on in each of chapters three through five. If we take the last of these as an example, we find that the trio keep T—'s attention focussed on JFK's assassination in a number of ways: as T— wanders around a deserted airport, Coma's cheekbones appear "reminiscent [. . .] of the President's widow"; Kline, meanwhile, arranges a group of mannequins, one of which begins, from T—'s point of view, to resemble Marina Oswald; and Xero completes the effect by assembling "an immense motorcade of wrecked cars" (72–73). As we can see from this example, none of the courier figures gives T— a direct order. Their 'message' is contained in their silent presence alone. As a result, they seem to embody compulsions which have some kind of connection with material originating outside of the psyche. In turn, this contributes to our suspicion that T— is little more than a mechanised or programmable subject.

Several of Ballard's critics have tried to theorise this mechanisation. David Punter was perhaps the first. In the opening chapter of *The Hidden Script* (1985), he writes of

the novel's representation of instinct as "the surfacing effect of multiple implantations at the base of the brain, gesturings produced by automatic programming while crews of scientists [. . .] observe [. . .] our power to delude ourselves into believing in free will" (10). The extremely pessimistic quality of this assessment is echoed in Luckhurst's marriage of *Atrocity* and theories of late capitalism put forward by Fredric Jameson and Jacques Ellul (cf. Luckhurst *'The Angle Between Two Walls'* 95–96). Like Punter, Luckhurst argues that what we see in *Atrocity*'s protagonist is a representation of the total penetration of the subject's unconscious by both "technique" and desires manufactured and implanted by the productive forces of advanced capitalism (96). My own understanding of T—'s programmability is, however, influenced more by Michel Delville's variation on this theme of mechanisation. He argues that *Atrocity* reveals Ballard's preoccupation with "the possibility that the new technological landscape may *trigger* unconscious drives" (26, emphasis added). A fine but nonetheless important line divides the metaphors of 'implantation' and 'triggering.' While the former gives us the impression of a subject who is merely a franchise of the dominant socioeconomic system, the latter suggests a more interactive model of the subject's place within the mediated environment. The trigger implies that specific signals emanating from the media landscape compel the subject to act in certain ways because they somehow correspond to more personal elements buried within the unconscious or instincts rooted in the flesh. Neither model is particularly heartening for readers who value (the illusion of) individual autonomy, but Delville's version is more appropriate to the confused and confusing representation of postmodern subjectivity in Ballard's novel.

What we see in T—'s art projects, bizarre experiments and re-enactments, then, is not (only) the free expression of a relatively autonomous artist but rather the results of a communication between signals issued from the media landscape and more private images already circulating through the unconscious. In terms of private image material, *Atrocity* offers infrequent glimpses of what are to be taken as T—'s childhood experiences of the aftermath of World War II in China. The passage that stands out most in this respect is the lengthy text-block in chapter eight, headlined "Too Bad" (112–14), in which T— not only reflects on an episode from his time in China but is also said to be writing it down (112); that said, similar references appear elsewhere in the text (cf. 5, 27). (Given Ballard's experience of the war in China as an adolescent, these flashbacks are, of course, very personal material for him as well—material that would resurface in the later fictionalised autobiographies *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*). Within the rubric of *Atrocity*'s fragmented narrative, these fleeting memories of an actual scene of violence and brutality have, for T—, somehow been recapitulated in the sanitised, glamourised and erotically charged images saturating his immediate environment. Perhaps it is even more accurate to say that the aestheticisation of violence apparent in the more recent images reiterates the child's naive perception of (the aftermath of) war. A close reading seems warranted to illustrate what I mean, and the combination of "Too Bad" with the text-block that precedes it, "Cinecity," provides a prime example.

The end of "Cinecity" seems to set up the childhood memory in "Too Bad" (like much of this fragmented text, the paragraphs follow on logically and linearly one to the next, even though such linearity is not compulsory). Toward the end of the paragraph, the

italicised section headed "*Sequence in slow motion*" (112) describes the contents of a film T— is watching: images of motorway landscape inter-cut with pictures of a woman's body, badly injured and bleeding. The passage concludes: "*The quickening geometry of her body, its terraces of pain and sexuality, became a source of intense excitement. Watching from the embankment, Travers found himself thinking of the eager deaths of his childhood*" (111–12, original emphasis). What does this last sentence mean? The triad of woman's body, childhood and death invites a psychoanalytic interpretation—the woman's damaged body somehow reminds T— of his mother. But what might be meant by the '*eager* deaths of his childhood'? A possible answer is contained in "Too Bad," an anomalous text-block on account of its length (easily the longest text-block in the book) and its realist narrative.

The childhood memory recounted in "Too Bad" seems insignificant enough: young T— is invited by an American soldier, Corporal Tulloch, to go with him to Japan, but several setbacks force the boy to stay behind when Tulloch leaves. The narrative is grouped around four separate failed attempts to begin this trip, and this in part explains the headline: 'too bad'—the offhand, condescending reply of a parent to a child whose aspirations have been thwarted. The question is whether the memory is so incongruous within the narrative as to be meaningless or pregnant with meaning, a formative experience of some kind. One could read the passage in loosely psychoanalytic terms as a formative myth: an account of the child's failure either to have the mother all to himself, or to escape the father and his prohibitions altogether. We note that T—'s father is away on business, leaving the boy alone with his mother, and that the realisation of the Oedipal

fantasy is deferred because the mother is ill—so ill in fact that she cannot protest the boy's decision to go away with Tulloch (112). We could go further: after the boy leaves his mother, the American servicemen on the shore at Hongkew become surrogate parent figures (113). The boy seeks acceptance into the womb-like hold of their landing craft tank (L.C.T.), only to find it already full of suffering Japanese prisoners (112)—the mother as a place of pain. At that point, the boy is faced with a twofold dilemma he has no hope of articulating to himself. On the one hand, his new parents seem child-like and unwilling to accept him; the Americans fight among themselves and need their own parent figures, MPs, to keep them in order. On the other hand, the Japanese are no longer what they used to be in his imagination: once his captors—the text mentions that he and his parents had been released from an internment camp (112)—and therefore figures of authority, now the Japanese are merely bodies in the process of dying.[10] The boy is thus shut out of two landscapes of the imagination: the exciting American military craft, and Japan itself, which had promised an escape altogether from the father. Later, the boy returns to Hongkew with his father (114), and, if we take our psychoanalytic reading all the way, we can assume that the interdiction against both the body of the mother and the space of escape has been restored. Not surprisingly, young T— sees the same L.C.T. on the beach, but this time with its bow ablaze (114)—the flames symbolising the boy's frustrated longings for acceptance into its womb-hold.

It is interesting that the annotation Ballard chooses to accompany "Too Bad" is a lengthy quotation from *Civilisation and its Discontents*, in which Freud articulates the "fateful question for the human species"—whether the development of culture will be

able to master humanity's aggressive instincts and its drive toward self-destruction (qtd. in *Atrocity* 126). The quotation describes a Thanatic epoch that Freud felt he was living through, especially in the wake of the First World War, but also his notion that a reply from Eros was to be expected in the near future—an ironic speculation in light of subsequent history. There is plenty in "Too Bad" to link to Thanatos: the chaotic aftermath of war, the cowed and brutalised Japanese, the disorganised and violent Americans, the guns of the military police, the burning L.C.T. Where would we find the (latent) Eros in this scene, though? Perhaps, unbeknownst to the young T—, aspects of both life forces are inextricably linked for him as a result of such experiences. We could even discard the elaborate psychoanalytic construct. Whether or not we believe that T—'s childhood memory of the shoreline at Hongkew contains within it his infantile longing for the mother and for escape from the father and his law, the passage conveys the less-convoluted notion that in looking for acceptance and a sense of freedom and adventure in the American's landing craft, T— finds only rejection and sights of casual violence, pain and suffering—'too bad' indeed. But also *too* bad, in the sense that the scene is so intensely distressing that the child could not be expected to process it properly. This naive disconnect from scenes of brutality, rooted in a period of psychosexual development, is then recapitulated in the violent imagery evident in passages like "Cinecity"—throughout most of *Atrocity* moreover. It is that correspondence which constitutes the 'trigger.'

Although there is something inherently sinister about the concept of unconscious triggering, Ballard's representation of this process seems more like an indictment of those

who would profit from the aestheticisation of violence, and of those consumers who naively enjoy the images they are fed, especially if we shift our attention to the element of repetitive sexualised violence apparent in it.

Throughout *Atrocity* the logic of radical analogy at the heart of T—'s projects is parallelled by references to an emerging, technologically facilitated polymorphous perversity. Where earlier we noted that the body in *Atrocity* appears to us as first and foremost an object of (or in) representation, that is, immaterial, so too is the sexuality practised by the characters presented to us as a cerebral affair: "divorced" as Nathan is fond of saying, "from affect and physiology alike" (85). Throughout the novel sex is described in terms of conceptualized perversions, and in T—'s scenarios it reaches an inordinate level of abstraction. Nathan explains to Webster that "Talbert has accepted in absolute terms the logic of the sexual union. For him all junctions, whether of our own soft biologies or the hard geometries of walls and ceilings, are equivalent to one another" (85–86). Accordingly, one finds T—'s desire, such as it is, invested in all manner of objects (cars, dolls, elements of architecture), media figures (Ronald Reagan, Hollywood celebrities), and abstract concepts (wall angles, mathematical equations). As with many of Ballard's other provocative ideas, this notion of a limitless sexuality has potential as a metaphor for personal liberation from established modes of conduct. Ballard's text asks us to set aside more conventional 'reasons' for sex—procreation, the physical expression of an emotional bond between individuals, the giving and receiving of pleasurable sensations through touch—and consider a new 'sexuality' in which the only thing conceived are more concepts. For an example, we might look to a text-block in chapter

three, in which Karen Novotny watches as T— builds a "box-like structure" out of the mirrors in her apartment, in an attempt to "trap" her womb and the "star" he believes is caught there (43–44). The only physical contact between the two occurs when T— grips Novotny's thigh (44); so, following the novel's indefinite expansion of the sexual field, the angles of the box structure and the mirror frames out of which it is made might constitute the 'intercourse' between them, while T—'s notion of the ensnared star, a metaphor for the energy released during an atomic explosion (Novotny believes T— is a "former H-bomber pilot" [43]) is the conceived concept.

Luckhurst has tried to describe the liberatory promise in this conceptual sexuality by contrasting *Atrocity*'s "promiscuous and unending semiosis[,]" its "associative chains and bizarre cathecting of 'non-sexual' objects[,]" with the "obsessively phallic" economy of desire apparent in *Crash* (*'The Angle Between Two Walls'* 112). Where the former is, according to Luckhurst, part of a Bataillean tradition of "triumphantly non-phallic, even 'feminine'" eroticism, the latter is more in keeping with a legacy of Sadeian pornography coded 'masculine' (112–13). The problem is that the revolutionary quality of the idea looks increasingly tenuous next to the repetitive nature of the scenarios in chapters one through eight. This repetition suggests that far from experiencing a liberating dispersal of desire across the whole world of objects, T— is merely doing the same thing over and over again because the media images with which he is obsessed are appealing primarily to his more aggressive instincts.

In my earlier references to McHale's reading of the novel, I emphasised the role-playing relationships between Ballard's characters. Here, I want to return to his

comments to help clarify the limitations I am trying to articulate. At one point, McHale describes the characters' searches for a "modulus" ("a single abstract form which is repeated in a series of unrelated and apparently formless or irregular phenomena") as "game-like" (70), but is the game metaphor entirely appropriate? Games typically involve a set of rules, within which the player has a measure of autonomy; the dealt hand of cards, for example, to a degree dictates what a player *can* do in a given round of play. Ballard's characters, however, do not have the luxury of even this sort of 'freedom in chains.' In each scenario, the indefinite extension of the field of desire invariably leads to the same conclusion—the murder of one or more of the secondary characters (only in chapter nine does T— himself disintegrate into the semiotic realm that has obsessed him and possessed him all along, leaving the other characters relatively unscathed [137–38]). What from one angle might seem full of possibility, then, appears from different perspective to be pathologically limited in what it can achieve. Incidentally, where in the first section of this chapter I suggested that role-playing in *Atrocity* is emblematic of a postmodernist construction of selfhood as a continual process of self-fashioning, now that idea needs to be re-evaluated. T—'s shifts between different imaginary personas (to recap: an element in an equation, his everyday self, the second coming of Christ, etc.) seem decidedly less compelling as a figure for personal liberation when one takes note of the fact that he undertakes more or less the same actions in each guise. Indeed, the fact that he is compelled to commit murder in each successive persona effectively pathologises the carnivalesque ideal of the subversion of stable identity through the

donning of masks. In a way, T—'s loss of (the illusion of) unified selfhood allegorises the end of the basis for personal and legal accountability.

I also find it odd that McHale would employ a game metaphor when he, quite correctly, observes that *Atrocity*'s characters are not able to switch roles amongst themselves. Ballard tends to place the same characters in the same position within each scenario: T— as artist / murderer, Nathan as chorus, Koester as imitator of T—, Margaret and Capt. Webster as foolish sceptics, and Karen Novotny and Catherine Austin as objects of desire / murder victims. Over successive chapters the fixity of each role begins to take precedence over the illusion that the characters are acting of their own accord. That said, we can, I think, still envision a bizarre 'game' in which the same players agree always to be dealt more or less the same hand, and this appears to be something close to what we have in *Atrocity*. Certain characters are aware, and even accepting, of their confinement within these prescribed positions. Near the opening of chapter one, for instance, Dr Austin reflects on the "nightmare [T—'s nightmare, we assume] in which she had begun to play a more willing and calculated role" (1). In other words, she is *game* for whatever T— has in mind, even though her body-language throughout the text suggests wary scepticism. Her tentative adventuresomeness is in keeping with the apparently willing involvement of other figures in T—'s experiments (Dr Nathan's acceptance of the analogical thought behind T—'s exploits would be another case in point). The truth of Austin's situation, however, would seem to lie somewhere between her sense of her own deliberate and calculated involvement in this nightmare, and the fact

that her involvement is more often than not the result of calculations made by other characters (T— or Nathan) or by Ballard's recurrent and restrictive story design itself.

Of course, in the most literal sense, characters in any work of fiction are completely constrained. At the risk of stating the obvious, texts are *written* no matter how many variations or options for the reader are introduced. What we are dealing with, then, is the extent to which readers believe in the illusion that characters are in control of their own destiny. And from that perspective Ballard's characters appear, on average, more constrained than characters in, say, a realist novel, because the main roles in each scenario are meted out in the same way every time. There are minor exceptions: on two occasions, Margaret intervenes in T—'s experiments and ends up getting killed in the process, and these actions are depicted as somewhat unpredictable (cf. 12–14 & 73–75); but even these two isolated examples are given a cast of predictability because of their similarity to one another. Perhaps the most that can be said is that Ballard heightens the arbitrariness of what McHale calls 'story-content,' and this serves to reinforce the mechanistic quality of T—'s motivation and behaviour.

A different 'game' metaphor may still be useful to us in this context, though. The repeated apportioning of a victim's position within T—'s experiments suggests that the 'game' being played is always, in some sense, a hunt for *game*—for prey. Although almost every character is killed in one way or another over the course of the novel, T—'s principal quarry is usually a woman, and more often than not Karen Novotny. In effect, the fixity of roles within these scenarios is also gendered in a way that becomes increasingly unnerving. T— and his imitators (Koester and Vaughan) are given the

franchise of this boundless, 'feminine' eroticisation of non-sexual things, but Ballard's female characters, and in particular Karen Novotny, rarely seem able to escape the role of victim, and are never allowed to become sexual aggressors. Critic Alan McKee has suggested that Ballard's fiction, generally, evinces an anxiety over the appearance of a powerful feminine sexuality (65), and I would agree that this anxiety is apparent in *Atrocity* as much as it is in those novels McKee has in mind, primarily *Crash* and *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979). More generally, though, the irony here is that the repetition of this destructive sexual impulse, in part, breaks the promise of a polymorphous and largely conceptual perversity, and undermines Dr Nathan's theory that intellectual ingenuity—the technologisation of sexuality—has left behind the more primal instincts of the flesh. While the idea of conceptual sexuality gestures toward something limitless, to hitherto undreamt of permutations, T—'s triggered fixations on junctions and angles as intercourse keeps a rigidly agonistic definition of sexuality in play. Additionally, the solution of endless geometric couplings never seems to sate "the jaded palates of our so-called sexuality" [85]. T— repeatedly appraises the intersection of Novotny's body with various inanimate angles and planes but the seemingly endless posturing never suffices, and the process of appraisal itself becomes goal-oriented, each epiphany arriving only to be replaced by the next media-induced compulsion.

Given the fragmented quality of the text, and the prominence of T—'s point of view, one is never actually shown the moment of Novotny's murder(s). Instead, in the majority of cases, the narrative provides some indication that T—'s experiment has reached a climax, and then Novotny's lifeless body makes its appearance in a subsequent text-

block. The narrative progression in "You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe" is illustrative of how most of the scenarios develop. Ostensibly, the goal of T—'s conceptual project in the chapter is, in Ballard's own words, "to make sense of [Monroe's] tragic death [by] recast[ing] her disordered mind in the simplest terms possible, those of geometry: the shapes and volumes of the apartment house, the beach, the planetarium" (*Atrocity* 61–62). Most of the 'action' in the first half of the chapter consists of T— observing Novotny and an anonymous dancing woman move across a landscape of sand dunes (55–59), until the courier figure Coma arrives and, with her face "more and more resembl[ing] the dead film star" (58), compels him to complete his solution. As Coma's physical resemblance to Monroe increases, there is a subsequent decrease in T—'s regard for Novotny. Eventually, her physical presence in the apartment becomes an unwelcome distraction from his thoughts of Monroe, and T—, quite literally, 'gets her out of the way.' Novotny's death seems to have the desired effect: Monroe's face appears on the walls of the apartment as part of some private "epiphany" concerning her suicide (60). Readers, however, are shut out of this arcane knowledge, and T—'s final re-delivery into Coma's hands suggests that his murder / solution to Monroe's suicide has not actually released him from the compulsions triggered by the media landscape. Thus, it would seem that the immediate and unmediated stand-in for the object of T—'s desire must be reduced to *only* a body in order for him to be able to gaze upon "the serene face of the film star" (60), and from there, come as close as he can to communion with Monroe's 'body conceptual,' to borrow Paul Youngquist's phrase, without having to die as a celebrity himself. Analogous narrative scenarios are present in chapters one through eight, and more often

than not it is the production of Novotny's corpse that is the prerequisite for T—'s fleeting moments of "neural calm" (cf 14, 36, 51, 74).

Something about Novotny, then, makes her the necessary price of T—'s efforts to make meaning within his increasingly fragmented world, but what? Luckhurst's answer is ingenious, but debatable. He positions Novotny as the "meat" of the novel (*'The Angle Between Two Walls'* 106), not only because she is the recurrent victim of T—'s experiments, but also because her gender supposedly represents a truth hidden in otherness, ambiguity and mystery. For very specific reasons related to his overarching discussion of genre, he generalises the mystery surrounding celebrity 'tragedies' like the death of Marilyn Monroe and more serious disasters such as the Apollo 1 fire so that it becomes as abstract as any conceptual conundrum in the novel itself: "[T—] tries to capture the 'secret' truth of Novotny's body precisely in the 'vanishing point' of her genitalia. The compulsion to repeat the mutilations of her body records the inevitable failure but reiterated attempts to grasp that 'truth'" (111). T—'s compulsions are then doubled by Ballard's own attempt to carry out, through *Atrocity*, an "impossible occupation" of the conceptual space between various dualities: "Ballard deploys his figure of Woman[,]" Luckhurst argues, "to stage an occupation of the limit between high and low, modernism and postmodernism, science fiction and mainstream. Neither a simple definitional postmodernism (erasure of the border), nor simple avant-gardism (sublation of the border); the angle [or space between two walls / genres] remains intolerably present" (116). The implication, here, is that Ballard is aware he is attempting to write his way into a 'feminine' space of ambiguity between genre boundaries, but also

honest enough to acknowledge that the male writer's attempt to occupy such a space, or arrogant assumption that he can do this, might be tantamount to a (conceptual) rape. The paradox Ballard faced in writing *Atrocity*'s pieces would be as follows, then: although the male author's attempt to write in a manner that could be theorised as 'feminine' appears admirable, there is nevertheless a violence of thought, a will to power over otherness, implicit in the process, regardless of the good intentions that might have initiated it. Ballard's repeated staging of Novotny's mutilation and death would then be the centrepiece of an allegorisation of his own anxiety over this conceptual violence.

There is, however, a certain irony in the fact that anxiety over one form of conceptual violence must be assuaged through the obsessive exercise of another. Is Ballard's intellectual honesty apparent in the repetitive sadism of his text, or is it misogyny masquerading as theoretical sophistication that we are dealing with? Luckhurst is able to champion *Atrocity*'s 'feminine' oscillations between categories of genre because he views Novotny principally as a metonym for an abstract concept. She comes to symbolise an un-representable space, itself signified by Woman, between categories arrived at through a rationality coded 'masculine.' The sign and accompanying abstraction are effectively dissociated from the image of a specific individual. To his credit, Luckhurst worries that his interpretation of Novotny's role "unacceptably waives the physicality of violence towards Woman" and "repeats [the surrealist's] denial of *les femmes* for *La Femme*—the object, the image of the feminine" (116). In other words, the critic's well-intentioned attempts to sanction T—'s actions through theory risk (conceptually) murdering Novotny all over again. No longer the name for an imaginary individual possessed of a body that

feels pain, this theorised 'Novotny' designates only Woman conceived of as a tissue of concepts (absence, suspensivity, oscillation, indeterminacy, etc.), and supposedly capable of sustaining any amount of cruelty because it is composed solely of ideas or signs. Readers must decide for themselves whether this disavowal of the (imagined) material results of T—'s experiments is worth the philosophical dividends. And certainly, the novel itself helps facilitate such a denial through the strategies of narrative style and characterisation examined earlier.

If I am less willing to waive the physicality of violence in the same way, it is because *Atrocity* still evinces a preoccupation with the corporeal aspects of T—'s fictional world. This is nowhere more apparent than in the novel's representation of the human body itself. When I touched on this subject earlier, I was interested mainly in the thoroughly textualised body that makes its presence felt in *Atrocity*, not in Ballard's strategies for conveying the body's materiality. My earlier comments on the novel's anatomical terminology can be flipped around, though, so that the obsessive quality of this diction conjures up an amorphous corporeality over the course of the narrative. Instead of, or in addition to, positing a body that is representation first and flesh a distant second, we could just as easily argue that, cumulatively, these terms create an alternate illusion: a closing of the distance between referent and representation (the analytical penetration that kills Novotny again and again, perhaps), and the impression of a ghostly flesh appearing behind the play of signification. In other words, the corporeal ends up haunting the text, like the mysterious "contours of a corpse" which appear when Dr Nathan covers one of T—'s assemblages with a sheet (47).

It should be stressed, however, that a vague sense of this substance does not make Ballard's representation of the body, itself, any less unsettling. The overall effect of the novel's obsessive gestures toward the flesh might be taken as a desperate bid to bridge the distance between (un-representable) referent and representation, but the gulf between that referent and the reader is potentially widened in the process. The affinity between the alienation effect that *Atrocity*'s representation of the body can produce, and a description of a vertiginous sense of dislocation between self and flesh contained in Susan Buck-Morss's essay on aesthetics and anaesthetics is suggestive in this respect. Speaking specifically of the estrangement that the philosopher feels when he or she contemplates the physiology of mind, Buck-Morss writes that

> [i]n our most empiricist moments, we would like to take the matter of the brain for the mind. [. . .] But there seems to be such an abyss between us, alive, as we look out on the world, and that gray-white gelatinous mass with its cauliflower-like convolutions that *is* the brain [. . .] that, intuitively, we resist naming them as identical. If this 'I' who examines the brain were nothing *but* the brain, how is it that I feel so uncomprehendingly alien in its presence? (383)

This experience of alienation is for Buck-Morss the starting point of her theorisation of the locus of human consciousness and revision of the term *aesthetics* (cf. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics" 383–87). As we noted in the general introduction, Buck-Morss argues that consciousness does not reside in a mind or brain distinct from the organism's environment but rather throughout a system that includes the subject's environment (385). Derived from Freud's speculations regarding the seat of consciousness in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, this "synaesthetic system" (Buck-Morss 385) presupposes an individual who is inextricably connected to his or her world, and Buck-Morss uses this

idea as the foundation for her sense of the subject's profound belonging to that world. While this representation of consciousness has certain affinities with *Atrocity*'s dissolution of traditional conceptual boundaries between self and world, T—'s experience of this dissolution does not evoke a similar sense of belonging, nor does it speak to a sense of personal responsibility to alter what the sensory apparatus of the body may find unacceptable about that world—be it some form of injustice or cruelty. By contrast, his experience is better characterised as panic over both invasion from outside forces and incarceration within a flesh perceived as alien. The impression of a ghostly corporeality throughout the text helps dissuade readers from adopting a nonchalant attitude toward the use of violence which would be similar to that displayed by T—, his imitators, and Dr Nathan.

In this respect, it is instructive to contrast the sense of alienation described by Buck-Morss with T—'s own estrangement from the corporeal. The experience Buck-Morss articulates at least contains within it an ingredient of wonder at the sheer absurdity, implausibility and rarity of human existence. T—'s response to the corporeal is, by comparison, characterised primarily by revulsion. Throughout the novel he betrays a "biomorphic horror" (116), which we might take to be a pathological exaggeration of Buck-Morss's experience of the uncanny. In actual fact, T—'s revulsion toward the body is more the product of the entertainment culture in which he lives. His problem with the body, and more specifically with the bodies of women, has to do with their resistance to being made over in the image of the images that so fascinate him. In chapter six, a section entitled "The Great American Nude," which centres on T—'s interest in sex as

well as the female form in art and media images, Dr Nathan argues that "[i]n the multiplied body of the film actress [. . . T—] finds what seems to be a neutral ground. For the most part the phenomenology of the universe is a nightmarish excrescence. Our bodies, for example, are for him monstrous extensions of puffy tissue he can barely tolerate" (86). Nathan's statement leads us to believe that physical bodies remind T— of his own finite extension in time and space, and thus of his inadequacy relative to superior semiotic bodies of media figures (in this case, Elizabeth Taylor). In managing to have launched themselves, or launched *other selves*, into the media landscape, celebrities attain a timelessness and wide distribution, in short, the kind of immortality Paul Youngquist describes in his reading of *Crash*—at least, that is how T— sees things.

In turn, Novotny's body itself becomes a source of constant frustration for T— because it resists his (triggered) attempts to engineer it, to pose it and thereby make it resemble what he sees in various forms of media: "[T]hey raced around the city, examining a dozen architectures. Talbert pushed her against walls and parapets, draped her along balustrades. In the rear seat the textbooks of erotica formed an encyclopedia of postures—blueprints for her own imminent marriage with a seventh-floor balcony unit of the Hilton Hotel" (81). This frustration becomes so acute that T— also resorts to the manipulation of simulacra for a sense of satisfaction, among them obscene dolls (82) and a Karen Novotny "kit" composed of artificial body parts, medical analyses, textual descriptions and voice samples (84–85). T— does not just overlook the differences between the real Novotny and her artificial substitutes, but moreover prefers the latter because through them he is able to bypass the human body's relative immutability. I say

'relative,' because none of the characters in *Atrocity* possess 'natural' bodies. One imagines Karen Novotny's appearance as the product of machining by the culture of fashion and style through which she moves. Colin Greenland suggests that Ballard's late 1960s fiction begins with a concept of the human as *thoroughly* artificial, utterly divorced from nature (39),[11] but positing total artificiality is going a little too far. Ballard deals in gradations of artifice, and the human body occupies an insecure position between the unnatural and the organic throughout *Atrocity*. For that reason, it remains a constant source of anxiety for T—, whose perception of the body's artificiality, dictated to him by the culture of late capitalism, veers so far toward an utter disregard for its abiding materiality.

* * *

In the general introduction, it was suggested that the novels of the quartet are set in what might be called the 'pre-virtual' age, a transitional time between the decline of de Certeau's 'empire of mechanics' and the development of a future 'cybernetic society' with its accompanying technologies. Recovering *Atrocity*'s satirical response to this cultural moment depends very much on identifying Ballard's techniques for conveying a sense of consequence within the realm of the materially real in spite of, or alongside, his representation of a landscape grown increasingly semiotic. By focussing on the novel's less apparent evocation of 'triggered' drives and elemental corporeality, this chapter has attempted to highlight those aspects of *Atrocity* which make it part of a long-established tradition in satirical writing: the comic deflation of overly cerebral behaviour or highly idealistic modes of thought through their collisions with the relative intransigence of the

corporeal. To my mind, this satirical component helps secure *Atrocity*'s importance to ongoing debates over the idea of the post-human, specifically where such discourse touches on the fate of sensory experience within an environment increasingly characterised by technological mediation. By insisting that, for at least some of its characters, a remnant of physical risk still exists within the postural economy, *Atrocity* counsels us, implicitly, to think carefully about the ethical dilemmas facing us within a realm where once-familiar reference points for judgment, particularly the potential to inflict physical harm on other individuals, no longer seem as stable as perhaps they did in the past.

Notes

1. It should be pointed out that the page references provided for all quotations from the text, and from the annotations that Ballard originally wrote for the magazine-format Re/Search edition (1991), relate to the most recent Flamingo edition (2001).

2. The word *renascent*, which appears in the Re/Search edition's version of this text-block, has been dropped from the Flamingo edition. Not knowing whether this omission is a typographical error or an editorial decision, I have chosen to put it back in as my own editorial emendation.

3. Luckhurst's explanation of the collage attributes of Ballard's novel are subsumed under a wider exploration of *Atrocity*'s debt to the modernist avant-garde (Surrealism) and position within the postmodernist avant-garde (Pop). His account of the novel is valuable for the scope of its erudition alone, in that it constitutes a thorough catalogue of the art historical allusions and references made throughout each of its chapter.

4. Interestingly, Ballard has expressed extreme reservations about R.D. Laing's anti-psychiatry: "I was always suspicious of Laing and his claims that schizophrenia was a social construct[,]" he commented to Will Self in 1994, "Having known one or two people who were virtually schizophrenic, I believe the severe nature of the handicaps these people suffered from weren't in any way an adaptive response to a hostile reality. These people were crippled in a way that an autistic child is crippled. Something had gone wrong with the basic wiring" (Self 359). While Ballard himself represents T—'s nervous breakdown as in large part a social construct, a potentially sane response engendered by a maddening world, much of my interest in *Atrocity* has to do with its intimations of a psychosis that is at least partly rooted in the flesh, and thus akin to the kind of handicaps he refers to in his comments on Laing.

5. It is not always necessary for Nathan to step in and discredit these sceptical characters. Webster, for instance, does a fine job of making a fool of himself. The repetition of questions similar to the one about T—'s 'assassination weapon' makes him sound very much like Nathan's straight-man (cf. 32, 46 & 86). His questions essentially become a series of one-liners and provide a measure of comic relief. As a result, incredulity itself begins to look like an unserious response to T—'s behaviour. Furthermore, there are suggestions in the narrative that Webster's interest in T—, and in the language of Nathan's explanations, has less to do with law enforcement, and more to do with his own prurient fascination with the sexual dimension of T—'s experiments: "The last few weeks had been a nightmare[,]" Margaret reflects in chapter one, "Webster with his long-range camera and obscene questions. He seemed to take a sardonic pleasure in compiling this one-man Kinsey Report on her . . . positions, planes, where and when Travis placed his hands on her body" (10). Also, in chapter three, we hear Webster mimicking Nathan's voice, not out of respect for the doctor's intelligence, but in an effort to impress, and thereby seduce, Karen Novotny (50). Clearly, Webster finds the investigation into T—'s

killings sexually gratifying, and through him Ballard puns on the cliché of 'examining a body of evidence.'

6. Ballard speaks of a similar, albeit more buoyant feeling of absolute permissibility in one of his annotations to the novel—which incidentally lends greater weight to the identification between Nathan and the author made by several critics. In reference to *Atrocity*'s opening link between "'Eniwetok and Luna Park' [. . .], the H-bomb test site [. . . and] the Paris fun-fair loved by the surrealists[,]" Ballard notes that "the endless newsreel clips of nuclear explosions that we saw on TV in the 1960s (a powerful incitement to the psychotic imagination, sanctioning *everything*) did have a carnival air" (*Atrocity* 14, original emphasis).

7. Docherty's use of the word *plot* corresponds to my understanding of the word *story*, that is, the chronologically ordered sequence of events in which the characters are involved. My own understanding of *plot* is slightly different, in that it would refer to the author's idiosyncratic arrangement of those events. I sense, however, that in some of the cases of postmodernist fiction that Docherty is dealing with, the distinction between plot and story is obscured such that the deliberately preposterous quality of the story results from the coincidence of the story with its idiosyncratic arrangement. Thus, the postmodernist writer would not place later events before earlier ones to create flashbacks and flash-forwards, necessarily, but instead to dispense altogether with the presupposition of temporal sequence and logical causality.

8. I am taking a cue, here, from McHale's formulation of postmodernism as a preoccupation with ontological questions. For McHale, the properly postmodernist text severs or confounds the referential link between fictional and real worlds, and thereby shifts the emphasis away from epistemological dilemmas (as an aside, epistemology is still a major concern in *Atrocity*, as we've just seen in conjunction with the collage aspects of the text, that is, with the way they foreground problems of *how* one is supposed to make sense of and within T—'s surroundings). McHale's consideration of *Atrocity* doesn't directly address the ontological status of death in the novel, but his focus on Ballard's attempt to postmodernise the science-fiction genre by writing a text that is *text* first and foremost, and representation of an imaginary world only secondarily, makes it a related issue nevertheless (cf. 68–70). Simply put, do readers of Ballard become more and more desensitised to serious matters, like the use of violence, when they decide to think of his characters as only, or mainly, signs on a page? Is the reader's concern for fictional individuals indicative of a deep sense of compassion, which would mean that we read fiction, generally, to exercise our capacity for caring; or is it a sign of the exact opposite—a misplacement of compassion, which belittles genuine concern for other real individuals?

9. Obviously, this problem of reanimation became more of a factor when the pieces that make up *The Atrocity Exhibition* were finally brought together in 1970. That said, there is no reason that avid readers of *New Worlds* in the late sixties couldn't have perceived

the same effect, if they were familiar with Ballard's work issue to issue.

10. My attempt at a 'loose' psychoanalytic reading of the "Too Bad" section owes much to Dennis Foster's analysis of *Empire of the Sun*, in "Perversion and the Failure of Authority." In fact, the text-block from *Atrocity* seems like an early attempt at the kind of fictional autobiography that would later appear in that novel. Foster argues that *Empire of the Sun*

> details the emergence of a particularly American world out of the failures of two traditionally dominant forms of authority, the British form, based on a rigid class structure, and the Japanese, based on a cult of the emperor. [. . .] As the boy, Jim [. . .] watches the successive defeats of the two powers, he loses the faith in authority that had anchored his emotional ties to his family and culture and binds himself to the imagery of technology and death that he finds in American war machinery and films.
>
> What is most striking about this novel's depiction of a child's experience of war is that Jim grows to love the violence. (527)

That last assertion is crucial, and goes some way toward explaining why T— might be attracted to seductive images of violence, even though his state of mind precludes his making a necessary linkage between formative event in childhood, and present psychopathological compulsions.

11. In a chapter of *The Entropy Exhibition* entitled "Love Among the Mannequins," Greenland discusses Ballard's lack of interest in "the tension between an authentic, organic sexuality and an intrusive, artificial technology[,]" and his belief that the "invasion was already complete, [that] artificiality had become our natural mode of being" (39). Additionally, Greenland's short reading of *Atrocity* commends Ballard's search for "a new sexuality, man embracing machine to celebrate our entry into the post-humanist condition" (39). From that point of view, *Atrocity*'s doll-women, mannequins and rather remote real women are justified as ideals, rather than regrettable symptoms of consumer society. And yet, Greenland quickly goes back on his own sense of Ballard's optimistic post-humanism by implying that Ballard's representation of women amounts to a frank, satirical commentary on the realm of consumer goods, celebrity, and mass advertising—the way that this realm robs women of their "erotic attributes" (40).

Chapter Four

The Amber Vision of *Crash*: Elemental Corporeality and Cautionary Content

> I'm not thinking of psychopathology simply in terms of sadism and meaningless cruelty and all the rest of it; but rather, the deliberate immersion of oneself in all sorts of destructive impulses—let's say the deliberate immersion of one's *imagination* in all sorts of destructive impulses. Writing a novel like *Crash* was to some extent a psychopathic act.[1]
>
> *Crash* is not a cautionary tale. *Crash* is what it appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn. But it is a psychopathic hymn which has a point.[2]

A visionary, to revisit the words of Edward Ahearn already cited in the general introduction, is an individual who "vehemently claim[s] that the world as we perceive it is an impoverished and dull thing, fundamentally delusory, and that [he] can put us in touch with a reality far more exciting, even 'infinite'" (3). Such a conviction is evident in Ballard's sense of his achievement in *Crash*, and we cannot help but notice in the first of the two quotes above, Ballard's pride in the results of this deliberate immersion in the psychopathic—or at least in the sane man's approximation of that state of mind. *Crash* can be placed within a subset of Ahearn's definition of visionary writing that he terms "the sordid sublime" (117–18), a category covering works dealing with not only madness but also drug use, visceral and / or scatological imagery and sexual perversion. But while including *Crash* in this literary tradition may provide a literary historical context for its abundant sadomasochistic sex and technological violence, it does not really articulate the profound end-point that would make the deliberate immersion in the sordid, the

destructive, and the psychopathic an 'enrichment' for both author and reader, nor does it provide sufficient justification for indulging in imagery that a 'fundamentally delusory' reality proscribes for whatever reason.

The idea of a deliberate immersion in destructive impulses is not Ballard's own, but rather an idea he borrowed from Joseph Conrad. As Ballard tells it, he first read Conrad in the mid-1960s, after several individuals, including the publisher Victor Gollancz, suggested that the idea for *The Drowned World* (1962) had been lifted from *Heart of Darkness* (1899).[3] While at the time Ballard assumed his critics were referring to similarities between the tropical landscapes in the novels, it is perhaps more accurate to say that they were trying to point out a certain affinity between the "psychic fulfilment" that protagonists in Ballard's early catastrophe novels supposedly find in the total dissolution of the self,[4] and Conrad's tendency to invite his readers to sympathise with idealistic yet destructive figures like Mr. Kurtz, by making his narrators feel a conflicted sense of loyalty toward them. In any case, if one accepts Ballard's version of events, then it seems he did not begin thinking of his fiction in Conradian terms until the writing of *The Atrocity Exhibition* pieces in the late sixties. By the time of *Crash*, Ballard's introduction to Conrad's work had presumably given him an aesthetic framework through which to justify the extremism of the fiction.

But to ascribe the idea of deliberately immersing oneself in destructive impulses to Conrad himself is also somewhat misleading. Whether or not Ballard is aware of it, he is alluding to the words of a character in *Lord Jim* (1900): the German merchant Stein. It is important to make the distinction because the idea is presented in that novel with a certain

amount of irony. At one point in the text, Stein and the narrator, Marlow, discuss the problem of young Jim's "romanticism," and Stein tries to put into words what should, ideally, constitute 'the way' of the romantic: "[T]o the destructive element submit yourself," he says, "and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up" (208). It is a compelling metaphor for imaginative struggle, so long as we subscribe to the heroic isolation implied in the image of a man treading water all alone in an infinite sea. By picturing the romantic flailing about in isolation, we might find it easier to accept Stein's idea with a clear conscience. Otherwise we find ourselves in Marlow's position. The problem, as Marlow sees it, is that Jim's romanticism does not exist in a vacuum. The romantic's idealism is too often at odds with the world in which he *must* live. So, while Marlow may be impressed by Stein's conviction, he still worries that the "charming and deceptive light" of the merchant's ideas "[throws] the impalpable poesy of its dimness over pitfalls—over graves" (208). In other words, Marlow is willing to entertain the notion that Stein "had been inspired by some whisper of knowledge" (209)—is trying to express a truth glimpsed in a visionary moment—but he also remains wary of the vagueness of this truth, and the moral implications of the destructive path needed to attain it. By the end of their discussion, and perhaps in response to Marlow's scepticism, Stein admits that something "practical" will have to be done about Jim (210). And to that end, the young romantic is bundled off to Patusan, where he can exercise his idealism on the natives. In effect, Stein and Marlow opt for a strategy of containment when it comes to Jim's idealism.

In essence, the following chapter on *Crash* takes up a position relative to the novel that is analogous to Marlow's mixed response to Stein.

First, the chapter examines the idea that the narrator's traumatic delirium in the wake of his first serious car crash constitutes a visionary experience in and of itself. What he glimpses is a purely abstract and depthless version of his everyday world. With reference to Scott Durham's reading of the novel, I argue that this post-crash vision introduces the narrator to the first of two superior 'reals'—this one identified with 'life' in images—featured prominently in the novel, both of which convince him of the comparative unreality of the suburban life he had been living with his wife prior to the crash. In turn, this vision comes to be associated throughout the narrative with the pursuit of an exalted communion with, if not entrance into, the space of mediation between the actuality of the disaster and the consumer receiving the disaster's image. In this way, the opening section continues the discussion initiated in the first part of chapter three, which examined T—'s own obsession with 'life' within the immaterial realm of the media landscape in *The Atrocity Exhibition*—out of which *Crash* grew, incidentally.[5] The primary difference between the two novels, however, is that T— already seems to be motivated by this obsession from the outset of *Atrocity*—it is a component part of his nervous breakdown—whereas the narrator of *Crash* develops it gradually, as the subject of his own narrative of apprenticeship. His instructor, the individual who gives shape and purpose to the vision, is the novel's central psychopathic 'hero,' a former television personality named Robert Vaughan. Eventually, it will be contradictions within

Vaughan's theory of the car crash that we will have to deal with, as our discussion of the visionary component of *Crash* veers toward its more satirical dimension.

The second and third sections of the chapter set out to show how *Crash*, a novel that appears to be founded on a sweeping suspension of moral prohibitions, resists Ballard's own recent assertion (the second epigraph to this chapter) that *Crash* is exclusively "a psychopathic hymn" devoid of cautionary value (Self 348). Ballard's assertion goes back on what he said of the novel at the end of his 1974 Introduction to the French translation. There, he wrote that "the ultimate role of *Crash!* is cautionary, a warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape" (*Crash* 9). Ballard's more recent regret over having pointed out the presence of a cautionary note in *Crash* is, to my mind, unwarranted. Arguably, if he made a mistake in the "Introduction" it was in giving his readers the lasting impression that the novel's role is *primarily* moral, instead of suggesting that the cautionary is one aspect among others in a multidimensional fiction. Perhaps more worrisome, Ballard's flip-flop on the moral implications of *Crash* points up his tendency to equate philistine moral*ism* with less-dogmatic forms of ethical sensibility or moral awareness. Ballard's qualification that his 'psychopathic hymn' nevertheless 'has a point' is typical of this tendency: the problem is that he refrains from explaining what that point might be if the novel is not a cautionary tale. If at this juncture I may be allowed to venture a guess, I would suggest that while Ballard does not want to be accused of indulging in 'meaningless cruelty,' and thus maintains that there is something more substantive or socially relevant about his novel, he is also uncomfortable with the

idea that that *relevance* might be perceived as having been grounded in a moral sensibility. In any case, in spite of Ballard's more recent attempt to promote the novel as an amoral techno-romance, this study establishes, through close readings of key episodes, that *Crash* has always displayed a pronounced and crucial cautionary element; it has always been an amber-, as opposed to green-light visionary text. The difficulty of such an approach, however, is getting around Ballard's modification of the Conradian narrative model, in which the narrator not only feels a complicated sense of loyalty toward a central psychopathic figure, as Marlow feels toward Mr Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, but moreover moves toward a point of complete identification with that figure. Because the narrator of *Crash* allows himself to be utterly seduced by the psychopathological, the novel appears to sidestep altogether the question of a 'practical' response to romantic excess.

As a counter to the visionary heights of the narrator's delirium, part two provides an analysis of the role of the character Colin Seagrave, a stunt-driver and devotee of Vaughan. Like the narrator, Seagrave arrives at his understanding of the car crash under Vaughan's tutelage, but the implications of the actions Seagrave undertakes with the knowledge Vaughan has given him foreground all of the brutality implicit in Vaughan's ideas, with none of the theoretical sophistication. Figuratively speaking, Vaughan is the intellectual revolutionary, armed with a loosely formulated ideology but at times hesitant to put it into practice on the streets, while Seagrave is, by comparison, the unthinking nihilist. By both exaggerating the implications of Vaughan's theories of the car crash and recklessly turning that theory into practice, Seagrave embodies the psychotic limit of

Vaughan's philosophy, and thereby provides a focal point for the novel's satirical treatment of its own vision of man's relationship to technology.

In the third section, the discussion moves to address the novel's representation of corporeality and sexuality. There, I argue that the text invites both Baudrillardian and Lacanian interpretations: the former provides a compelling explanatory framework for the novel's dissolution of boundaries between body and technology / machine, and the conceivably limitless sexuality of abstraction that attends this dissolution. The latter, meanwhile, articulates the second of the novel's two superior 'reals,' identified with the narrator's confrontation with a more elemental corporeality, which in turn tends to complicate the novel's overall movement toward idealised representations of the union between flesh and machine. On the basis of this more elemental physicality, I launch a close reading of the conflicted trope of exhaustion as it appears in the three main sexual encounters in the latter half of the narrative. This trope is certainly perplexing: the result of intense living, it is naturally a sign that the characters have rejected the (caricatured) numb, emotionless state of suburban life, but beyond that, it appears as either the necessary 'spent' feeling which allows the characters access to visionary experiences, or proof that their aspirations to be (like) the technology that manipulates them ultimately run up against the redemptive limitations of human physiology.

1. The abstract aftermath of the crash

Set in a 'near-future' west London, *Crash* is the story of James Ballard,[6] a forty-year-old producer of television commercials who, after unintentionally killing another man in

an automobile accident, gradually finds himself exploring the sexual significance of car crashes. In the wake of his accident, James is drawn into a subculture of car-crash enthusiasts, led by Vaughan, who are driven to seek different forms of transcendental experience as a result of having been through what they see as the violent sexual communion of the crash. From the hallucinatory moments immediately following his crash, to Vaughan's fateful entrance in chapter nine (Vaughan is introduced before that, but remains a peripheral figure, cf 37–38, 48, 53), James's response to his crash is understandably confused and confusing. In this early section of the novel, James is haunted by the vision he receives in the aftermath of his crash, and amused by the uncooperative nature of his injured body, which behaves in hospital as a collection of almost independent parts, functioning beyond any illusion of conscious control. It is the first of these two concerns that we will explore here, because it amounts to the novel's primary visionary dimension, and is eventually subsumed under Vaughan's elaborate scheme to pass into the realm of media images and thereby assure himself of a kind of immortality.

If James's account of the aftermath of his crash takes on the veneer of revelation, it is due in part to the banality of the collision itself. James recalls simply meeting another car head-on and a body being "propelled through his windshield like a mattress from the barrel of a circus cannon" (20). The body is that of Charles Remington, the passenger of the other car, and the circus cannon image pushes the banality of his demise toward farce. It only exacerbates the fact that the extremity of the violence involved in the event calls out for a more meaningful, and therefore satisfactory, explanation. In effect, James's

description of the event emphasises the momentary, not momentous nature of the typical road fatality. Against this unnerving banality, the remainder of chapter two is taken up with the vision born from James's "exhausted mind" (22), that is, with his traumatic delirium. His account basically re-writes the ensuing "manic activity" (21) in quasi-religious terms. James's survival of the crash takes on the air of divine intervention on the part of the "mysterious forces" (fate? physics? chance?) presiding over the event, while the driver of the other vehicle, Helen Remington, looks to James like the "madonna in an early Renaissance icon" (21). In this way, *Crash* asks us to accept the possibility that traumatic consciousness is in fact a *higher*, not merely *different*, form of consciousness—an idea Ballard himself tentatively endorsed in the early 1980s, when he commented to an interviewer that "one cannot help one's imagination being touched by [crash survivors] who, if at enormous price, have nonetheless broken through the skin of reality and convention around us [. . . and] achieved—become—mythologial [*sic*] beings in a way that is only attainable through these brutal and violent acts" (Vale & Juno 47). It is apparent that, on one level, Ballard wants his readers to see the car crash as a democratic means to visionary experience,[7] but with the added conceit that survivors are not just enlightened but also enhanced by the event, becoming something more than human as they emerge from the wreckage. We could say that the cause for emergency becomes, in his hands, an event of emergence or re-birth.

But the irony in James's breaking through of reality's skin is that it reveals only another world of skins—of surfaces. Parallel with its religious overtones, there are repeated references to *stylization*, and related terms, in James's account of the crash: "the

stylization of the terrible events that had involved us"; "the stylization of violence and rescue" (22–23). As in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *style* and its synonyms become bywords in *Crash* for an imaginary state of being beyond *affect*—the word Ballard uses throughout his fiction and non-fiction alike to denote 'feeling' in both its emotional and sensory connotations. Seeing objective reality as 'stylized' would mean perceiving a space of almost total abstraction superimposed on the same world everyone else sees. In psychological terms, this fascination with abstraction could be rationalized as part of the traumatised individual's attempt to maintain a sense of control over a surfeit of sensory information—seeing the world in abstract terms would bring mathematical order to what is otherwise threateningly chaotic. James's point of view takes us beyond this rationale, however. For him, 'stylizing' the scene of disaster means imposing outlandish interpretations on otherwise familiar actions, and as a result, *stylization* ends up looking like a shorthand for 'normalised delusion.' A good example of this is his observations of the rescue crew. James finds himself fascinated by the firemen's "formalized" movements (23), and cannot place these actions in their familiar context. Their formality no longer reflects habitualization through repetition and practice. Instead, James reinterprets the firemen's movements according to a relativistic logic of 'formalization-for-its-own-sake.' The motions of rescue appear to him to be merely one set of movements among many other possible and equally acceptable alternatives: "If one of them had unbuttoned his coarse serge trousers to reveal his genitalia, and pressed his penis into the bloody crotch of my armpit," James recalls, "even this bizarre act would have been acceptable in terms of the stylization of violence and rescue" (23).

This relativistic awareness is one of two lasting impressions that James takes away from the scene of the crash. The other is his suspicion that the entire event has somehow been staged: "For a moment I felt 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" (22). The two revelations seem diametrically opposed: the one disperses value across a range of alternate meanings and interpretations; the other gives to the 'ordinary' road accident an air of gravity, as if all James and the Remingtons needed to do was show up at the time and place appointed by the mysterious powers that have saved his life. In either case, James cannot put to rest his fascination with the apparent profundity of this traumatic vision—or visionary trauma. Later, while on his way home from the hospital, James is still uncommonly interested in the surface effects of the motorway landscape all around him:

> As I drove home with Catherine from the hospital I was surprised by how much, in my eyes, the image of the car had changed, almost as if its true nature had been exposed by the accident. Leaning against the rear window of the taxi, I found myself flinching with excitement towards the traffic streams on the Western Avenue interchanges. The flashing lances of afternoon light deflected from the chromium panel tore at my skin. The hard jazz of radiator grilles, the motion of cars [. . .] the street furniture and route indicators—all these seemed threatening and super-real. (42)

From there, the pursuit of experiences similarly 'more real' than ordinary reality (itself identified with "all the hopes and fancies of [James's] placid suburban enclave" [42]) becomes a central preoccupation in the narrative.

James's excitement over stylisation, surface effects and abstraction amounts to what Scott Durham, via Baudrillard, calls the "passions for the real" featured prominently in the novel (64); although, more precisely, it is the first of two such passions, the other being Lacanian in orientation, and discussed in more detail in section three. Durham treats *Crash* as an allegory of the contradictions inherent in the order of simulation as it has been theorised by Baudrillard, and sees in the novel a population of isolated consumers who are convinced of the superior 'reality' evident in the multitude of simulations and images all around them—simulation models—which seem to prefigure almost every conceivable event;[8] even equivalent representations of the consumer's violent death can be mapped out in detail in advance, and then sold back to him or her as entertainment (cf. *Phantom Communities* 58–75).[9] Thus, when James feels a sense of relief at being involved in an actual accident, "[a]fter being bombarded endlessly by road-safety propaganda [. . .] billboard harangues and television films of imaginary accidents" (*Crash* 35), he does so only because he has yet to learn that the full force of the real has passed out of actuality, and now resides in those very test runs of his death, the anonymous commuter / consumer's death that had haunted him prior to his crash. In other words, in *Crash* the real has fled toward the virtual—or at least that is one area where we might situate it. Following Durham, we could say that what James glimpses in the stylised, abstract aftermath of his crash with the Remingtons is an alternate version of objective reality analogous to the supposedly superior, more exciting space 'beyond' the television screen.

I want to pursue Durham's reading of *Crash* further, because it provides a thorough explanation of where James's nascent 'passion for the real' goes after the definitive entrance of Vaughan into his life, in chapter nine. In short, as James becomes more and more homoerotically involved with Vaughan, his narration becomes increasingly preoccupied with, or completely hijacked by, Vaughan's version of this passion, which manifests itself in a secretive research project examining the intersection between car crashes, sexuality and celebrity.

In order to solidify the link between *Crash* and this Baudrillardian 'passion,' Durham focusses on the episode in chapter thirteen where James, Vaughan and Helen Remington observe simulated crashes at the Road Research Laboratory. There, the spectators are confronted with the careful planning, simulation and enticing video re-play of a crash between a motorcycle and a car (cf. *Crash* 96–100). The video re-play, in particular, convinces the spectators that the crash-test dummies, whose 'deaths' seem elegant and graceful when reviewed in slow-motion, exist within a realm that is eerily superior to their own: "As we watched, our own ghostly images stood silently in the background, hands and faces unmoving while the [. . .] collision was re-enacted. The dream-like reversal of roles made us seem less real than the mannequins" (101). The experience leads to an all-consuming fantasy: "These prospective martyrs of the civilization of the industrial accident [. . .]" Durham writes,

> through the very image of their anticipated deaths, lay claim to a peculiar sort of immortality which leads them to resign themselves to, and even to embrace, their violent fate. Once the long-awaited 'original' accident takes place, launching them from the obscure privacy of their interiors into momentary stardom on the evening

> news, their deaths will reappear, eternally resurrected, in living rooms throughout the country. (Durham 65)

Durham is essentially describing a distinctly postmodern version of visionary experience as Edward Ahearn defines it. The 'more exciting' reality, here, is identified with the flickering images and sound bites of the media landscape. (Because contemporary newscasts rarely if ever display the kind of graphic footage Durham refers to, we need to think in terms of television during the 1960s and early 70s, and specifically the media's role in fuelling anti-Vietnam War sentiment in the United States through the nightly airing of combat footage.) If Durham's reading of this episode needs to be modified slightly, it is because he too quickly extends full awareness of the significance of this 'dream-like reversal of roles' to the general public as it is represented in *Crash*. Only certain members of Vaughan's subculture of car-crash enthusiasts—mainly himself and James, and perhaps Helen Remington and Gabrielle, too—are shown as believing they are consciously pursuing this immortality. By contrast, a Ministry official's wife whom James catches staring with "rapt gaze" at the video monitor (*Crash* 101) does not appear to understand the strange possibilities being presented to her in quite the same way that James and Vaughan do.

That said, Durham is correct to claim that Vaughan turns this apparent role reversal into the dream of "a fatal collision with Elizabeth Taylor that would launch him into permanent afterlife on the far side of the screen" (65). In chapter ten, Vaughan's preoccupation appears to be (merely) the car crashes of ordinary individuals, a subject matter evident in his photo-journals (cf. 78–81); but by the time of the R.R.L. episode,

Vaughan has lost interest in everyday crashes because of their very banality: "Believe me," he says to James once the crash simulation is finished, "one car-crash looks like another" (101). In other words, Durham's 'prospective martyrs' may unknowingly gain a kind of immortality on the evening news but, according to Vaughan, their sacrifice fails to move anyone. Vaughan assumes that the missing ingredient in all of these accidents, the element that will lift the ordinary crash above its anonymity, is the presence of celebrity. And in accordance with this theory, he comes up with the idea of a planned 'accident' with Taylor, which will supposedly "transform all our dreams and fantasies" (102). On the surface at least, Vaughan's plan is to bring about an event that will haunt the dual dreamworlds of the public at large, both the phantasmagoria of their television screens and the increasingly public spaces of their unconscious.

However, beneath this messianic rhetoric, Vaughan's real motivation is more likely self-aggrandizement—a legacy of his earlier profession as a television personality (Vaughan had started his career as "one of the first of the new-style TV scientists" [53]). After telling James of his plan for Taylor, Vaughan muses ominously, "The man who dies in that crash with her . . ." (102), suggesting that his interest in the celebrity crash has less to do with liberating the desires of the driving / viewing public, and more to do with lifting his own death above the banality of the 'everyday' road accident. So while Vaughan couches his monstrous project in revolutionary terms, he also reveals, in spite of himself, that the plan is merely an expression of his own excessive narcissism. He foolishly gambles that Taylor's fame will assure him of genuine immortality, although as a potential footnote *to a footnote* of history, he stands to gain at best what Hal Foster calls

"notoriety"—a lesser kind of fame associated with uncommon criminals, political assassins, spies, etc. (Foster "Death in America" 367).

As Durham's reading makes clear, the novel's later chapters move toward a final, inevitable confrontation between the dream of transcendence born from Vaughan's "naive idealism" (*Crash* 53) and linked to James's abstract post-crash vision, on the one hand, and the material reality that complicates that dream, on the other. Vaughan comes close to getting his wish in the novel's last chapter, as he drives James's car toward a planned meeting with Taylor's limousine. But ironically the attempt becomes "his only true accident" (11), as he misses Taylor's car and crashes into the roof of a coach filled with package tourists (168). Clearly, the most straightforward way to interpret Vaughan's demise is as the final revenge of the theory on its practitioner—and this is very much the substance of Durham's reading. In his view, Vaughan's failure

> suggests that the 'reality' that at once gives rise to and resists the simulation model persists where [Vaughan] had never thought to seek it: neither in his grandiose attempts to pass into the domain of the spectacle, nor in his perverse attempts to escape it, but in his relation to the vestigial collective itself, to the 'silent majority' of isolated spectators who serially share his fantasies of transcendence or escape. (71)

This sums up well the situational irony apparent in Vaughan's final act. I would only add that in retrospect his death suggests a second irony: Vaughan's plan entails an idealised form of authenticity that, if we adhere strictly to Durham's definition of the simulation model, has no relevance within his world. Vaughan may identify the real with the glamorous space of the television or film screen, but his plan is fatally dependent upon the actual person and body of Elizabeth Taylor. Vaughan is trapped between enthralment

to the aura of celebrity emanating from her screen image and a nostalgic dependency on the human referent represented in that complex of images. Thus, his fate looks very much like a comic reversal, a sophisticated joke about the residual physical real at the root of his plan for communion with the actress's glamorous image. In this respect, Vaughan's predicament is very much like that of T— in *Atrocity*, whose efforts to achieve some kind of intimacy with the image-bodies of starlets like Taylor necessitated a series of frustrating, and deadly, encounters with the actual person and flesh of Karen Novotny. That said, Vaughan's failure has about it a more emphatic satirical resonance, if only because his crash with the busload of package tourists will not assure him of even the notoriety he so desperately craves.[10]

2. The psychotic limit: Seagrave

Although Durham's careful tracing of the supreme folly involved in Vaughan's project offers one substantial counter to what Roger Luckhurst calls the novel's "ecstatic immersal in the order of simulation" (*'The Angle Between Two Walls'* 129), it can be augmented by a consideration of Colin Seagrave's role in the novel, specifically the effect his suicide has on Vaughan. The advantage of analysing the significance of this often-overlooked character is that it demonstrates that Ballard's characters do not experience or act upon the Baudrillardian passion for the mediated real in a uniform manner, which is the basic presupposition of analyses that create a complete identity between the novel and Baudrillard's theory of the order of simulation, or reduce the substance of the narrative to a 'buddy story' between James and Vaughan. Although a marginal figure in *Crash*,

Seagrave is nevertheless conspicuous as both a satiric exaggeration and literalisation of Vaughan's theorisations about car crashes, celebrity and sex. His role seems to be to hasten Vaughan's project toward its inevitable confrontation with the corporeal. The depth of his psychosis makes him capable of translating into practical action what Vaughan and James are, for the most part, content to explore through more textual means, such as photography, polling, planning and research, or through casual, 'stylised' sex with prostitutes. Thus, Seagrave could be said to embody the psychotic limit of Vaughan's psychopathological ideas.

When we are first introduced to Seagrave in chapters nine and ten, he is both Vaughan's subordinate, playing the part of various screen starlets in Vaughan's recreated crashes (76), and one of James's employees, appearing as Elizabeth Taylor's stunt-double in a Ford commercial James is producing (87–88). In a way, Seagrave's profession makes him symbolic of the material base for the superstructure of illusions that Vaughan finds so seductive, and from which James profits. His body is the expendable object that helps maintain the illusion. By risking death Seagrave facilitates Taylor's emergence, relatively unscathed, from the car wreck on-screen, and thereby helps further the fantasy that the ordinary driver can survive a catastrophic crash so long as he or she drives a Ford. While Taylor wears the cosmetic wounds that the viewer will see in the finished advertisement (86), only Seagrave, made up like "a nightmare parody of the actress" (87), risks sustaining the actual thing. This subordinate position is reinforced by the fact that Seagrave and his wife Vera live further down the class ladder than the other members of Vaughan's subculture. Their home is a garage and showroom located in an "area of

breakers' yards and vehicle dumps, small auto repair shops and panel beaters" (74). And so, although the Seagraves inhabit the same nondescript suburban zones as do the Ballards and Vaughan, their domestic situation is a far cry from the comforts of their counterparts' upscale apartments. They immediately strike us as representatives of an unsophisticated underclass, ripe for exploitation at the hands of opportunists like Vaughan.

Seagrave's subordinate position within the narrative—and the fact that he literally lives in a garage—make him *Crash*'s resident 'rude mechanical,' or perhaps just its rudest mechanic. And like Shakespeare's characters, Seagrave's use of language is key to his role within the larger design of the narrative. That said, while the quality of his speech is certainly coarse, what he has to say is hardly akin to the bumptious and amusing diversions of Bottom and his companions. His only dialogue takes place in chapter ten, when James overhears Vaughan, an anonymous television producer and Seagrave discussing the actresses for whom Seagrave acts as a stunt-double:

> "I'd like to get them all in those cars we have to drive. What do you think of that, Vaughan?"
>
> "We will, one day." There was a surprising hint of deference in Vaughan's voice as he looked down at the stuntdriver. "We'll do that."
>
> "With those cheap bloody harnesses we have to wear." Seagrave drew on the loosely packed cigarette Vaughan passed to him. He held the smoke in his lungs as he stared at the mountain of derelict cars at the bottom of his garden. "Can you see them, Vaughan, in one of those high-speed pile-ups? Doing a really groovy roll-over. Or a hard head-on job. I dream about that. It's your whole thing, Vaughan."
>
> Vaughan smiled reassuringly, a metallic grimace. "You're right of course. Who do we start with?"

> Seagrave smiled through the smoke. He ignored his wife, who was trying to calm him, and stared with level eyes at Vaughan. "I know who I'd start with . . ." [Elizabeth Taylor, presumably]
> "Maybe."
> ". . . I can see those big tits cut up on the dash."
> Vaughan turned away abruptly, almost as if he were afraid of Seagrave stealing a march on him. (76)

Seagrave's speech is frightening in its explicit sadism. As a rendition of Vaughan's 'whole thing,' it is noticeably devoid of all of Vaughan's metaphysics. 'Groovy' is about as philosophical as Seagrave's rhetoric gets. And so, all he seems to produce through his fantasies is bile directed toward the women whose superior image-bodies he is employed to mimic. Even more intriguing than Seagrave's callousness, though, is the subtle power struggle that Ballard sets up between the stunt-driver and Vaughan—between pupil / disciple and tutor / messiah. James's narration takes deliberate note of Vaughan's less-than-assured response to Seagrave's words: the 'hint of deference' to Seagrave's unreserved cruelty, which suggests that Vaughan is either unnerved by the relative lack of imagination apparent in Seagrave's fantasies or impressed by their purity. And the final sentence in the passage effectively sets Seagrave up as Vaughan's principal rival within a game that Vaughan had assumed was always his to win. My sense is that we are to see in this exchange Vaughan's affront at the idea that his underling is presuming to lecture him on the project he has devised for himself and his followers. Seagrave functions, here, as an uneducated filter through which Vaughan's ideas are transmitted back to him in distorted form—or in what Vaughan believes is a distorted form. When James later asks Vaughan whether Seagrave "appreciates" (understands, admires) his plans for Elizabeth Taylor, he replies, "[i]n his own way" (102)—which is to say, not at all. For the reader,

Seagrave's statements clearly express what Vaughan's theorisations of the car crash obscure through intellectual sophistication: a basic bloodthirstiness. In sum, Seagrave parrots Vaughan's obsessions but cannot reproduce the buttressing ideology.

Seagrave's exaggeration of what is always implicit in Vaughan's ideas takes on an even more troubling dimension when we consider that he and Vera are the novel's only parents. Dennis Foster has claimed that "[c]hildren are wholly absent" from *Crash* ("J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses" 524), but this is not entirely accurate. Children are certainly absent in the sense that there are no substantive child characters in the novel, but the fact that the Seagraves have children is nevertheless significant. The combination of their involvement with Vaughan and their status as parents effectively places them in two 'times' at once: a past in which people still raised families, and a future presided over by the notion of "benevolent psychopathology" (107), a concept that makes children redundant because it has the potential to infantilise adults. Durham has made a similar point: his reading of *Crash* is premised on the idea that Ballard's characters are without exception "the fragmented and hollow subjects [. . .] who occupy the negative pole of the simulation model" (63), which in turn means that the novel denies the "coexistence of the society of the spectacle and its cast of characters with the residue of earlier cultural moments, *such as the responsible parental agent*" (64, emphasis added). The Seagraves certainly do not undermine this claim, but their presence evokes this 'parental agent' in negative terms, embodying its absence from the socio-cultural scene of *Crash* and pointing back to the 'earlier cultural moment' when that agent might have been a more prevalent figure. Interestingly enough, this brings us back to Foster's claim by a

circuitous route: his assertion that *Crash* features no children might overlook the Seagraves' status as parents, but the remainder of his assertion—that "the erotic fixations [of the characters] have a quality that it is tempting to call childish, or at least adolescent, for their refusal to move beyond the most elemental physical body" ("J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses" 524)—accords with the idea that the Seagraves have been given children in order to emphasise the absence of a certain kind of parent from the novel's landscape.

The wider implications of the Seagraves' position between past and future are worth noting. To accept the world as Vaughan sees it (i.e. overwritten by the future and its psychology), which is essentially what James's narrative invites us to do, would mean viewing Seagrave's physical contact with his son as merely one more 'normalised' perversion among others. Of course, this presupposes that what Seagrave does—"flick[ing] at" his son's penis (76) and placing the boy's mouth over his nipple, itself squeezed into "the parody of a breast" (83)—is suggestive of a pattern of sexual abuse. If this is indeed what Ballard is trying to evoke, then Seagrave's actions can be taken to embody the extreme implications of Vaughan's theory. He pushes transgressive behaviour into a space where it begins to harm (or might be harming) innocents, that is, individuals who lie outside the unspoken contract that Vaughan's coterie of followers adheres to; incidentally, a similar dynamic is implied in Vaughan's sexual escapades with very young prostitutes in chapter fifteen—although perhaps the point there is that Vaughan is gradually imitating Seagrave more and more. We need to view Seagrave's status as a parent in context, then. It tells us that if there is a bona fide sense of possibility

and excitement in the dreamworld Vaughan is promising us, Seagrave's paedophilic behaviour will also be one of its 'pastimes.'

While Seagrave functions as a figure of satiric exaggeration, he also provides a literal translation of Vaughan's plan for Elizabeth Taylor, which remains for him strictly a matter of casual sex acts, photo-documentation, polling, and discussions with James up until chapter twenty. Throughout this section of the narrative, Seagrave basically disappears. His presence on the motorways is conjured up only when Vaughan and James discuss his whereabouts or speculate on his possible intentions. We do learn, however, that throughout this section of the narrative Seagrave is somewhere out there, driving around by himself, still wearing the make-up and Elizabeth Taylor costume that he had worn at the commercial shoot in chapter eleven (87–88). We are also given some indication that his brutal fantasies have reached their zenith (or nadir) in terms of brutality when James notes the quality of his responses to one of Vaughan's questionnaires: they constitute only "an abattoir of sexual mutilation" involving various screen actresses (105). When Seagrave finally re-enters the story, in chapter twenty, it is only at the scene of his own death. In effect, the stunt-driver transfers his professional training into the realm of the actual, and crashes his car into two other cars. That scene, however, and its effect on Vaughan are key elements in the novel's satirical treatment of its psychopathic hero and the vision he carries within him.

The stunt-driver's death tableau is a kind of valediction aimed at Vaughan, although it remains a mystery whether Seagrave intended to send a final message to his former

mentor or Vaughan merely reacts to the scene—reads it—as if it were directed specifically at him. James describes the tableau as follows:

> The driver of the sports car lay dead in his cockpit, as two firemen and a police constable worked to free him from the buckled overhang of the instrument panel. The woman's leopard-skin coat which he was wearing had been torn back to expose his crushed chest, but his white platinum hair was still neatly held together by a nylon hair-net. On the seat beside him, like a dead cat, lay a black wig. Seagrave's slim and exhausted face was covered with shattered safety glass, as if his body were already crystallizing, at last escaping out of this uneasy set of dimensions into a more beautiful universe. (142)

Looking back on the scene, James tries to imagine it as the aftermath of the stunt-driver's assumption into the image sphere. The metaphorical link between safety glass and crystal expresses his desire to see something more exalted among the senseless wreckage.[11] Despite this effort at sublimation, though, both he and Vaughan are also disturbed, not necessarily by the fact that Seagrave has killed himself and taken several other anonymous individuals with him, but by the manner of the *presentation* of that death:

> [Vaughan] forced his way to the crushed fibreglass sports car and looked down uncertainly at Seagrave's body, dressed in its coronation armour of fractured glass [. . .]. His hand gripped the windshield pillar.
>
> Confused and shaken by the stunt-driver's death and the tags of the film actress's clothing—themselves the props of a calculated collision—
>
> [. . .] I followed Vaughan through the spectators. He wandered blankly around the silver Mercedes, eyes fixed on the bloodstains smeared across the seat and instrument panel, examining every piece of the strange litter that had materialized from nowhere after the crash. [. . .]
>
> Later I realized what had most upset Vaughan [. . .] was not Seagrave's death, but that in his collision [. . .] Seagrave had preempted that real death which Vaughan had reserved for himself. In his mind, from that accident onwards, the film actress had

> already died. All that remained now for Vaughan was to constitute the formalities of time and place, the entrances of her flesh to a wedding with himself already celebrated across the bloody altar of Seagrave's car. (143)

Although we are looking at Seagrave's death in a material sense, the passage conveys to us that Vaughan understands it as Elizabeth Taylor's demise in a symbolic sense. As we saw earlier, Vaughan's obsession with the one crash that will "transform all our dreams and fantasies" (102) is dependent upon the involvement of Taylor herself, of the relatively less-machined referent behind the disseminated image-body. The message Seagrave's death tableau sends to Vaughan is that his own death *in the guise of* the screen actress amounts to the same thing. The tableau out-conceptualises even Vaughan himself, for it suggests there are only ever a series of 'Taylors' or, to make the obvious pun, that the actress's public image is largely a matter of tailoring, arranging familiar cosmetic and wardrobe tags on any given body (and, because the resulting image is mass-produced, the echo of Taylorism is suggestive as well). Perhaps after having doubled for so many starlets Seagrave can no longer see a substantial difference between them, nor between them and his performance of them: Taylor = Dietrich = Garbo = Monroe = Seagrave in drag. Ballard even tries to suggest this possibility jokingly by having James and Vaughan rush to the crash site when radio reports indicate that Seagrave's performance of 'the auto-death of Elizabeth Taylor' have temporarily fooled the authorities (141). In any case, what Seagrave's death tableau exposes is the logical inconsistency at the heart of Vaughan's theory, that is, the way Vaughan's (and James's) passion for the mediated real only leads him back to the physically real body of Elizabeth Taylor. Within the logic of

both Vaughan's theories and the wider society of simulations the actress's actual mortality has been rendered a mere afterthought by the stunt-driver's actions. The effect on Vaughan is devastating: Seagrave's death tableau precipitates the psychological deterioration that Vaughan goes through in subsequent chapters.

While James's sense of a 'calculated collision' suggests that Seagrave knew both what he was doing and how Vaughan would respond, it is difficult to treat the symbolic significance of (the style of) the stunt-driver's final act as anything but a real accident because of what we already know about the limitations of his character. The tableau itself meets the simulation model on its own terms, while Seagrave only inadvertently takes revenge on Vaughan, if not on the entire system that produces simulations as well, for using him as a prop. If it is unlikely that Seagrave understood the symbolic significance of his own actions, this is the result of the reader's prior awareness of his overall brutish nature. Seagrave's death scene implies that he had suffered a rapid erosion of whatever unified sense of self he might once have had, through his repeated performances of Vaughan's favourite screen starlets. To fill up the void left by the complete dissolution of (his sense of his own) individuality, Seagrave must have identified increasingly with the stereotypes into which Vaughan and James had been casting him. And thus, he ends up a victim of the celebrity culture that fascinates him. If on one level the goal of Vaughan's plans and theories is to reach a transcendental point of self-negation that is synonymous with entering the realm beyond the screen, Seagrave's especially psychotic version of the same suggests something far less idealistic. His transvestism is less a subversive

performance of gender and more an experience of incarceration, of being trapped within a prefabricated identity.

To read Seagrave as a frightening yet comic parody of Vaughan essentially positions him as symbolic of the corporeality that gets left behind by Vaughan and James's dangerous dreaming. However, it would be inaccurate to assert that Seagrave is the sole representative of this aspect of James's world. Nor do I want to suggest that the interaction between James and Vaughan is geared solely toward Vaughan's longed-for 'marriage' with Elizabeth Taylor; for the other major component of their exploration of the car crash is their pursuit of visionary experiences through sexual congress. We cannot discount the fact that the narrative's sexual imagery, which necessarily keeps matters of the flesh front and centre, complicates the characters' intellectual movement away from the physical. I want to turn to consider this aspect of the text in what follows, highlighting the unresolved tension in James's narrative between, on the one hand, the ideal of a semiotic and machine-like body with its attendant sexuality, and on the other, the intractable corporeality that becomes an object of perverse pleasure for James during his recovery in hospital, but also an unreliable partner in the pursuit of that pleasure.

3. Semiotic bodies / elemental bodies

Vaughan's 'passion for the real' implies a willed ignorance or even pathological disdain for the body's materiality, because the ideal it presupposes is the image-body of the screen star. In essence, Taylor's screen identity projects a 'flat' body to complement the stylising tendency of James's traumatic vision, although it should be pointed out that

seeing her image this way presupposes a bizarre disbelief in the referent. What makes *Crash* particularly disorienting, though, is that this notion of an ideal body without depth is reiterated in James's detailed descriptions of (the bodies of) the other characters. Taken together, they give the impression that practically every body on display in *Crash* can be read as the sign of a machining of the body by a specific technology or industry, in the manner that Michel de Certeau articulates in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (cf. 144–50). Although a substantial part of James's narration is taken up with celebrating the textual aspects of this machine-body and its sexuality, it would be an oversight to discount the appearance of a more intractable flesh throughout the text. Its presence, at the very least, complicates idealisations of the machine-body and its limitless sexuality by whispering to us of the persistent vulnerability of the organic aspects of the human. In this respect, *Crash* carries forward the trope of 'corporeal haunting' already touched on in the previous chapter, in conjunction with *The Atrocity Exhibition*'s anatomical lexicon. And, as in the previous chapter, our concern here remains the cautionary significance of this other, more elemental body. Theoretically speaking, this will entail pairing the Baudrillardian perspective on the novel, with its idealisation of a thoroughly semiotic techno-body, with a key aspect of its Lacanian counterpart: the notion of a pre-symbolic body.

As we saw in chapter one, Baudrillard reads the body in *Crash* as primarily a semiotic object and, for that reason, an extension of technology to the same degree that technology is an extension of it. "[A]bove all [. . .]," Baudrillard writes, "the whole body becomes [in *Crash*] a sign to offer itself to the exchange of bodily signs. Body and technology

diffracting their bewildered signs through each other" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 112). His interpretation implies that Ballard's characters are little more than composites of articulated signs of and on the body, and without exception lack affect, desire, psychology, libido, etc. (112). He reinforces this claim through a conspicuous use of the passive voice: bodies in *Crash* are "delivered to" and "confused with" technology, but no system, group or individual is held accountable for these actions (111–12). If we adopt Baudrillard's point of view, there would be only a kind of mindless and unminded movement in *Crash*. Baudrillard is not arguing that Ballard's characters lack physical bodies, only that readers miss the real tenor of the novel if they focus too much attention on that aspect of the characters' existence. In terms of the car crash, he would prefer it if readers saw various mergers of once-separate sign systems, and only secondarily material objects colliding in space. By setting aside the reader's imagination of the non-semiotic corporeal in this way, Baudrillard can justify his sense of the novel's amorality (cf. 113, 119), for without it there is no body substantial enough to care about in the entire text, let alone characters conceived of as relatively distinct individuals. We are left with an extended piece of abstract prose poetry: *Crash* as an encomium to the (coming) age of simulations and virtual reality.

Baudrillard's movement 'beyond' codes of morality rooted in the vulnerability of the flesh articulates the profound and dreadful end-point of the novel's visionary dimension, outlined earlier. He expresses what *Crash*'s style gestures toward, but what Ballard chooses not to make real within the limited technological horizons of his narrator's world, specifically, a perfect union between flesh and technology that would bring with it

a myriad of complex pleasures—'complex' because they would mingle tenderness and aggression ambivalently. But the value of the idea of such a union lies not merely with the way it hints at a future cybernetic ideal of seamless transfers of information from tissue to circuitry and back again: the confusion of body and technology in *Crash* is also an important catalyst for re-conceiving the category of 'the human' in more complex terms, for it challenges readers to re-think human nature as always already to some degree a matter of artificiality, while reminding us that the body is, in part, a discursively produced and historically determined object.

In the novel itself, Vaughan's body is unquestionably the focal point of this motif. Whereas the image-body of the screen actress stands as the ideal, Vaughan's physique projects the closest thing to it in 'living' terms: a body surface that looks as though it were flesh and machine co-mingled, as well as a text awaiting its decoder.

> The whiteness of his arms and chest, and the scars that marked his skin [. . .] gave his body an unhealthy and metallic sheen, like the worn vinyl of the car interior. These apparently meaningless notches on his skin [. . .] marked the sharp embrace of a collapsing passenger compartment, a cuneiform of the flesh formed by shattering instrument dials, fractured gear levers and parking light switches. Together they described an exact language of pain and sensation, eroticism and desire. (72)

The wound is here presented not as a sign that a once-sacrosanct wholeness has been taken from the individual, but instead as proof that the body can internalise and surmount its technological other; it is for this reason that Vaughan is the central figure in what Baudrillard calls the body's "semiurgy" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 112). Furthering this trope is James's fascination with Vaughan's uncleanliness. The narrative's repeated

references to the odours of semen and engine coolant emanating from Vaughan's body, and the stains of both that mark his clothes (cf. 81), juxtapose organic and mechanical terms, making them seem equivalent, and evoking an equilibrium between both sides of that conceptual divide. Through James's eyes, then, Vaughan's body seems to have absorbed the automotive technology it has collided with in the past, and thereby actualised the futurist fantasy of the "dreamt-of metalization of the human body" (Marinetti qtd. in Benjamin 241). A more sober observer might respond that Vaughan's scars indicate little more than his extraordinary luckiness, but this would be beside the point. Vaughan's "hard body" (133) becomes the object of James's admiration and desire because it points the way forward to a bio-technological paradigm in which human flesh would not be merely incorporated by the machine world, but moreover accommodate its sometimes violent intrusions.[12] That said, if James's description of Vaughan's body has the ring of self-deception about it, this is because his 'reading' of the history of pain written on its surfaces makes too much of the semiotic quality of the wounds, and thereby undermines his own notion of an "exact language." If the language was indeed exact, it would have to convey the violent nature of the referent behind the wounds, but this dimension of the message is largely lost amid James's rapturous surface scanning.

If Vaughan's body is the exciting ideal from James's point of view, then the sexuality that is the correlate of that ideal is the intercourse James contemplates in chapter ten, after riding in a car with Vaughan for the first time: "However carnal an act of sodomy with Vaughan would have seemed, the erotic dimension was absent. [. . .] 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" (81–82). We see here that James is contemplating a sexuality appropriate to the 'stylized' realm he accessed briefly after his crash with the Remingtons. The act he describes is, however, a logical impossibility: sexuality without feeling which is still somehow physically stimulating. Perhaps the presence of the car explains the paradox, for presumably the sexual energy James fantasises about originates with the machine, not with either himself or Vaughan. In this way, Ballard may be reintroducing the notion of "machine libido" suggested in the "Crash" chapter of *The Atrocity Exhibition* (157). In any case, in James's mind sexuality 'after the crash' comes to be equated with a process of mechanically assuming gestures and postures, which in turn can be assigned alternate meanings as the individual sees fit—a "sexuality without a referential and without limits[,]" to again cite Baudrillard (*Simulacra and Simulation* 111). Hypothetically speaking, the range of assignable sexual meanings is vast, but I tend to agree with Bradley Butterfield's claim, previously discussed in chapter one, that the characters' abstracted sexual behaviour becomes increasingly a vehicle for "neoprimitive symbolic exchange[s] with death" ("Ethical Value and Negative Aesthetics" 73)—and with the dead. To give just one example, James's couplings with Helen Remington are, in a sense, represented as 'threesomes' because the memory of Charles Remington presides over these acts like a ghost: "[T]ogether we recapitulated her husband's death," James recalls, "re-seeding the image of his body in her vagina in terms of the hundred perspectives of our mouths and thighs, nipples and tongues within the metal and vinyl compartment of the car" (*Crash* 67). Yet, even in this example the overarching purpose of sexual communion with the

dead is built upon a use and perception of the body as an abstraction. James is physically present with Helen, but he describes the encounter as if he experienced it from vantage points outside of himself—from a 'hundred perspectives' at once, in the manner of a cubist painter.

Working against the limitless possibilities conveyed by the novel's body-semiotic-machine nexus and its related abstract(ed) sexuality are its intimations of a more fragile and limited corporeality. In saying this, I am taking a cue from a number of Lacanian interpretations of the novel which are predicated on concepts of elemental physicality. In one Lacanian approach, the figure of the accident is interpreted as an "eruption of the real" (cf. Stewart 275–77), of an event whose ineffability disrupts the smooth circulations of cars, commodities, signs, bodies, etc. throughout the consumer landscape of James's world.[13] In this notion of the real, we have another theoretical framework for conceiving of the crash as a visionary event: it becomes the advent of the unspeakable or un-representable. Accordingly, where the immediate aftermath of James's collision with the Remingtons appeared as something of a revelation, so too does his recuperation in hospital. Suddenly faced with the pain that had been held at one remove by his visionary trauma, James is convinced that he has been through a thoroughly unmediated experience, something akin to the actual suffering evident in "those scenes of pain and violence that illuminated the margins of our lives. [. . . M]y own pain as I lay in the hospital bed [. . .], even the vagal flushes that seized at my chest seemed extensions of that real world of violence calmed and tamed within our television programmes and the pages of news magazines" (33). Here, the impact of physical discomfort breaks through

the anaesthetic effect of the mediating screen. Rather than longing to live in the zone between violent referent and living-room theatre, James responds to the car crash with an insatiable pursuit of experiences that will make him and Catherine feel *more* alive than they have ever felt before, caught as they were within the insulating membrane of their consumer culture. The 'real,' in this sense, is located not with an actual referent of suffering, which the image partially communicates, partially obscures, but with the excitement generated by the subject's first-hand experience of analogous injuries.

The impact of this alternate visionary experience, which is more or less an antithesis of James's vision of abstraction and stylisation, is re-stated throughout the early chapters.[14] James speaks, for instance, about the crash being "the only real experience [he] had been through for years" because "[f]or the first time [he] was in physical confrontation with [his] own body, an inexhaustible encyclopedia of pain and discharges, with the hostile gaze of other people, and with the fact of the dead man" (35). Here again, the impression of having been through an experience that is superior to ordinary reality is tied explicitly to physical ordeal—in addition to the power of the other's gaze and the lingering presence of the deceased.[15] In short, the messy actuality of the crash site catches up with him. Immediately following the collision, he had observed with some fascination Charles Remington's blood "sprayed" across his chest (20), and the stream of urine pooling around Helen's feet as she was helped from her car (22); yet at the time, his delirium gave these material considerations only secondary importance in comparison to the apparent abstractness of the rescue operation. Now, the apparent depth of the

experience is solidified after the fact by the very excess of sensory stimuli against which James's (heightened) consciousness of abstraction had acted as a defence.

A somewhat different Lacanian approach, meanwhile, highlights the perverse sexual pleasure that James and the other characters find through this eruption of the real—the pleasure derived from their pain and the involuntary processes of their damaged bodies; a trope that was introduced in chapter two through my initial engagement with the Lacanian readings put forward by Dennis Foster and Robert Caserio. Returning once more to James's recovery in hospital, we find him both amused by a new-found obsession with "the sexual possibilities of everything around [him]" (27) and fascinated by the maternal care he receives:

> [A]ll these women around me seemed to attend only to my most infantile zones. The nurses who emptied my urinal and worked my bowels [. . .], who steered my penis through the vent of my pyjama shorts and adjusted the drainage tubes in my knees, who cleansed the pus from the dressings on my scalp and wiped my mouth with their hard hands [. . .] reminded me of those who attended my childhood[.] (30)

Ordinarily, we might put such post-traumatic arousal down to a basic survival instinct. Indeed, if it were only temporary, it would seem like an understandable aberration—a drive toward life which appears as the individual's urge to possess all the objects in his or her immediate surroundings. James never re-masters this impulse, though: the world of objects remains for him a sphere of indiscriminate sexual possibility, and, as with T—'s unlimited attraction to non-sexual objects in *Atrocity*, becomes paradoxically linked to the more elementally corporeal side of his sexual re-awakening. As a nurse dutifully shifts James's penis from one side to another during a routine sponge-bath, he

experiences an involuntary "quickening impulse [. . .]. The sense of a vital sex" (35). Although both the eroticisation of practically everything and the involuntary sexual response help James recover from his crash in psychological and physical terms, we nevertheless see here a nascent conflict between a process of desiring that is potentially limitless and the pursuit of rather conventional male sexual gratification. In other words, James's new-found perversity is problematically joined to the goal-oriented functionality of his genitals.[16]

The effect of James's new perversion is immediately apparent in his sexual relationship with Catherine. The Ballards' marriage had, in the years leading up to James's crash, deteriorated into an adolescent pursuit of sexual excitement, the two managing to connect physically with one another only by incorporating their respective extramarital affairs into their own love-making ("I felt that these affairs took place merely to provide the raw material for our sexual games" [29]). Indeed, we find James's narrative repeatedly identifies the health of their relationship with the level of excitement generated by their sexuality, by the mutual allure of their bodies. The effect that the crash has on this dynamic is somewhat of a mixed blessing. In one passage James recalls a rekindling of his wife's interest in his body, more accurately, in the marks left on it by the violence of the crash ("My body, which [Catherine] had placed in a particular sexual perspective within a year or so of our marriage, now aroused her again. She was fascinated by the scars on my chest" [44]). Although he claims to feel "these happy changes" himself (44), this assertion is undermined by his later efforts to envision a different Catherine marked by the same signs of pain (cf 138–39). Arguably, she remains

to him little more than the "sexual exercise doll fitted with a neoprene vagina" (44) that she had seemed to him before the accident.[17] If there is a fundamental problem hanging over James's interest in the excitements of wounded flesh—in his belief in the aura of the real attached to this excitement—it is that such excitement does not constitute a substantially different experience from the thrill of minor infidelities that had preoccupied the couple prior to his crash. In essence, James is still looking to this fleeting sensation to carry the burden of significance in his life. On the one hand, this can only lead the individual toward a conflict with a law of diminishing returns: the pursuit of ever-more intense forms of excitement can only lead to the frustration of an endlessly deferred culmination. On the other hand, James's conversion of mere excitement into the locus of profundity points up the generally vacuous quality of his world: even its more significant experiences turn out to be measured in fairly juvenile terms.

Having laid out the Baudillardian and Lacanian approaches to *Crash* in this way, we find ourselves suspended between two compelling explanations for both the novel's representation of the body and the bizarre car-crash sexuality practised by Ballard's characters. James, Vaughan and their counterparts either approach their sexuality as if it were an abstract means to commune with the "traffic-slain dead" (155), and think of themselves as only semiotic material, or they pursue the intense pleasures of the wounded body, delighting in the corporeal sensations of pain and the fact of their own helplessness. Although critics have argued back and forth over the relative importance of both views, my sense is that they remain intertwined throughout *Crash*—and of course this in turn contributes greatly to the novel's complexity. That said, our overarching concern with

(re-)establishing *Crash*'s amber vision makes it necessary to mitigate the semiotic excess of the Baudrillardian approach through close reading, as well as demonstrate ways in which the novel reveals the drawbacks of James's fusion of limitless possibility and genital sexuality. Three sexual encounters late in the novel are instructive in this regard: the car-wash 'threesome' involving James, Catherine and Vaughan in chapter seventeen; James's encounter with Gabrielle in chapter nineteen; and his final sexual congress with Vaughan in chapter twenty-one, arguably the most idealistic moment in the entire novel.

In the car-wash scene, the emergence of feeling at the end of the sexual encounter between Catherine and Vaughan refutes James's expectations and Vaughan's aspirations, but also leaves us wondering whether their identification with the machine does in fact allow them access to a more intense range of feeling than they have ever experienced before. James's account of the encounter between Vaughan and Catherine begins with an emphasis on its 'stylized' appearance. Recalling watching them from the front seat, James remembers his impression that

> this was a ritual devoid of ordinary sexuality, a stylised encounter between two bodies, which recapitulated their sense of motion and collision. Vaughan's postures, the way he held his arms as he moved my wife across the seat, lifting her left knee so that his body was in the fork between her thighs, reminded me of the driver of a complex vehicle, a gymnastic ballet celebrating a new technology. [. . .] He was arranging her body in a series of positions, carefully searching the codes of her limbs and musculature. Catherine seemed still only half aware of Vaughan, holding his penis in her left hand and sliding her fingers towards his anus as if performing an act divorced from all feeling. (124)

Up to this point, I think we can agree that James is observing something very close to the 'act divorced from all feeling and emotion' that he had earlier fantasised about during his

first car ride with Vaughan; the actions of Vaughan and Catherine seem to be living up to his own theoretical speculations. As the car moves further into the wash, the narrative moves toward a unified vision of the couple, the car, and the car-wash machinery moving around them, and in the episode's most surreal passage, James notes how the "distant headlamps refracted through the soap solution jetting across the windows covered their bodies with a luminescent glow, like two semi-metallic human beings of the distant future making love in a chromium bower" (124). One senses, here, that James is striving to articulate as best he can the similarity between the automatic motions of the car wash and the clockwork efficiency of the backseat sex act, as well as the strange elegance of both. In other words, he believes Vaughan and Catherine are working their way methodically toward a bio-technological ideal—the machinic human and / or the graceful machine.

However, the car-wash scene becomes more troubling when the backseat coupling begins not merely to confound the expectations of James's earlier speculations but to produce precisely the opposite result. We note that the sex Vaughan and Catherine are having becomes frantic and impassioned even though their desperate sounds are muffled by the noise of the machine (125). The cold beauty of the stylised encounter gives way to more aggressive penetration; indeed, the very fact that Catherine and Vaughan move toward conventional genital intercourse is a step back from the initial 'ballet,' that is, if one takes into consideration James's earlier anticipation of "stylized and abstracted" (82) sexual acts. Eventually, an element of bathos appears as Vaughan's machine-body cannot

respond indefinitely to the performance levels of the machinery itself. After a few cycles of wash, intercourse and ejaculation, Vaughan's penis (thankfully) quits:

> Each time the machine completed its cycle I wound down my window and pushed more coins into the pay slot. The two attendants watched us from their glass kiosk, the faint music of the transistor radio sounding into the night air as the gantry returned to its start position.
>
> Catherine cried out, a gasp of pain cut off by Vaughan's strong hand across her mouth. He sat back with her legs across his hips, slapping her with one hand as the other forced his flaccid penis into her vagina. His face was clamped in an expression of anger and distress. Sweat poured from his neck and chest, soaking the waistband on his trousers. The blows from his hand raised blunted weals on Catherine's arms and hips. (126)

There is an intriguing gap between these two paragraphs. The first suggests that Vaughan and Catherine could continue having sex all night—or at least until James runs out of coins. The second, however, indicates that the machine fantasy ends abruptly with the return of the limitations of the organic. For Vaughan, the encounter ends in raw emotion, not in a dispassionate nirvana, and his disappointment that such a state fails to arrive is projected outward to Catherine as he beats her. She meanwhile seems merely bored and exhausted by the end of their encounter. The seriousness of Vaughan's brutality should not be played down, but the conclusion of this episode produces a strangely positive re-assertion of the unreliability of the corporeal. Exhaustion, here, marks a falling short of sexual satiation or perhaps the still-unbridged gap between human being and machine. The longed-for consummation through mechanical and /or stylised sex has not (yet) been reached, and perhaps never will or can be. In this way, James's exquisite fantasy image of the semi-metallic lovers in their machine bower is undercut by the body's inability to

match the superior endurance capabilities of the machine itself and the demands of the fantasising imagination.[18]

If in the car-wash scene one form of exhaustion appears as a redemptive sign of corporeal limitations and the indefinite deferral of sexual satiation within the 'stylised,' in the next substantial sexual episode—an encounter between James and Gabrielle—another form appears: the reader's weariness at the exhaustive and exhausting sadism of James's imagination.

Another of Vaughan's devotees, Gabrielle first appears at the Seagraves' apartment in chapter ten. Over the course of the novel, her body becomes a complex signifier. Initially, James is fascinated by the sheer extent of her physical injuries and the elaborate prosthetics which support or now constitute her body's frame: "On her legs were traces of [. . .] gas bacillus scars, faint circular depressions on the kneecaps. [. . . B]eside her was a chromium metal cane. As she moved I saw that the instep of each leg was held in the steel clamp of a surgical support. From the over-rigid posture of her waist I guessed that she was also wearing a back-brace" (75). In contrast to Vaughan's physique, which signifies to James an ideal fusion of machine and flesh, if not a surmounting of technological violence by the corporeal, Gabrielle's body is totally disciplined by its elaborate buttressing of prosthetics. The presence of her body thus acts as a counterpoint to Vaughan's—a vision of the corporeal in the process of being supplanted by technology. The extent of Gabrielle's outward appearance of artificiality leads James, in chapter nineteen, to assume half-jokingly that one of Gabrielle's nipples will be "a

detachable latex structure, fitted on each morning along with her spinal brace and leg supports[,]" and feels "vaguely disappointed that it should be her own flesh" (136).

Gabrielle's body also signifies in contrast to that of Catherine—or at least it does so for James. In short, Gabrielle's post-crash physiology is more stimulating to James than his wife's primarily because it has been damaged. The relatively 'natural' female body that James finds beneath Gabrielle's exoskeleton of prosthetics does not prove exciting to James, nor to Gabrielle herself: "[T]his bored and crippled young woman found that the nominal junction points of the sexual act—breast and penis, anus and vulva, nipple and clitoris—failed to provide any excitement for us" (136). In contrast, what the couple do find stimulating is the idea that their bodies have been 'enhanced' by technological violence. In the chapter's most provocative moment, the two explore each other's wounds as if they were new sexual organs: "Her fingers found the small scars below my left collar bone [. . .]. As she began to explore this circular crevice with her lips I for the first time felt my penis thickening"; "My first orgasm, within the deep wound on her thigh, jolted my semen along this channel, irrigating its corrugated ditch" (137). From one perspective, Gabrielle reclaims a measure of sexual agency during the encounter, finding pleasure in, or in spite of, her damaged body, and thus making the best of a less-than-ideal situation; this is a possibility that is suggested again at the novel's end, when James sees Gabrielle expanding her sexual repertoire to include a lesbian encounter with Helen Remington (cf. 170). Additionally, James is able to overcome his condescending pity toward her and her predicament, by concentrating his attentions on her various deformities; indeed, he no longer sees them *as* deformities, that is, as areas of the body

lying outside 'normal' sexual practice, but instead makes them exotic, finding excitement in their taboo status (137).

That being said, Ballard's depiction of the scene makes the event seem singularly geared toward James's pleasure, and this becomes problematic. This limitation is, of course, partly the result of our only being able to see things from James's point of view. But it remains odd that the goal in this sexual encounter remains his erection, despite the fact that the penis is supposedly not necessarily central within the new post-crash libidinal economy. At certain points James's narration leads us to believe that the 'invaginations' left by collisions with cars are to be considered sex organs in the infancy of their evolution, a claim that implies the car crash bestows on its male victims the opportunity to experience sexuality with a kind of vagina, to become somehow female, or perhaps a third sex. However, in those moments when James's wounds are actually touched by another character, as in the sex scene with Gabrielle, Ballard refrains from describing the actual sensations produced by these invaginations. Instead, the feeling of pleasure derived from the touched wound is, more often than not, displaced onto the swelling penis—the new sexual practice may seem revolutionary from without, a sign of the dispersal of erogenous zones across the entire space of the body, and of the identification of pleasure with "tender lesions" and "exquisite and warming pain" (121), but these feelings are then re-localised, and the goal remains finding new keys to the ignition of the genitals. Perhaps this only accords with the notion of a sexuality in its embryonic state: the male characters are excited by something only half formed, which can only be experienced metonymically through the penis. But the fact remains that *Crash* projects a

compulsory male sexual arousal which remains either troubling or another sign of human limitation.

Whatever amount of individual agency Gabrielle might actually have gained during her encounter with James is quickly cancelled by shifts in focus within his narration. For one thing, his growing infatuation with the semiotic landscape and machine world almost immediately reorients their desire, so that it originates not from them, but from their crashed cars, long since carted off to the wrecker's yard: "During the next few days my orgasms took place [. . .] in these sexual apertures formed by fragmenting windshield louvres and dashboard dials in a high-speed impact, marrying through my own penis the car in which I had crashed and the car in which Gabrielle had met her near-death" (137). Whereas at first we might have thought their affair was a symbolic act of reclamation of the damaged body, the nominally 'human' participants in the affair are, to James at least, no longer its key players. Thus, what seemed like a route toward the disabled individual's renewed sense of proprietorship over her body is made to appear more troubling: a jubilant subjection to the (broken) machine.

A final problematic aspect of James's account is that, as it turns out, his mind is hardly on Gabrielle during their time together. Instead, it is racing through an exhaustive inventory of fantasy crashes involving "the famous and the beautiful[,]" Catherine and his mother, and—in an echo of Seagrave's treatment of his son—children and adolescents (138). The repeated use of the word *visualization* in the passage gives the impression that James's nominally 'human' imagination has been hijacked by a technological vision; *imagination* still seems to carry an expansive connotation, as if the dream incorporates a

full range of imagined sense perceptions, while *visualization* implies a technique of reduction to the strictly scopic. Nevertheless, James is clearly thrilled to finally surmount, if only inside his own head, the few remaining social mores of his already-permissive society through this torrent of fantasies of violence done to loved ones, of incest, of paedophilia. The problem is that after the encounter between James and Gabrielle has been set up as a significant moment in which damaged individuals find a way to find pleasure in their bodies, this revelling in the sordid sublime rings hollow: James has traded in pity and received the fetishisation of injury in return. It is one thing to accept the kind of damage 'written' on Gabrielle's body, to live with it or *be* it as a subject, but quite another to envision an expansion of situations in which the pain occurs, especially when it is the other who must wear and / or bear it. Noteworthy in this respect is that James's fantasies about "the possibilities of unimagined technologies" (138) and the sex 'organs' they might create are all sadistic, that is, imaginary violence done to others as objects but never directed back at the self. This may be the same as saying that his sadistic fantasies have no masochistic counterparts which would indicate that James has in fact expanded his repertoire of imaginary couplings, and that the experience of being with Gabrielle has led him to reflect on the power dynamics implicit in these fantasies.

The third and final sex scene to be considered here is the climactic encounter with Vaughan that takes place in chapter twenty-one, which James had fantasised about during their first drive together. The trope of exhaustion re-appears, but this time as a symptom of, or perhaps the physical prerequisite for, visionary experience. In the chapter, James

and Vaughan take a final joyride together, but this time on LSD. Thus, the episode becomes quite literally the 'high point' of the narrative. We might say that the neurochemical technology of the drug helps facilitate the vision of bio-technological fusion that begins during the drive ("The bones of my forearms formed a solid coupling with the shift of the steering column, and I felt the smallest tremors of the road-wheels magnified a hundred times" [150]), and culminates in James's perception of his sex act with Vaughan. In the lead-up to the sex scene, the chapter offers an explicit opposition between visionary experience and the toll James's effulgent dream seems to take on his body. The drug grants James the glorious sight of, among other things, an "armada of angelic creatures, each surrounded by an immense corona of light, [. . .] landing on the motorway" (152), but this vision is attended by an extreme physical fatigue which makes the drive a game of Russian roulette:

> [T]he oncoming cars were carrying huge cargoes of cool light, floats loaded with electric flowers being transported to a festival. As their speeds increased I found myself drawn into the fast lane, so that the oncoming vehicles were moving almost straight towards us, enormous carousels of accelerating light. Their radiator grilles formed mysterious emblems, racing alphabets that unravelled at high speed across the road surface.
>
> Exhausted by the effort of concentrating on the traffic and holding the cars around us in their lanes, I took my hands off the wheel and let the car press on. [. . .] I lay back helplessly, my body exhausted. (151)

Here, James has moved into complete solipsism; the viewer begins to believe that his perceptions not merely contribute to the quality of the reality seen, but moreover generate that reality. Meanwhile, Ballard has the flesh bear the burden of James's chemically induced solipsism. In the car-wash scene physical exhaustion appeared potentially

redemptive, a welcome sign of the inherent limitations of the human, or at least of the limitations of the human body relative to its boundless imagination; the point of its re-appearance in this episode is less clear. We get the sense that James's exhaustion might be amplifying the effects of the drug, and is therefore an integral part of his gaining access to this "metallized Elysium" (152).

The acid-drive ends without (material) incident. Given the number of crashes and crash sites represented in the novel, the fact that James and Vaughan cruise the razor's edge in relative safety and comfort suggests that their audacity has been rewarded with access to a realm beyond consequence. Indeed, throughout the chapter the radiance of Ballard's imagery conveys an enthusiasm for the vision of the body and the motorway landscape as a 'matter' of semiotics, as if he hopes the force of his rhetoric alone will make us believe in the hallucination, totally. Accordingly, James and Vaughan's sexual intercourse closely approximates the idealised abstractedness that James had fantasised about in chapter ten. In fact, Ballard has his narrator describe anal sex so that it appears as a paradoxical act—receptive penetration:

> I laid my penis at the mouth of [Vaughan's] rectum. His anus opened around the head of my penis, settling itself around the shaft, his hard detrusor muscle gripping my glans. As I moved in and out of his rectum the light-borne vehicles soaring along the motorway drew the semen from my testicles. After my orgasm I lifted myself slowly from Vaughan, holding his buttocks apart with my hands so as not to injure his rectum. (154)

The passage produces two effects, potentially. First, James recounts a moment of transcendent communion with the machine world, with Vaughan's body as a go-between. Ballard's choice of words turns Vaughan's anus into an active mouth rather than a

passive hole, but also implies that it is the 'mouth-piece' for, or prosthetic extension of, the traffic passing over their heads. James leads us to believe that the automobile landscape, through Vaughan, is performing fellatio on him, as if the car and its landscape have finally become his submissive lover. Whether or not one lends credence to James's perception of his own involvement in events, his coupling with Vaughan is, in this sense, depicted as the most idealistic moment in his exploration of car-crash sexuality. Ballard asks his reader to delight in the vision of a sexual communion with the machine world.

The second effect apparent in the passage is the appearance of very subtle emotions, which suggests that Ballard's representation of their sex is meant to thwart or exceed James's expectations; that is to say, James's feelings for Vaughan, as a kind of re-awakening of affect, might be both an ironic reversal of his expectations and the unforeseeable blessing of the revolution he and Vaughan had been trying to start. James's conflicted emotions of "hostility and affection" toward Vaughan—"emotions that had become interchangeable" (150)—prevent him from either engaging in 'an act divorced from all feeling' or indulging in a more violent form of sodomy which would express in physical terms the sadistic fantasies that attended his encounter with Gabrielle. His sex act with Vaughan is depicted not solely as an abstract motion sculpture, and not at all as a figurative crash between bodies in which one 'vehicle' sustains more damage than the other. Instead, the symbolic transfer of authority from Vaughan to James takes place in a moment of intimacy with a startling amount of gentleness and tenderness. Something about James's taking care not to damage Vaughan's rectum during withdrawal is all too human; it expresses a desire somehow *not* to injure, even though the act of

penetration injures necessarily. Some critics argue that the sex scenes in the novel should, without exception, be read as "anti-erotic" because of Ballard's technical diction (cf. Sobchack "Baudrillard's Obscenity" 327), but such an argument only confirms that James's prized 'act divorced from all feeling' is indeed a possibility, rather than a dangerous fantasy that he foolishly buys into or an evasion of the feelings for Vaughan that he has in fact developed. Although the language in the passage above *is* technical, and although its effectiveness as pornography remains a matter of personal taste, it would be a mistake to ignore the complex of emotions evident in it.

The encounter between James and Vaughan is the perfect vehicle for Ballard's talents as a surrealist word-painter, but *Crash* is too rooted in science fact for the giddy heights of the visionary experience to remain in the ascendant indefinitely. True to the actual experience of LSD, the 'come down' in the following chapter is as abysmally low as the hallucination was splendidly high. A hellish vision of the world covered in flies replaces the glorious sight of angelic cars and seamless junctions between machine and flesh (156–57). And accordingly, the chapter reiterates the exhaustion that both leads to the vision and constitutes the limit point for the human subject undergoing the experience, except that this time James's lingering solipsism makes his own weariness engulf his surroundings: "Everything had become drab again. The air and light were exhausted" (157). The come down is worth pointing out because it reinforces the idea that the positive light thrown on the acid-drive and the sex scene flows from the filtering device of James's perceptions. In this respect, there is some justification for thinking that Vaughan's experience of their time together—an event which makes James the senior

partner in their relationship and most likely increases the turmoil in Vaughan's mind initiated by Seagrave's death—was quite different. Specifically, when James steps from the car that has just served as their bed, Vaughan tries to run him down (157–58). This is an odd thing for Vaughan to do because James, in effect, becomes a pedestrian once he steps outside the vehicle, and thereby moves beyond their bio-technological 'playground.'[19] Vaughan's action therefore cannot be a playful bit of promiscuity in the same way that his earlier attempt to rear-end Catherine's car was apparently meant to be (cf. 90). On the contrary, his attempt to run James down looks more like revenge for having been 'screwed,' literally, out of his position of authority. We sense that the psychopathic spirit of Seagrave has possessed him, and dissolved what little is left of his "naive idealism" (53).

The three sexual encounters analysed above do not render up a consistent point about the fate of the physical within a world perceived as increasingly semiotic in nature, but perhaps that inconsistency is the point. Ballard's representation of car-crash sexuality, in its capacity as both a literal event and a more expansive metaphor, is varied throughout *Crash* and thus resists a unifying theorisation. As I have tried to show, his construction of individual episodes merits greater scrutiny, not en route to a summary rejection of the Baudrillardian interpretation, but as a means to complicate its overly, strategically monological reading.

* * *

My case for the enduring cautionary element of *Crash* has hinged upon various reversals of the characters' expectations, as the idealism in this vision is translated into

practical terms. *Crash* is a novel rife with fairly elaborate theories based on personal fantasies: from Vaughan's plan to inhabit an impossible space of pure mediation, to his and James's shifting justifications for pursuing a sexuality of the car crash. Although the novel makes these avenues toward more exciting realities look seductive, *Crash* nevertheless remains a warning on account of its unsystematic presentation of the actual practices that follow on from these dreams—apparent in Seagrave's parodic performance of Vaughan's 'passion for the real,' as well as the conflicted trope of exhaustion, which acts as an ambiguous help and hindrance to the characters' aspirations. Amidst all of this, the organic body remains imperilled, appearing as both the necessary medium of the visionary's self-transcendence, and the primary obstacle to his full experience of that sublimity.

By arguing in support of *Crash*'s underlying circumspection, I have taken up a political position on the side of humanism throughout this chapter—albeit a renovated humanism. This may seem like a tenuous position to adopt in relation to a novel whose narrator delights in contemplating the destruction of human life, and in which the characters tend to identify more with the inhuman (the machine, the dead, media images) than their own kind; however, I believe it is justified. Ballard's characters may identify with the car, with auto fatalities or the images on a TV screen, and find excitement in the image of themselves as conduits of 'machine libido,' but there remains no 'ghost in the machine' in *Crash* that would constitute the absolute fulfilment of their longings. Ironically, their bizarre behaviour only demonstrates that the element missing from the technological artifacts that they fetishise is an experience of consciousness. These objects

may be our dreams made flesh, but they cannot dream themselves. There is, then, a reason why Ballard refrains from giving us that moment when the 'semen glazing an instrument panel' would actually fertilise the dashboard, and bring forth a hybrid child: his aim is to suggest that modern humans are, conceptually speaking, always complex instances of this hybrid, but that an awareness of this existential reality should bring with it immense responsibility—even if it does not do so for his characters.

Notes

1. From an interview with Ballard given by Graeme Revell, *J.G. Ballard* (eds. Andrea Juno and V. Vale. San Francisco: Re/Search, 1984): 47.

2. From an interview with Ballard given by Will Self, *Junk Mail*: 348.

3. In a 1975 interview with David Pringle and Jim Goddard, Ballard commented that "when *The Drowned World* was published people said it was heavily influenced by Conrad. Oddly enough, though I was 31 or 32, I'd never read a word of Conrad. I remember Victor Gollancz the publisher, taking me out to lunch after they'd bought *The Drowned World*, and turning to me jokingly, and saying: 'Well, you stole the whole thing from Conrad.' I thought, 'Oh, what's this?' and going away and actually reading some Conrad [. . .] I could see a resemblance. But that's partly because if you're going to try and build up the atmosphere of steaming jungles, there's only one way of doing it."

4. In response to Pringle's concern that his early science fiction novels were, at base, fictions of "disaster and doom," Ballard countered:

> I don't see my fiction as being disaster-oriented, certainly not most of my SF [. . .]. People seem to imply that these are books with unhappy endings, but the reverse is true: they're books with happy endings, stories of psychic fulfilment. The geophysical changes which take place in *The Drought*, *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World* are all positive and good changes—they are what the books are about. The changes lead us to our real psychological goals, so they are not disaster stories at all.

5. One can find in *The Atrocity Exhibition* many of the basic ideas behind *Crash*. A character by the name of Vaughan already appeared in *Atrocity*, although his vicious behaviour there is closer in spirit to Seagrave's appearance in *Crash*. One of the later chapters in *Atrocity* is entitled "Crash!" and explores the "latent sexual possibilities of the automobile crash" (153). Dr Nathan's comments about the "fertilizing" potential of car crashes in "The University of Death" sound very much like something *Crash*'s Vaughan would say. In the same chapter mention is made of Koester's "Crash Magazine," which features photographs of "the dismembered bodies of Jayne Mansfield, Camus and Dean [. . .] epiphanies of violence and desire" (28). And in both novels, Ballard evinces a preoccupation with these and other media celebrities—so long as they have some connection to automobile accidents.

6. Several critics have suggested that Ballard's decision to name his protagonist after himself closes the distance between reality and fiction, and that this fact somehow drastically modifies our critical stance relative to James as a fictional character; incidentally, a persuasive study of biographical source material for the novel, which might lend weight to an identification between author and narrator, can be found in Iain

Sinclair's reflections on David Cronenberg's film adaptation, in *Crash: David Cronenberg's Post-mortem on J.G. Ballard's 'Trajectory of Fate'* (London: British Film Institute, 1999). This particular analysis of *Crash* proceeds on the assumption that James Ballard *remains* a fictional entity independent of his author's biography. As with any participant narrator, the reader can make assumptions about his unique persona and development as a character by analysing shifts in the quality of his voice. There is at least one precedent for such an approach to the novel: Aidan Day's close reading of *Crash*, already referred to in this study, asserts that "[s]tanding outside the dramatisation of James, the reader may retain James's record of his own capacity for horror and disgust even as the character loses it" (288).

7. I use the word *democratic* with some uncertainty. Because commuter society is at the centre of *Crash*, one gets the impression that the entire population owns a car, and not just those automotive citizens trapped in traffic jams, zooming past James and Vaughan, or stopped by the side of the road observing an accident site. It is unlikely that Ballard's vision of motorway culture accurately reflects life in west London at the end of the 1960s, when car ownership would have been much more of a luxury, presumably even among the middle classes, than it would become toward the end of the century. Thus, if there is an element of the novel's representation of late twentieth-century life that is very much of the 'near-future,' it is this vision of ubiquitous car ownership.

8. While Durham relates James Ballard's world to that theorised by Baudrillard, he is careful not to identify them completely, arguing that "Ballard does not begin from the perspective of the 'total system' that Baudrillard sometimes vilifies, sometimes celebrates, but never calls into question" (64).

9. Durham defines the Baudrillardian 'simulation model' in the following way: "a copy that not only precedes but generates its original" (59). Durham's argument is that the simulated or rehearsed crash appears throughout Ballard's novel as just such a phenomenon, but with the added sinister note that even the individual's violent demise can now be anticipated and mapped out in advance, and presented to the consumer as a pleasing spectacle. "No greater triumph of planning is imaginable[,]" Durham writes,

> than this moment in which the accidents of death emerge as products of the operational universe. The one moment that we formerly took to be the most unmasterable, the most unpredictable, but at the same time for each of us peculiarly 'mine'—the moment of 'my death'—now appears as the byproduct of corporate research and development, and the most advanced techniques of reproduction and social planning of which 'postindustrial society' is capable. (59)

10. Vaughan's death in chapter twenty-four is perhaps also an appropriate penalty for his believing that the celebrity car crash is less unremarkable than the 'everyday' road accident. This is to say, the other of Vaughan's fatal flaws is that he misguidedly accords

special status to the crashes of the famous. Thus, he fails to realise what is in fact suggested by his own questionnaires (103–6): that the famous automobile death is becoming, or is already, a kind of stereotype—if not a tried and true career move. Although the added element of celebrity still seems like a magical ingredient in Vaughan's world (in an attempt to convince James to introduce him to Taylor, Vaughan insists that "she's central to the fantasies of all the subjects I've tested" [114]), one senses from his questionnaires that even fame will, at some point, lose its capacity to rouse the anonymous television viewer from his or her boredom. Of course, I am willing to admit that my concern over Vaughan's misplaced idealisation of star-power may be merely the result of three extra decades worth of celebrities dying in a variety of spectacular ways, usually involving cars, aircraft, or stimulants.

11. In his reading of Ballard's "Fourfold Symbolism," David Pringle writes of the use of the crystal that it is "*without time*; it has become a fragment of eternity and eventually it will fill the entire universe. [. . .] The living that are caught up in this process do not die; they become [. . .] embalmed with eternity" (Vale & Juno *J.G. Ballard* 134–35, original emphasis). Pringle is writing specifically of Ballard's earlier science-fiction stories and novels, most obviously *The Crystal World*, where the process of crystallization appears as a 'natural' phenomenon, and is explained in pseudo-scientific terms. The version of it in Seagrave's death tableau is more suggestive of what James wants to see; it is something the narrator ascribes to the scene of emergency. The poetic principle may be basically the same, but in *Crash* Ballard undercuts the transcendental quality of his narrator's conceit. The shattered safety glass may sparkle in the flashing lights of rescue vehicles, creating a halo of light around Seagrave's body, but no amount of sublimation can cover up the fact that shards of glass penetrate the skin and draw blood. Thus, this is not quite the same thing as Ballard's original notion of organic matter enfolded, enmeshed in crystals of timelessness.

12. While Vaughan's body stands as the apotheosis in living terms of this machined / machining body, the appearance of other characters in the text evokes the same dream. One thinks of Catherine's obsessive cleanliness, Seagrave's transvestism, and Gabrielle's leg supports and back braces—representative of machining by the hygiene and fashion industries, and prosthetic technology respectively.

13. Susan Stewart writes in the last chapter of *Crimes of Writing* that

> [a]ccording to Lacan, the Real cannot be articulated, for it is the inarticulatable aspect of experience—that which comes from out of bounds, upon which the Symbolic stumbles and the Imaginary is rescued from automation and repetition. Yet we must analyse the Real not as that which resists language [. . .] but, as Aristotle has set forth the problem, as a problem of causality. (276–77)

For Stewart, the Real is not primarily that which escapes containment within representation, then, but moreover that which is "unattributable" (277–78)—an event which has no obvious cause. It follows that, for Stewart, the phenomenon of the car crash

in Ballard's novel is just such an event, an eruption of the unattributable within a world that prides itself on functionality, efficiency, and smooth circulations of traffic; this is the very antithesis of the approach to the accident taken by Baudrillard. Although this is essentially the foundation of Stewart's argument concerning the novel, she is nevertheless concerned to show how *Crash* "provide[s] a repertory of techniques, and their limitations, regarding the narrative presentation of the eruption of the Real" (283). That is to say, from her point of view *Crash* sets itself up to accomplish the impossible: capturing in prose something that supposedly exceeds all forms of representation.

14. These two 'reals'—the real of stylisation and the real of elemental physicality—remain inextricably linked but also opposed to one another throughout the narrative. This is especially true of the early sections of James's narrative, up to the appearance of Vaughan, which shift the emphasis back and forth between them. We see such a switch in emphasis in chapter three, for instance, when James silently reproaches Catherine for expressing "bogus commiseration over the dead man"; Catherine claims to feel sorry for what has happened but gets the victim's name wrong, calling him "Dr *Hamilton*'s husband"—although I am willing to admit this is only a typographical error (32). In contrast to the air of authenticity that hangs about his own psychological burden, his wife offers no more than "moral gymnastics [. . .] a mere stylization of a gesture" (32–33):

> I had thought for hours about the dead man, visualizing the effects of his death on his wife and family. I had thought of his last moments alive, frantic milliseconds of pain and violence in which he had been catapulted from a pleasant domestic interlude into a concertina of metallized death. (32–33)

This authenticity is, in turn, reinforced by the extent of his injuries:

> These feelings existed within my relationship with the dead man, within the reality of the wounds on my chest and legs, within the unforgettable collision between my own body and the interior of my car. (33)

James feels the presence of the dead man in his very bones, so to speak. However, what is crucial to note is his sudden dismissal of the merely 'stylised' gesture of his wife, in favour of the gravity of physical ordeal, when the former had seemed to carry all the force of the real in the immediate aftermath of the crash, and during his recovery in hospital as well.

15. It should be added that James also equates 'the real' with the appearance of the genuinely accidental. James says in the same passage that "[a]fter being bombarded endlessly by road-safely propaganda it was almost a relief to find myself in an actual accident" (35). In other words, in this period before he meets Vaughan, he still believes that his crash stands as a wholly unique event within a world where everyday experience is increasingly rehearsed in advance through simulations. That said, one of James's many dilemmas at this point is that he cannot accept that the crash *was* only an accident, that is, a wholly unforeseen event, in which the failure of technology results from a set of

invisible contingencies beyond anyone's conscious control. Despite the fact that his crash looks very much like that kind of event, James is nevertheless left with a "confused guilt over the man [he] had killed" (35). Even after a coroner's inquest rules the death 'accidental,' James still cannot overcome this irrational sense of responsibility (62); indeed, *ruling* the crash an accident would seem only to heighten the arbitrary and, therefore, spurious nature of the designation. In effect, the system sanctions James's distrust of the appropriateness of his own feelings, no matter how irrational they may be, by translating them into rational terms, that is, a verdict arrived at through the examination of empirical evidence. James is encouraged to overlook the fact that his irrational guilt is a perfectly understandable, and quite humane response to the situation—an emotion that effectively fills up the void of meaning surrounding Charles Remington's death.

16. The sexuality that emerges from James's recuperation does at least open the door to a more satisfactory 'explanation,' an unconscious explanation, for the crash. This would mean that the endless bombardment of "road-safety propaganda" (35) might have been functioning as a triggering mechanism, similar to the one we saw in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Where once there was only a random event ending in a meaningless death, now a fantasy structure can be imposed on the crash: James unconsciously sought to kill an unknown rival in order to steal Helen Remington away from him. This re-making of the event at least gives back to the subject a compensatory illusion of agency within a world of machine movement that otherwise denies such consolations. James does not, however, reflect on this possibility at length. Only once during his hospitalization does he mention that the dead man seemed to him like "an anonymous opponent killed in a pointless duel" (30). Instead, the reinterpretation of the crash as unconsciously motivated is only implied in James's subsequent affair with Helen Remington. Their sex becomes a mixture of mourning over the dead man—that is, each sex act in a car becomes a symbolic "re-seeding" of Charles's image in his wife's womb (67)—and the pursuit of the "quickening futures of my life" (57), as James puts it. In other words, by having sex with Helen, James believes he is both expressing his feelings of responsibility and exploring an alternate self now available to him in the wake of the crash. He notes the same motivation in Helen: "I sensed that in her refined and matter-of-fact way she was already trying out the possibilities I had opened for her, examining this instrument of a perverse technology [the car] which had killed her husband and closed the principal avenue of her life" (59).

17. Catherine's body appears throughout the text as a collection of undefiled spaces, both external and internal; James makes specific reference to her "immaculate cleanliness" and "porcelain appearance" (89). Catherine has an element of the doll-woman about her, and she reminds us of the obscene doll-version of Karen Novotny that T— puts together in *Atrocity*, except that here James finds the artificial quality produced by Catherine's obsessive cleanliness unstimulating. Catherine is symbolic of a culture steeped in the self-abuse of scrubbing and cosmetic masking. If it were possible to look beneath her porcelain appearance, it seems as though there would be nothing essential or elemental

hidden there. Originally, this very artificiality, mingled with Catherine's sexual adventureousness, had attracted James to her (89), but the doll no longer gets a rise out of the boy-man who plays with it. Ironically, Catherine's smooth surfaces and clean lines should make her a fitting companion to James's post-crash preoccupation with abstract angles and surface appearances.

18. Although this reading of the passage emphasises its satirical possibilities, we must also note that afterward James feels a potentially positive intensification of affection for his wife (127), and a heady mix of "jealousy, love and pride" in his relationship with Vaughan (128)—arguably, emotions he has not experienced with such intensity for quite some time. And yet, even this potential positive is undercut by the fact that we cannot gauge Catherine's stake in all of this. James claims that he perceives a similar rekindling of affection in her (127), but we cannot be sure that this rekindling is subsumed within a journey of self-discovery that is similar in kind to the one James believes he is on.

19. Incidentally, there are several suggestions in the narrative that Vaughan has already run down a pedestrian: in chapter sixteen, police question Vaughan about a dead pedestrian (115–16); in the following chapter James notices blood on Vaughan's Lincoln, which he assumes is that of a dog (122); and then much later Vera Seagrave tells James and Catherine, not in so many words, that she was in the car with Vaughan when he hit the pedestrian. Our sense of the significance of this hidden incident depends very much on what we can infer about Vaughan's intentions. If he inadvertently hit a pedestrian while engaging in a sexual act with Vera, then we might infer that the accident has unnerved him, and it in turn contributes to his gradual unhinging, in the same way that Seagrave's death does. If Vaughan ran down the pedestrian intentionally, then this only adds further weight to the idea that in Seagrave we see the psychopathic reality subtending Vaughan's more theoretical promotion of his ideas.

Chapter Five

The Anaesthetic Experience of Non-place in *Concrete Island*

In the third novel of the quartet, *Concrete Island* (1974), Ballard once again took up the challenge of representing the advent of a future psychology amid the outward trappings of early-seventies London. *Concrete Island* recounts the adventures that befall Robert Maitland, a thirty-five-year-old architect, after a blown tire forces his car off a motorway, in an area near the west-London district of White City. The accident places him on "a small traffic island, some two hundred yards long [. . .] that lay in the waste ground between three converging motorway routes" (*CI* 11). Eventually, injury, fatigue and malnourishment make escape from the island practically impossible, and Maitland becomes a contemporary Robinson Crusoe. Like his literary forebear, Maitland is stranded with relatively few survival skills and must learn quickly how to get by in his new surroundings. Unlike in Defoe's novel, however, the concrete island is not virgin territory and does not offer Maitland an abundance of natural resources to be exploited. Additionally, Maitland has no religious faith to be reborn into for comfort, nor does he live in a world where the mystery of the divine makes its presence felt. And so there is little chance that Maitland can sustain himself, emotionally or physically, on his own indefinitely—let alone prosper as sole proprietor of the island. In the place of the assistance of Providence, he receives only the arbitrary kindnesses and cruelties of the island's existing tenants, a young squatter named Jane Sheppard and a mentally handicapped circus acrobat called Proctor. In spite of these obstacles, or perhaps as a

result of them, Maitland does manage to 'prospero,' however—to reference the novel's other main intertext, *The Tempest*.[1] Scarcity and exposure lead to the derangement of his senses, and in part through his point of view, the island's spaces are touched with a kind of perceptual magic, transformed into a paradoxical landscape of barrenness and vitality, anonymity and historical specificity. The mystery of the divine may be missing from this particular Crusoe tale, then, but it is replaced by a marvellous secular mystery over the course of the three main sections of the narrative, periods marked by Maitland's attempts to escape, explore and dominate his new terrain, respectively.

For readers familiar with the previous two novels in the quartet, *Concrete Island* may appear merely to extend their preoccupations. The automobile is again depicted as the emblematic technology of Western consumer culture; Maitland is yet another affluent but nondescript man, looking for deeper meaning within that socioeconomic context; and the story presupposes the same widespread affective disorder that was a foundational concept in both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*. But while *Concrete Island* carries forward these motifs, it also distinguishes itself from its predecessors in several ways. For a start, it marks a substantial shift in terms of genre and narrative perspective. Even though *Concrete Island* continues to explore much of the same psychological and emotional territory as the previous two novels, its more conventional narrative structure makes it a fairly sedate follow-up to *Atrocity*'s experimentalism and *Crash*'s explicit sex, if not a total retreat from their various provocations. More significantly, the novel's conventional narrative form allows for a less equivocal approach to its ironic take on Maitland's tendency to identify the island with himself. What Ballard moves toward in *Concrete*

Island is a narrative which is still subjective but with a slightly more pronounced perspectivism. That is to say, the fact that the island is more noticeably shared by the perspectives of Jane and Proctor presents a different take on the ultra-subjective narratives of *Atrocity* and *Crash*, in which so much of what readers are allowed to see is filtered through the central protagonists, making it that much harder to imagine an actuality beyond the limitations of a singular point of view. As Maitland explores the island, readers watch over his shoulder, but in his depiction of Jane Sheppard, Ballard toys with the idea that Maitland is in part her psychological projection as much as she is constructed from his point of view. This happens to an extent with Proctor as well, but he is associated more with physicality, biological urges, and the terrain of the island itself, and less so with psychological matters. While this shift in narrative structure is important, I reserve comment on it—specifically, on its limitations in terms of gender—for the closing section of the chapter on *High-Rise*, a novel in which the combination of realist style and narrative perspectivism is even more conspicuous.

The stylistic shift in *Concrete Island* is parallelled by an emphasis on a different emblematic artistic medium from the previous two books. In *Atrocity* and *Crash* image media (film, television, painting) took precedence; even the central motif of the car was made to appear in *Crash* as a cinematic machine—the rear-view mirror framing the back-seat spectacle of car-crash sexuality, while the windshield and rapid forward motion turn objective reality into a silent movie. In *Concrete Island* image media take a backseat to architecture. Most noticeable in this context is that Maitland himself is an architect. On its own, this observation is not all that remarkable because Ballard tends to recycle a

limited number of professions for his protagonists. As David Pringle points out, "[t]he overwhelming majority are doctors, with architects and research scientists of one type or another forming most of the remainder" (37). Pringle's point seems to be that the reuse of these professions allows readers to quickly and efficiently slot Ballard's protagonists into a particular social and economic bracket—the professional middle class—but his generalising gesture also implies that the specific choice of profession is purely incidental within a given Ballard fiction. *Concrete Island* refutes this idea. The nature of Maitland's profession carries extra weight primarily because the narrative is so preoccupied with his built environment. The towering presence of the motorways is juxtaposed with the startlingly varied terrain of the island, especially the series of ruins that Maitland finds there. In general, the novel's architectural motifs are used to illustrate elements of Maitland's character, specifically his desire for isolation, and they become a primary feature in Ballard's meditation on the fate of corporeality within a media-obsessed culture, especially considering that the narrative repeatedly links Maitland's body to the spaces of the concrete island itself.

One last substantive shift from the previous two novels rests with *Concrete Island*'s dramatisation of the theme of self-transcendence. Modern technology does not play quite the same catalyst role that it did in *Atrocity* and *Crash*, mainly because the narrative leaves behind the trope of bio-technological 'interfacing' immediately after Maitland's crash. As a result, *Concrete Island* may appear to be a less-challenging response to life under late capitalism. After *Atrocity* and *Crash*'s unresolved tensions between the semiotic body and elemental forms of corporeality, *Concrete Island*'s more

straightforward presentation of primitive living in the midst of technocratic culture seems at first like a puzzling over-simplification of the issue. But there is at least one obstacle that may dissuade us from reducing *Concrete Island* to the status of a less-ambiguous rejection of consumer society: the affectless quality of Maitland's emotional life prior to his crash is actually taken in new directions, rather than countered, by his new existence on the island. Before the crash, Maitland's emotional attachments and daily responsibilities were subsumed under a rubric of convenience, and this in turn fostered a sense of detachment that he found to his liking; for a time he still thinks in terms of these attachments, but eventually we are led to question the depth of his commitment. Arguably, the crash places him in a space that answers this desire to be finally rid of such obligations and feelings. The concrete island's remoteness might be said to intensify this longed-for detachment, instead of symbolising an implicit critique of it. Nicholas Ruddick writes of Maitland's final "state of pure solipsism" that "[w]e are not being asked to follow Maitland's path [. . .] but to understand how his 'accident' and its consequences are the inevitable working out of an unconscious narrative in which we all, as participants in Western civilization, to a greater or lesser extent subscribe" (93). My own variation on this reading stresses that Maitland, trapped amid the motorways that were once technically his mobile home, discovers, through the sublimated delirium of his island solitude and the physical extremes of subsistence-level living, a more wondrous version of the isolation he had found so appealing in the first place. It is as if Maitland journeys deeper into the vacuum at the heart of his own commodity fetishism and finds there a palace of art.

The discussion below is divided into three sections. The first sets out a theoretical context for the novel's motorway landscape and Maitland's experience of passing through it, by developing the connection Roger Luckhurst makes between *Concrete Island* and the work of Marc Augé and Margaret Morse on contemporary 'non-places.' In particular, the section highlights not just Maitland's emotional sympathy for the 'detached' feeling generated by movement through such spaces, but also his aesthetic appreciation of the nondescript architectures that constitute the physical embodiment of the concept of non-place. Then, it provides an interpretation of the island's mysterious ruins, centring on the emblematic possibilities of the island's air-raid shelters. The second part follows the course of Maitland's early island adventures in the first half of the novel. I approach the many physical ordeals that Maitland is put through as an unambiguous rejoinder to the 'anaesthetic' interior of both his automobile and the built environment of non-place more generally. Lastly, the third part links Maitland's interactions with Proctor and Jane Sheppard to Augé's sense that the subjective experience of non-places might produce a rarified form of role-playing or pleasure in identity loss, and then goes on to examine the significance of the fantasy of a 'body beyond consumption' which constitutes the novel's final conceit.

1. *Concrete Island*'s non-places

Because *Concrete Island* is a contemporary Robinson Crusoe tale, it is difficult not to think of its protagonist as an allegorical figure, an Everyman for the age of fast cars and superhighways. Unfortunately, much about Robert Maitland makes such a reading naive

at best, politically blinkered at worst; in short, he leads too exceptional a life to be considered a fully credible type. But while it may be naive to think of Maitland that way, especially within the context of late-twentieth-century cultural relativism, his experience of the contemporary landscape is still typical of a widespread phenomenon—the daily highway commute. Much about Maitland's experience of the novel's motorway landscape prefigures contemporary theorisations of spatial practice within the late-twentieth-century suburban realm. Theories of 'non-place' articulated by Margaret Morse and Marc Augé, in particular, provide useful frameworks for contextualising his experience.[2] In saying this, I am picking up on a connection between *Concrete Island* and their theories first put forward by Roger Luckhurst. Three analogies need to be emphasised in this respect: Augé's notion of a temporary suspension of the commuter-subject's daily obligations within what he calls *non-place* is reflected not just in the amount of time Maitland ordinarily spends within such transit zones, but moreover in the frame of mind in which he feels most comfortable; the anaesthetising effect described by Morse in her theorisation of *nonspace* is apparent in Maitland's reflections on the moments leading up to his crash, but also dispelled by his crash and subsequent ordeals during the first half of the narrative; and lastly, there is a partial affinity between Maitland's movement into deeper forms of delirium, and Augé's tentative suggestion that certain individuals might find within non-place's "immense parentheses" (*Non-places* 111) the freedom to experiment with their identity, to exercise their imaginative powers. We could say, then, that Maitland is a generic figure but only within a limited field of

application—not a viable Everyman, but certainly a credible representation of something we might call 'Commuter Man.'

For Augé, non-place designates a wide range of contemporary transitional spaces, in addition to the quality of experience that individuals have while passing through them. Although the category encompasses spaces associated with social strife—squats, refugee camps, and shanty-towns (78)—the focus of Augé's anthropology of 'supermodernity'[3] is exclusively those "real non-places [. . .] the ones we inhabit when we are driving down the motorway, wandering through the supermarket or sitting in an airport lounge" (96). In other words, he concerns himself primarily with spaces of relative affluence. If we take Augé at his word, individuals entering these paradigmatic zones are granted an experience of release. After passing through customs at an airport, for example, they are "freed from the weight of [. . .] luggage and everyday responsibilities" (101). Employing the obvious pun, Augé speaks of the subject of supermodernity entering a "duty-free" space and state of mind (101): "[A] person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, or driver. Perhaps he is still weighed down by the previous day's worries, the next day's concerns; but he is distanced from them temporarily by the environment of the moment" (103). Hypothetically speaking, the non-place releases the traveller into a zone where the attachments and responsibilities of everyday life are temporarily forgotten or considered only in a haphazard fashion.[4]

Augé's notion of duty-free experience finds a fitting fictional template in Maitland, not so much in his state of mind just prior to his crash, but certainly in the state of

emotional detachment that characterises his life more generally, and in which, arguably, he feels most comfortable. Luckhurst speaks of Maitland existing within "affectless economies of work and desire"; he will not be particularly missed following his accident because "his company will assume work-related absence; his wife and mistress will each assume his staying with the other" (*'The Angle Between Two Walls'* 136). Where Maitland's initial thoughts of home, office and mistress might lead us to believe that his first priority is to re-join the world and continue fulfilling his obligations at these three terminals, albeit insincerely, we also sense that his scheduled movements between these points would have kept him in transit for a large portion of his time—in the mobile 'bachelor pad' of his Jaguar.

One could go even further and assert that Maitland is most at home within Augé's 'immense parentheses.' The manner in which Ballard chooses to convey this information about his protagonist is very subtle and involves the novel's architectural motifs. In short, Maitland is a kind of architect of the affectless. Ballard never resorts to an explicit statement of Maitland's taste in architecture; in fact, he refrains from identifying the kinds of buildings designed by Maitland and his business partners. Instead, Ballard chooses to scatter brief references to Maitland's architectural predilections throughout the first half of the narrative, which cumulatively suggest that he prefers structures which seem to answer his desire to "rove for ever within the empty city of his own mind" (142), to have done with his everyday responsibilities and emotional attachments. Early in chapter two, for example, Maitland's rationalisation of the excessive speed of his drive home from the office sets up an intriguing contrast between the architectures and women

in his life: "Eager to see Catherine again," Maitland reflects, "he was looking forward to relaxing in their cool, formal house with its large white rooms. After three days with Helen Fairfax, in this sensible woman doctor's warm and comfortable apartment, he had felt almost suffocated" (16). The opposition between wife / home and mistress / apartment is overstated, but the contrast remains an effective indicator of Maitland's attraction to his sense of detachment. We can infer that his eagerness to get home had less to do with rejoining his wife than it did with immersing himself in the 'affectless' quality of space within his home. The point is reiterated in chapter eight, when Maitland huddles in a stairwell during a rain shower. Thinking back over separate vacations to the south of France—one in childhood with his parents, the other more recently with Fairfax—Maitland again uses architecture, this time buildings that are even closer than the Maitlands' home to the idea of non-place advanced by Augé, to distinguish between the women in his life:

> [He and Helen] had gone straight to La Grande Motte, the futuristic resort complex on the coast [. . .]. Helen had quietly hated the hard, affectless architecture with its stylized concrete surfaces, nervous of Maitland's buoyant humour. At the time he had found himself wishing that Catherine were with him—she would have liked the ziggurat hotels and apartment houses, and the vast, empty parking lots laid down by the planners years before any tourist would arrive to park their cars, like a city abandoned in advance of itself. (65)

For Maitland, the appeal of La Grande Motte stems from both the ahistorical design of its buildings, and the way in which their design seems to frustrate the viewer's emotional investment in his or her physical surroundings. Like the Maitlands' overly formal house,

the resort complex is not a place in which one feels at home in the conventional sense. And this is precisely the quality which Maitland has a certain affinity for.

In turn, Maitland's taste in women is an extension of his taste in architecture. Helen, her apartment located somewhere in the inner-city district of Marylebone, comes to represent the urban realm, a space still measured according to a human scale. We might guess that Maitland's suffocation in this realm results from the crush of urban density, in addition to the middle-class comforts of, and air of sensibility projected by, Helen's apartment. Catherine's name, meanwhile, becomes a byword for all that is suburban, if not for the duty-free state of the non-place itself. She comes to symbolise the detachment associated with these zones primarily because Maitland projects his own delight for this feeling onto her. Amid these metonymical associations between women and space is a crucial irony: the emotional bankruptcy that allows Maitland the freedom to seek gratification beyond the confines of his marriage is precisely what he misses when he is with Helen Fairfax, who, we gather, makes more emotional demands on him than Catherine does. Put more positively, the nothingness at the heart of Maitland's marriage of convenience to Catherine ("a failure by anyone else's standards" [27]) is nevertheless *something* to him—the very thing he longs for. Thus, the narrative's architectural motifs help reveal the paradoxical nature of this desire—a longing for the absence of longing. Whether or not he is aware of it, Maitland is seeking a substantial emptiness which the physical structures of non-place allow him only temporary access to.

At this juncture we need to ask whether Maitland's desire for the absence of longing and his affinity for 'affectless' architecture are traits we should consider specifically his

own, or take the line that Maitland is largely a product of his cultural context. *Concrete Island* does not carry forward *The Atrocity Exhibition*'s preoccupation with the permeable postmodern subject, nor does it feature a character, like *Crash*'s Vaughan, who appears to be so obsessed with the culture of celebrity that it comes to define who he is. As a result, Maitland is depicted as a more autonomous individual. Is his attitude of detachment something he has freely chosen, as if he is the architect of his own affectlessness, is it in his nature, or does he appreciate 'cool' structures and detached living because he is the product of a culture which fosters modes of disconnection? It would be unwise to content ourselves with just one explanation. Maitland's thoughts about architecture certainly suggest that he has weighed aesthetic options and chosen the styles that feel most amenable to him. However, as we will see in conjunction with the island's ruined architectures and the childhood memories they engender, Maitland's affinity for isolation and disengagement from the world have deep roots in early experiences of solitariness. And finally, as Luckhurst points out, Maitland's life prior to the crash is very much a matter of circulating through 'the affectless economies of work and desire,' an image that projects semi-automatic, as opposed to willed, behaviour.

Another aspect of Maitland's experience of the motorway which seems prescient given the theoretical context I am working with is the feeling of relative invincibility that his Jaguar bestows upon him. Whereas Augé does not consider this part of the experience of non-place, Margaret Morse makes it a key aspect of the 'ontology of everyday distraction' that she formulates in her study of *nonspace*. Her analysis plays up not only the emotional detachment synonymous with the mutually reinforcing televisual

zones of TV, freeway and shopping mall, but also their tendency to separate the mobile subject's senses from a more substantial 'real'—which theorisations of "derealized space" (Morse 195) always presuppose. Our bodily experience of the climate-controlled interior of the car is indicative of this desensitisation: "In *nonspace*, the body in motion is no longer a kinaesthetic key to reality," Morse states,

> for at the wheel of the automobile [. . .] engaged in small motor movements which have become highly skilled and automatic, it explores space as an inert mass, technically or electronically empowered with virtual or actual speed. Indeed, what we experience is not an erasure, circumvention, or fragmentation of the body but its investment with a second and more powerful skin within which a core remains secure, intact, and at rest in a vortex of speed. (204)

Morse's nonspaces, or at least the interior of the automobile, can be thought of as anaesthetic membranes (this reintroduces the *aesthetic* as Buck-Morss uses it: to mean perceptive by the whole human sensorium) which discourage the user from thinking in terms of the inherent limitations of his or her own body. The narrative of *Concrete Island* offers a remarkable dramatisation of this effect. The narrative begins with the minutiae of Maitland's car crash itself ("Soon after three o'clock on the afternoon of April 22nd" and so forth), so once again we have to look to his post-crash rationalisations for his excessive speed for evidence. Sitting in his wrecked car, Maitland remembers that

> [h]e had left his office [. . .] at three o'clock, intending to avoid the rush-hour traffic, and had ample time to cruise along in safety. He remembered swerving into the central drum of the Westway interchange, and pressing on towards the tunnel of the overpass. He could still hear the tyres as they beat along the concrete verge, boiling off a slipstream of dust and cigarette packets. As the car emerged from the vault of the tunnel the April sunlight had rainbowed across the windshield, momentarily blinding him . . . (9)

The passage conveys very well the knife edge separating anaesthetic comfort from technological disaster. In it, we hear Ballard's peculiar talent for turning vertiginous moments such as these into a kind of prose poetry; the paragraph becomes noticeably more lyrical in the sentence evoking the hypnotic thumping of the tires. In turn, what was apparent in both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* is also apparent here: Ballard's tendency to implicate his style in the object it is meant to expose. If we read the page in full, we note that Ballard plays Maitland's memory of his absent-mindedness and the dream-like state of the drive home (with its slipstream of rubbish, blinding rainbow of sunlight, etc.) off against reiterations of his surprise at his excessive speed. One can conclude from this that the cadences of the description above are intended to 'blind us momentarily' to the precariousness of Maitland's position, just as the cinematic quality of the view through the car's windshield distances him from the reality of his situation.

The passage goes on to suggest that Maitland is possessed whenever he is in his car, an idea that anticipates Morse's concept of distraction as well as Augé's 'gentle form of possession,' except that Ballard tends to emphasise both the potential for thoughtless aggression within these states of consciousness and the key role played by technology in fostering that aggression: "Once inside the car[,]" Maitland admits to himself, "some rogue gene, a strain of rashness, overran the rest of his usually cautious and clear-minded character" (9). Here, the "rogue gene" metaphor introduces the notion of an innate deviance catered to by modern technology. Ruddick has suggested that "Otherness descends on Maitland in the heart of familiar London, just as the Martians in *The War of the Worlds* appeared to the smug inhabitants of the Home Counties" (*Ultimate Island* 91),

but Maitland's exasperation at his own driving persona indicates something slightly different: otherness is awakened during the drive and then liberated at the moment of impact. It follows logically that when Maitland twice sees himself reflected in his crashed car's still-gleaming surfaces, the outward manifestation of this "strain of rashness" is apparent in the image: "The eyes staring back at him from the mirror were blank and unresponsive, as if he were looking at a psychotic twin brother" (8–9). Similarly: "In the polished panels of the rear wheel-housing Maitland stared at the distorted reflection of himself. His tall figure was warped like a grotesque scarecrow, and his white-skinned face bled away in the curving contours of the bodywork" (13). The car, functioning as mirror, confronts Maitland with outward signs of his own recklessness, which it had helped to nurture all along. Put more generally: technology, reflecting physiology, reveals something about the psychology it caters to. The crucial point to take away from this intersection between deviance and technology, however, is that the alter ego which is finally loosed for good on the island should be understood as a function of the feeling of relative security produced by the interior of the car on a daily basis.

To summarise, then: the experience of affectlessness and the technological armouring of the body transport Maitland to the island, and eventually the island's confines reveal themselves to be an extension of these things. The longer Maitland remains marooned, the more intense becomes his experience of both. However, the period immediately following his crash is, understandably, more of an undoing of anaesthetic experience. The architect of the affectless is confronted by the remains of physical structures from the past that seem to trigger childhood memories, while the crash and Maitland's subsequent

physical hardships on the island stand as unambiguous rebuttals to prosthetic empowerment and the false sense of security which attends it.

During his initial survey of the island in chapters five through nine, Maitland gradually discovers a form of emptiness-as-substance which provides a fitting counterpoint to his own admiration for structures like the hotels at La Grande Motte and the cool formality of his home. Over the course of his explorations, Maitland stumbles across, sometimes quite literally, a collection of ruins that dot the island's terrain. In abstract terms, ruined architecture is an absence given substance, in that it marks some thing, be it a building, an individual, a population, an entire way of life, etc., that has long since disappeared. What is interesting about this is that Maitland's discovery of these structures overturns one of the key characteristics of non-places: their tendency to bypass visible markers of history (cf. Augé 98–99). Although the specifics of the history alluded to by the ruins remain, ultimately, lost to Maitland, their combined effect is to whisper to him of the roots of his affinity for the affectlessness of non-place. To get a sense of how these ghostly structures reverse, but also deepen Maitland's affectlessness, it is worthwhile to consider Luckhurst's interpretation of them, and of Maitland's response to them.

Founded on an inventive blending of concepts borrowed from Augé, Anthony Vidler and de Certeau, Luckhurst's reading of *Concrete Island* explains the ruins, and Maitland's encounter with them, as a rejoinder to the hegemony of the order of simulation represented in *Crash*. Despite being aware of compelling interpretations of *Crash* which reveal for its satirical content, Luckhurst concludes that *Crash* offers only an "ecstatic

immersal in the extremities of the mediascape" (129). This 'ecstatic' response to the sixties media landscape is subsequently undermined by *Concrete Island*'s architectural themes, more specifically, by the spatial tug-of-war between motorway landscape and island ruins allegorised in the narrative. With Vidler's notion of an "architectural uncanny" in mind, Luckhurst argues that the ruins, as signs of a history lost beneath the de-historicised spaces of the motorways, produce their own "technological uncanny" (135). They are *unheimlich* because they mark the return of "surmounted and abandoned technologies and artifacts" (135): the cinema posters in Jane Sheppard's hovel and the remains of a printer's shop in chapter six both speak of a bygone era of mechanical reproduction (136). Maitland's encounter with the past figured in the ruins automatically brings forth familiar and unfathomable images from his childhood (cf. *CI* 63–65, 69–70), and in this way their appearance in the narrative is explicitly linked to the return of the repressed, a key aspect of Freud's articulation of the uncanny. For Luckhurst, the significance of these ruins and the flashbacks they engender rests solely in their mutually reinforcing inscrutability. The flashbacks are characterised as little more than "clumsy Oedipal memories[,]" while the ruins remain merely cryptic fragments by virtue of Maitland's inability "to turn [them] into meaningful narrative" (136; of course, this implies that Maitland does in fact *try* 'to narrate' the ruins, only to fail, but it is doubtful whether Maitland gives it that much effort). In turn, Maitland's inability to make sense of these fragments links up with the narrative's other figures of indeterminacy—Luckhurst identifies the swirling of the island's grasses as yet another symbol of the erasure of meaning (137)—and together they help Luckhurst situate the setting of *Concrete Island*

as a counterpoint to the seemingly totalising reach of the socioeconomic context represented in *Crash*. Emblematic of radical uncertainty, the ruins are tasked with destabilising the instrumental rationality and idealised efficiency symbolised in the motorway systems, and thereby providing readers with some leverage against "simulacral trafficking" (137).

Luckhurst's reading of the ruins' uncanniness expresses very well the way in which Maitland is affected by them, but the reduction of both ruins and regressions to a default indeterminacy risks turning interpretative paralysis into a virtue—something that one cannot really avoid when holding up figures of indeterminacy as emblems for political and ethical thought. If I am reluctant to fault Luckhurst for taking this route, it is of course because my own approach to the quartet has, in its own way, tried to track down various ambiguities. That said, I sense that we are to imagine more going on in Maitland's head than just bewilderment. With respect to the regressions, we do not see Maitland reflecting at length on their collective significance, and yet they still whisper to him of his desire for isolation and, moreover, a form of solitude that is more profound than the regimented and quotidian solitariness that characterises the motorway landscape. We note that several of the childhood memories engendered by the ruins are of early experiences of seclusion or abandonment (cf. 65, 69–70); perhaps the most telling along these lines is the "remythologized" image of "a small boy playing endlessly by himself in a long suburban garden surrounded by a high fence" (27). Although the recovery of this kernel of seclusion from amid the fragments of Maitland's past does not resolve the aura of ambiguity that surrounds them, it does suggest that the early part of Maitland's exile is,

in part, a process of coming to terms with the deep sources of his anti-social tendencies: "Most of the happier moments of his life had been spent alone—student vacations touring Italy and Greece, a three-month drive around the United States after he qualified. [. . .] It was not entirely vanity that the framed photograph of a seven-year-old boy was not of his son, but of himself" (27).

In terms of *Concrete Island*'s ruins themselves, we might want to ask the following questions: Do they signify only as a homogeneous group? Are they uniformly distinct from the motorways which threaten them with extinction? And would a more nuanced analysis of their significance as individual ruins, rather than as a group, lead to new insights? I would contend that their symbolic qualities merit closer scrutiny, if only to recover what is implied in the interplay between the historical moments they evoke and the nature of life within the speed zones of the contemporary city.

Immediately after he notes the resilience of the island's spaces in chapter nine (69), Maitland surveys the ruins more carefully, noting that they are arranged into a distinct line that runs roughly east to west across the two hundred yards of the island:

> Parts of the island dated from well before World War II. The eastern end was its oldest section, with the churchyard and the ground-courses of Edwardian terraced houses. The breaker's yard and its wrecked cars had been superimposed on the still identifiable streets and alleyways.
>
> In the centre of the island were the air-raid shelters among which he was sitting. Attached to these was a later addition, the remains of a Civil Defence post little more than fifteen years old. [. . . Maitland] hobbled westwards down the centre of the island. He crossed a succession of low walls, partly buried under piles of discarded tyres and worn steel cable.

> Around the ruin of a former pay-box, Maitland identified the ground-plan of a post-war cinema [. . .]. Ten feet away, partly screened by a bank of nettles, steps ran down to a basement. (69)

The linear arrangement of the ruins prevents them from being thought of as a playful jumble of historical quotations, in the manner of certain forms of postmodernist architecture, and therefore calls out for narration. That said, the visible gaps in time separating each element leave room for the ambiguity which Luckhurst finds so valuable. But the fact that such gaps exist should not lead inevitably to meaninglessness, nor to the absence of meaning *as* meaning, unless one takes an all-or-nothing approach to interpretation, that is, makes no allowance for something in between the recovery of a single incontrovertible Meaning, on the one hand, and idealised indeterminacy, on the other.

Regardless of whether Maitland realises it or not, the arrangement of the ruins is evocative of a chronological record of London's expansion outward into the countryside over the hundred or so years prior to his crash. They are therefore emblematic of a history of urban growth during the modern age. But this means that the motorway landscape itself should be included as part of this architectural history, if only to point up its impermanence—the illusion of its triumph over history which Maitland notes when he thinks of the island "continu[ing] to survive, unknown and disregarded, long after the motorways had collapsed into dust" (69).

One could go even further with this interpretation and divide the ruins into two groups, separated by a substantial gap in time. One group gestures back to a period in Britain's past of which Maitland has had no lived experience, while the other represents

decades he has lived through, albeit as a child. The remains of a Victorian house and its garden steps; of a churchyard, with its empty graves; and of terraced housing, streets and alleyways dating from the Edwardian period, together evoke a pre-First World War era of relative stability and prosperity, if not England's mythical 'Edwardian summer' as well. The air-raid shelters and ruins of the Civil Defence post and cinema, meanwhile, counter the relative stability and peace suggested by the first group through their associations with the Second World War and the postwar period. The air-raid shelters evoke the London Blitz, while the cold-war era defence post and cinema bring to mind a popular culture overshadowed by the threat of nuclear weapons. While the older structures are certainly distinct from the surrounding landscape of the motorways in architectural terms, the more recent group cannot be cut off from the world of the motorways quite as definitively. The air-raid shelters, in particular, offer some intriguing metaphorical links between the highway world out of which Maitland has crashed and the hidden world of the concrete island. And there is justification for according the shelters this special attention: first, they are the only of the island's 'ruins' which are still technically intact; secondly, Ballard seems to accord them more prominence by positioning them at the centre of the island (Maitland actually surveys the other ruins from atop one of them), and by making an air-raid shelter the makeshift home of the island's only native inhabitant—the acrobat, Proctor (Jane Sheppard is, like Maitland, a more recent immigrant).[5]

The shelters are the focal point for two related, but divergent tropes in the novel. Maitland's discovery of them in the early chapters helps reinforce the metaphorical connections between Maitland's post-crash sensory ordeals and the sights and sounds of a

modern battlefield. Viewed from one angle, then, their iconic presence helps solidify Maitland's early experiences on the island as a rebuttal to the desensitisation synonymous with non-places. The shelters are also emblematic, however, of the higher state of consciousness that Maitland finds on the other side of sensory overload and physical deprivation—in or through the anaesthetic as it were. Even though the discussion below examines these tropes one after the other, the novel itself does not present them in this manner; instead, one finds them intertwined throughout Maitland's experience of being stranded. The sensory overload of pain, hunger and exhaustion leads to (symbolic) moments of disembodiment, in the "Fever" chapter for instance, and yet Maitland's divestment of his own physical pain in that chapter is quickly rebuffed when he takes cover in one of the air-raid shelters—Proctor's hovel—and is subsequently beaten up by the old acrobat. After that point, Maitland struggles physically with Proctor and psychologically with Jane Sheppard, but again, the stresses of subsistence living transport him to the concluding fantasy of a body beyond consumption, a quasi-religious state of mind in which he believes that his flesh has more power even though it has been through an extensive period of deprivation.

2. 'Injury and exhaustion': from anaesthetic space to sensory overload

Obviously, the air-raid shelters are no longer operational in Maitland's present-day, but Ballard goes some way toward depicting Maitland's initial few days on the island as a kind of battlefield experience, and their presence on the island is a key component of this conceit. Most noticeable in this respect are the repeated references in chapters two

through seven to the sound of the traffic passing by the island. Because the motorways are raised, these noises descend on Maitland as an "unbroken boom" (29), "a series of sharp detonations" (43), a "relentless roar" (57), and drumming sounds (73); cumulatively, and in conjunction with Maitland's discovery of the shelters, these descriptions evoke the thunder of aerial bombardment. Additionally, we might note that the island itself becomes, in effect, a muddy trench because of a rain storm in chapter six, during which the droplets of rain are said to "cut like shot" (46) through Maitland's clothes. The overall impression of the island and surrounding motorway systems as a battlefield is, of course, an indirect indication of Maitland's traumatised state of mind, confused sense of self, and feelings of self-pity. Maitland even melodramatically fancies himself a kind of casualty of war immediately after his crash, when he thinks of his son waiting to be picked up near a "military hospital," and imagines a group of veterans sitting nearby, "as if exhibiting to the boy the variety of injuries which his father might have suffered" (11).

It is largely through Maitland's increasingly delirious point of view, then, that the quotidian aggression of the contemporary freeway comes to look like, or at least sound like, an air-war over London—and from there that the 'urban clearances' required to construct massive roadways like the Westway Flyover might conjure up images of the levelling of London during the Blitz. Ballard has, in a sense, set up a radical analogy to rival those created by T—'s assemblages in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. That said, one suspects that for Ballard writing in the early seventies, the sweeping away of older urban structures at the end of the 1960s was as much a sign of progress into an exciting future,

as it was a matter of displacing peoples and erasing evidence of a national past figured in the juxtaposition of architectural styles. In this respect, it should be pointed out that once or twice Ballard complicates his novel's otherwise monologic representation of the anonymous commuter. At the end of chapter four, for example, Maitland ignores an offer of help from "a passing driver in an open-topped car [. . .]. The driver, a uniformed American serviceman, looked down good-humouredly at Maitland, whom he clearly assumed to be a tramp or drifter enjoying his first drink of the day. He gestured with his thumb at Maitland, offering him a lift" (35).[6] The soldier soon speeds away, but his brief appearance sums up well Ballard's ambivalence toward the combination of excitement and brutality that characterises the popular iconography of warfare and the automobile. The soldier reminds us of England's cold-war status as an American forward base, a less-ominous version of Airstrip One perhaps; and yet, his apparent amiability and the economic confidence signified by his convertible complicate a strictly negative interpretation. He seems more like a comic-book character who has driven into Maitland's field of vision from a seductive future dominated by the mixed blessings of American culture, and the infiltration into the English landscape by the nondescript structures of non-place.

In any event, the air-raid shelters and the narrative's military imagery help solidify the notion of Maitland's early island adventures as a figurative battlefield experience, but only in relation to the string of physical ordeals which he endures up to chapter ten, when he tries to find refuge in one of the shelters. If we are looking for the starting point of this trope, the moment of Maitland's crash, which effectively breaks the desensitizing effect

of the car's interior, and alerts the absent-minded driver to the violent reality of his rate of speed (in Maitland's case, well past an already hazardous seventy miles per hour [7]), is as good as any in the narrative. Ballard's representation of the crash event is intriguing because of its brief suggestion that the crash has a physiological dimension beyond what we might expect, that is, beyond the "second collision" (11) of body and car interior. At the moment when the car's tire fails, "the exploding air reflected from the concrete parapet seemed to detonate inside Maitland's skull" (7). On one level, the image suggests that the crash has an immediate psychological impact. Something about the event has an intimate relationship to Maitland's psyche. In this respect, Gregory Stephenson writes that "[i]n a metaphoric sense an explosion does occur within Maitland's head [. . .]: his familiar reality and his familiar identity are being exploded" (75). But the sentence also conveys a piercing of the body's natural armour. The word *skull* gestures toward the more figurative notion of 'mind' but also presupposes the penetration of bone—the body-armour protecting the brain. The crash itself, then, is just the first of a series of passages that point up the complex interplay between psychology and physiology in *Concrete Island*, an interplay that is eventually developed into the corporeal basis of Maitland's visionary experiences. That said, the metaphorical penetration of Maitland's skull by the air released from the tire is also a striking expression of basic concussion, and sets the trope of the breakdown of the anaesthetic moving forward. What lies beyond the crash are experiences of pain and privation the likes of which Maitland has never had to deal with before, and for which his life of convenience has hardly prepared him.

Maitland's prospects on the concrete island are even bleaker than those of his literary forebear, Crusoe, because his indefinite tenancy on the island is not eased by a solid resource base, nor by the strongly felt presence of Providence. In a short introduction to the novel, Ballard suggests that the original Crusoe's attempts to set up "a working replica of bourgeois society and its ample comforts" was too conveniently aided by the presence of "a supplies-filled wreck [. . .] on the nearest reef like a neighbourhood cash and carry" (4). By contrast, Maitland's survival depends very much on whether he can find a way to accommodate himself to sustained deprivation and endure physical ordeals. As David Punter puts it: "Out there in the dark and the wild, Maitland [. . .] experiences [. . .] only a continuous adjustment and scaling down of his needs" (16).

Once on the island, Maitland's thoughts turn almost immediately to his own person. Sitting dazed in the car, he performs an extensive "inventory of his body" (8). In a figurative sense, the shock of the accident is already forcing Maitland to dismantle a hitherto unexamined assumption of his body's wholeness. From that point onward, his body begins to take on the appearance of an aggregation of semi-autonomous parts, whose uncooperativeness produces the antagonistic quality of the whole. Maitland's self-examination reassures him that his body has passed through the crash relatively unscathed. The main injury he sustains is a triangular bruise on his head, "like the blade of a trowel" (9). This well-defined shape should give us pause, even if Maitland does not, or cannot, reflect on its significance because he is still overwhelmed by what has just happened to him. For one thing, the bruise prefigures the island's own triangular shape (11) and thus constitutes a symbolic branding. In effect, the island claims Maitland as its

own during the moment of impact, a conceit solidified later in the text whenever the island's grasses rustle excitedly in response to Maitland's thoughts of exploring or remaining on the island. As well, because Maitland sees the bruise in the rear-view mirror, it lends credence to the idea that an alter-ego, an entity that feels nothing and needs no one, is let loose permanently during the accident. This idea is bolstered by the triangle pattern's echoes of the three-point course of Maitland's regularised commutes between home, office and mistress. The island has claimed Maitland, but more specifically, it does so as a space in which Maitland's favoured detachment from his 'usual determinants' is allowed to intensify and develop in new ways. The bruise is, in this sense, symbolic of the space circumscribed by Maitland's week-to-week itineraries—the 'space of the between,' to evoke Luckhurst's hinge metaphor.

As a result of the island's 'possession' of Maitland, it seems only fitting that he sustains a serious injury only after going in search of immediate rescue. Once Maitland completes his inventory and is content that his physical injuries are relatively minor, his first impulse is to "climb the embankment, wave down a passing car and be on his way" (14). The impulse is compromised, however, by the alter ego signified in his bruise. In other words, even as Maitland climbs the embankment, forces within his own head are aligning against his more reasonable self. In turn, his bizarre behaviour on the roadside in chapter two—a tantrum brought on by the combination of shock, low-level exhaust poisoning, and his surprise and frustration at the general (or compulsory) indifference of passing motorists—can be viewed as an unconscious means to give himself an excuse for staying. Maitland probably does not realise it, or would not admit to it in any event, but

part of him wants to sustain the serious injury which he was spared in the original crash, precisely because it will immobilise him. In this way, his accident would become not just "some bizarre kind of rationalization" (9) for arriving home so abruptly after a week spent with Helen Fairfax, but a means to avoid going home altogether.

Quite apart from motivation though, it is Maitland's flesh that must eventually atone for the fuller emergence of this internal other. As Maitland discovers once he has climbed the embankment, the section of motorway off which he had crashed was designed without the scale and vulnerability of the human body in mind: "No pedestrian or emergency verge had been provided along this fast bend, and the cars speeding past him at sixty miles an hour were no more than three or four feet away" (17). In this way, chapter two presents us with a fairly unambiguous object lesson in the nature of the landscape of nonspaces: the body can survive there only as long as it is enclosed by the protective shield of (automotive) technology—and even then the potent mix of aggression and speed imperils it. The juxtaposition of Maitland's body and the speeding traffic brings to mind Anthony Vidler's observation that under the sign of what he calls the "posturban" the body loses its status as "the original ordering device mustered for every traditional city" (186).[7] Although Ballard's novels tend to make the obvious analogy between transit routes and the body's circulatory or nervous systems—a trope that is evident particularly in *The Atrocity Exhibition*—the landscape of freeways and overpasses in *Concrete Island* overwhelms Maitland's senses because it is suggestive of series of systems without limit—concrete and asphalt veins and arteries sustaining organs, the older urban centres, that are rarely seen because of the increasing amount of time the

average individual spends in transit between them. In any event, the roadside episode in chapter two ends with Maitland's quixotic attempt to slow down traffic by kicking a wooden trestle, all that remains of the barrier he had crashed through, out into the roadway (cf. 19–22). The futility of this challenge to the stream of cars is solidified when Maitland is struck in the leg by the very same piece of wood—turned into a veritable projectile by the passing car that hits it—and sent flying back down the embankment (22).

After Maitland's roadside injury, the narrative's emphasis on the hallucinatory quality of consciousness that arises from out of Maitland's physical ordeals becomes more pronounced. Indeed, Ballard's narrative can be read as a prolonged series of meditations on the interrelationship between the individual's (mistaken) impression of a distinction between mind and body, on the one hand, and the physical condition of that body, on the other. Lying in the grass at the foot of the embankment in chapter three, for example, Maitland has, "[f]or the first time since his accident," a moment of clarity (23); but this lucidity is presented as the by-product of more intense, site-specific physical pain: "The bruises on his temple and upper jaw, like the injuries to his legs and abdomen, were defined and localized, leaving his mind free" (23). Many passages in the narrative leading up to Proctor's entrance in chapter ten are subsequently taken up with Maitland's attempts to maintain authority over both that part of his psyche which revels in delirium and his inflamed and unruly body parts. The leg injured in chapter two becomes the central figure in the latter of the two trajectories, and a key component of the "conspiracy of the grotesque" (125) which keeps Maitland marooned in spite of statements to the effect that he is scheming to escape. On several occasions in the early part of the

narrative he tries to convince himself that his primary intention is to make it off the island and re-join society (cf. 14, 30, 32). A contusion at the hip joint turns Maitland's primary mode of conveyance around the island into a frustrating deadweight (the leg is described as feeling both like "a dead animal lashed to his belt" [26] and "the limb of some partly invisible companion" [57]), and in this way, the leg literally embodies the ironic reversal of Maitland's former life of ample comforts and conveniences. Although this reversal is far less sophisticated than the elaborate conceptual jokes that Ballard plays on, say, Vaughan in *Crash*, it is no less substantial. In effect, Ballard appeals to our *schadenfreude* through the satisfying image of a man who had grown too accustomed to covering a lot of ground in a relatively short time reduced so quickly to planning out the logistics of a mere hundred-yard walk.

A provisional climax to the trope of physical ordeal as a blunt rejoinder to Maitland's former life of affluence occurs in chapter nine, but it also marks the beginning of a new phase in his time on the island. The episode concludes Maitland's exploratory phase, but, more significant in this context, it also reveals a preliminary version of the impossible physical state—a body no longer needing the basic consumption of food and water—that he moves toward in the latter sections of the chapter. At the end of the chapter, Maitland, at the peak of his fever, symbolically divests himself of his injured limbs, identifying each body part and its pain with a different section of the island:

> Maitland found himself losing interest in his own body, and in the pain that inflamed his leg. He began to shuck off sections of his body, forgetting first his injured hip, then both his legs, erasing all awareness of his bruised chest and diaphragm. [. . .] Identifying the island with himself, he gazed at the cars in the breaker's yard, at

> the wire-mesh fence, and the concrete caisson behind him. These places of pain and ordeal were now confused with pieces of his body. [. . .] At each point a small ritual would signify the transfer of obligation from himself to the island.
>
> He spoke aloud, a priest officiating at the eucharist of his own body.
>
> "I am the island."
>
> The air shed its light. (70–71)

Here, the hallucination of a complete detachment of the self from the flesh compensates for the extremity of the body's exposure to hunger, fatigue and pain. Deep within his delirium, Maitland convinces himself that the island will absorb and thereby assuage his physical traumas, and also accept the burden of his 'obligations'—but to what exactly? The phrase is puzzling. Perhaps it refers to Maitland's 'obligation' to feel his own pain, but it could also be taken to mean that he wants the island to dissolve whatever tenuous feelings of attachment he still feels to the world he has left behind. In any case, Ballard is clearly evoking the centuries-old image of the Christian ascetic who attains higher states of consciousness and divine revelations by mortifying the flesh. Maitland's feverish perceptions are given the appearance of a religious ecstasy. However, if that is so, then what is it that is revealed to him? I sense that Ballard is trying to convince us that his protagonist has passed through the consequential phase of his sojourn, in which the 'affectless economies' of his former life are reversed in various confrontations with a more elementally physical side of his being, but has been rewarded a philosophical insight in return: an awareness of his existential isolation. Furthermore, within the limited confines of his new world, everything seems suddenly pregnant with meaning. We could say that Maitland has made the transition from a social world characterised by

half-hearted habit—his itinerary of commutes from wife and son, to mistress, to profession—to a solitary state which seems the more meaningful of the two on account of his new ritual behaviour.

Although the narrative presents Maitland's eucharist as a potential moment of transcendence, readers need not accept the idealisation of it without some reservation, or at least without considering how Ballard might also be undermining the ideal. For one thing, the eucharist strikes us as a pyrrhic victory because the ascetic ordeal takes place within a godless universe. Thus, it is difficult to put aside the suspicion that Maitland is experiencing a delusion glorified and sanctified by Ballard's narrative. Still further, we might feel inclined to question whether the amplification of ritual is sufficient grounds on which to distinguish the movement beyond sensory experience, which is both the prerequisite and the goal of Maitland's ceremony, from the desensitizing effect of non-place itself. In other words, has Maitland merely gone from one form of numbness to another, with only an increase in the sacramental quality of his behaviour to guarantee that the shift between them has been an improvement? I am not sure there is any way around these concerns, and the fact that they persist suggests that Ballard wants us to remain at least wary of the nature of Maitland's ecstasy.

If I tend to see this particular moment of ecstasy in ironic terms, it is because Ballard goes on in the very next chapter to the first encounter between Proctor and Maitland. The emphatically physical nature of that encounter suggests that Maitland's eucharist and identification with the island are premature, still too bound up with the childish self-pity that he displays so often during the first two and a half days of his exile. Proctor greets

Maitland with physical violence mainly because Maitland breaks into the air-raid shelter he calls home. The acrobat's assault provides an immediate rebuke to Maitland's renunciation of his body, re-grounding Maitland in the physical reality of his predicament. On another level, the fact that the confrontation takes place within one of the air-raid shelters brings their iconic presence into play. In their own way, air-raid shelters are anaesthetic structures par excellence. Their defensive profile provides an unambiguous figuration of the threatened individual's desire to shield itself from the harsh reality of the outside world. Like the interior of the automobile, the interior of the shelter speaks to intensified technological armouring of the body against its own vulnerability. But shelter is precisely what Maitland fails to find in Proctor's home, even though its interior, described as being like "the lair of some large and docile creature" (76), projects an air of stuffy warmth and security. Still further, Ballard's decision to stage the assault in Proctor's hovel is clearly meant to show that Maitland's delirious identification with the island constitutes a direct challenge to Proctor's claim on the same territory—a claim rooted in the duration of his tenancy. (Jane Sheppard tells Maitland at one point that "this place is all he's got. When they built the motorways they sealed him in—he never leaves here [. .]. It's pretty remarkable how he's survived" [98].) Maitland's assumption that he has stumbled into nothing more than an "abandoned beggar's hovel" (76), and this despite visible signs of occupancy (the quilts, the circus leotard), demonstrates he has been too quick in deeming the island uninhabited and his for the asking.

Clearly, Maitland's sense of his solitariness during the physical ordeals that make up the early sections of the novel is based on a false presumption: that just because he cannot perceive something through his senses, in this case other island inhabitants, it must of necessity not be there at all. In short, Proctor and Jane Sheppard's arrival on the scene contradicts the sense of entitlement Maitland has gained through a life of undisputed privilege. Accordingly, just as he is surprised to find that few drivers are willing to stop to rescue him despite their proximity (cf. 43), so too is he unnerved by the idea that Proctor and Sheppard might have had motives for *not* assisting him during the first few days of his marooning, even though they were only hundreds of feet away, observing his tribulations: "You *saw* the fire?" Maitland asks Jane, referring to his attempt in chapter seven to make a signal flare by setting his Jaguar alight (or to symbolically destroy the centrepiece in his consumer / commuter lifestyle), "Good God, why didn't you help me then?" (100). After that point, Maitland is forced to conclude that his presence on the island is as much, if not more of a threat to them, as their tenancy on the island is a threat to his desire for solitary existence—or at least for a life unburdened by serious commitments. The fact that Proctor and Sheppard were observing rather than rescuing Maitland becomes the foundation for the wary relationship that develops between the three of them. The antagonism that springs up between the trio, with which we will concern ourselves momentarily, takes on an important symbolic dimension: Proctor comes to embody the physical pain Maitland tried to surmount during his ritual divestment of the body, and provides Maitland with a surrogate body through which he can finally 'take leave of his senses'; Maitland's interaction with Sheppard, meanwhile,

allows him to role-play a new sexual relationship in which the woman is a combination of aspects of Catherine and Helen Fairfax—the emotional detachment of marriage, and the illicit quality of the extramarital affair—among other imaginary identities.

3. 'The unseen powers of the body': role-playing & the body beyond consumption

No matter how one reads Maitland's eucharist, with transcendence or irony in mind, it remains a rite of passage toward the body-beyond-consumption fantasy which concludes the narrative. In this way, the ceremony teases us with the possibility that Ballard's aim in the novel is to create a more resplendent aesthetic experience out of the anaesthetic envelope of non-places. To refer back to our earlier engagement with Augé and Morse, we might say that *Concrete Island* presents an early fictionalisation of the most idealistic possibilities of those zones. To get a sense of what I mean, it is important to note the difference in tone separating Morse's theorisation of non-place from Augé's; Luckhurst calls Morse's analysis "somewhat more apocalyptic" (130), and this is an accurate assessment. While Augé's anthropology seeks to identify a common experience of regimented isolation and anonymity, it also contains an intriguing hypothesis—the suggestion that specific individuals might experience the arbitrary suspension of their 'usual determinants' as an opportunity to try on other selves. The user of non-place is "[s]ubjected to a gentle form of possession," Augé writes, "to which he surrenders himself with more or less talent or conviction [. . . and] tastes for a while—like anyone who is possessed—the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing" (103). There is something curiously idealistic about this theorisation of non-

place possession. Whereas Morse's work is predicated on a lumpenproletariat of consumers and commuters, Augé's study adds at least a second dimension to what is basically the same phenomenon: rare moments when those with the prerequisite 'talent or conviction' are conscious of their own distracted state, and use it as an opportunity to pretend they are someone or something else, or find pleasure in the temporary dissolution of the everyday identity.[8] Although the connection is more tenuous than those made earlier, aspects of Maitland's island experience offer intriguing fictional correlates for Augé's role-playing concept. Certainly, in the novel's later episodes Maitland more or less leaves behind the remnants of his insincere attachments to Catherine and his son, to Helen Fairfax, and to his profession. In other words, he reaches a level of comfort with the anonymity he finds on the island as a fantastical extension of the non-place. This allows him to adopt new roles in relation to Proctor and Jane Sheppard (and be placed in new roles by them), and from there make the final transit, in his own mind at least, into a feeling of physical prowess and spiritual exultation in the absence of even basic sustenance—Ballard's closing metaphor for heroic independence and self-sufficiency.

In his interactions with Proctor, Maitland takes on the dual roles of father and teacher, and through them is able to experience the taboo pleasure of ambivalently nurturing and brutalising a (surrogate) child. Additionally, by subjugating and then exploiting Proctor, Maitland symbolically 'puts down' the last revolt of his body, which opens the way toward his final position on the island.

Proctor, more so than Seagrave in *Crash*, is symbolic of intransigent corporeality. Maitland's very first peripheral glimpse of the acrobat is of a "broad, thick-chested

figure" running toward him with "head lowered like a bull's between swaying shoulders" (76). Novelist Martin Amis has described Proctor as merely another of Ballard's "perfunctory grotesques" (101), and it is not hard to see why. Over the course of successive descriptions Proctor appears composed of extraneous flab, rather than flesh arranged into a definable shape: "Ridges of silver scar tissue marked his cheeks and eyebrows, almost joining across the depressed bridge of his nose, a blob of amorphous cartilage that needed endless attention" (87). And if this is not enough, Ballard completes the connection between acrobat and physicality by alerting us to his personal history, specifically a fall from a high-wire during adolescence, which left him permanently brain-damaged (98). On the basis of such details, one imagines Proctor as a body wandering the island almost independent of the enfeebled mind held within. As a result of Proctor's mental handicap, Maitland's self-serving decision to teach the tramp to read and write (150)—self-serving because he really wants to manoeuvre Proctor into inadvertently writing calls for help on the concrete surfaces of the motorways—is doomed from the start. Nevertheless, Maitland experiences "a surge of pride" in instructing Proctor because it reminds him of "the pleasure he had found in teaching his son to play chess" (151). The sentiment is almost touching in its fatherliness, except for the fact that Maitland's motivations for interacting with the tramp are revealed to be consistently duplicitous. Through Proctor, then, Maitland can treat a stand-in for his son with a mixture of care and abuse, and without incurring some kind of penalty or social censure.

Maitland's interaction and struggles with the acrobat / tramp are also, more symbolically speaking, a contest with himself. The metonymic link between Maitland

and the acrobat is firmly established when Proctor dons Maitland's dinner jacket after assaulting him in the shelter (87). The jacket, a relic of Maitland's former life of affluence, is not enough to keep Maitland's memory of his former attachments alive, but its absurd presence on Proctor's physical bulk means that Maitland is, in a sense, dealing with a parody of his former self whenever he interacts with the tramp. The connection between the two is further strengthened if Proctor's inability to coordinate his movements when performing relatively simple acrobatic tricks is linked to Maitland's on-going struggles with his injured leg. Where earlier Maitland had tried to rouse himself by striking at the leg (45), in these later chapters he directs the same violence outward toward Proctor's body. In "Beast and Rider," for example, we see Maitland riding around on the acrobat's back and beating him about the neck (144), an image that makes literal, and thereby finalises, Proctor's developing role as the vehicle for Maitland's surmounting of sensory affect.

As one might expect given Proctor's associations with elemental corporeality, Maitland's subjugation of the acrobat is accomplished through an especially crude physical act: Maitland urinates on him (135). This occurs in "The Duel," where the struggle for control of the island comes to a head; Proctor is drunk on Maitland's burgundy throughout the episode, as he and Jane Sheppard play the fool with Maitland. In response to what he perceives as the tramp's insolence (Proctor wears "an expression of pride and obsequiousness, hostility confused in his mind with a keen need to earn Maitland's approval" [134] throughout the episode), Maitland dispenses with the bartering and subtle psychological manipulations he had tried with Proctor in previous

chapters, and resorts to degrading him in the same way that Jane Sheppard claims local police had done years earlier (97). The act signifies on several levels. The grotesque detail of the urine dripping over the lapels of the dinner jacket indicates that Maitland is symbolically renouncing what little is left of his former social status. In effect, he ruins one of his remaining prized possessions intentionally, whereas his earlier burning of the Jaguar was, on the surface at least, an attempt to re-join his former life of affluence. In turn, the act also establishes Maitland's dominance over the body and dominion over the island. Proctor, as the corporeal's representative, is noticeably frozen in place with humiliation (135); soaking in urine, he is linked explicitly with the abject.[9] Meanwhile, Ballard's deliberate choice of words solidifies Maitland's identification with the island. The urine is said to "seethe" in the dust at Proctor's side (135); on its own the detail seems negligible, but Ballard uses the word frequently in *Concrete Island*, to the point where it becomes an irritating distraction,[10] whenever he is describing the island's grasses, and in particular when he is trying to convey 'its' delight at Maitland's decisions to explore or remain within its confines. The verbal connection between the grasses and Maitland's urine, in a way, helps complete the earlier eucharist ceremony, in that it identifies the natural processes of his body with the natural features of the island, and thereby divests Proctor of his native land rights.[11] Finally, the act completes the other half of Maitland's role as callous father. As he admits to himself after the fact, "his humiliation of Proctor had been entirely calculated; he had degraded the old tramp in the crudest way he could. But even this brutal act had given him a certain pleasure. [. . .] Determined to survive above all else, he would exploit this strain of cruelty in himself"

(139). The appeal to 'survival' strikes us as slightly dishonest. Maitland probably does want to survive, even at the expense of Proctor and Jane Sheppard, but my sense is that the drift of the narrative thus far should make us suspect that his 'pleasure' in the act is an end in itself.

As a final comment on the relationship between Maitland and Proctor, it should be pointed out that it is not solely characterised by Maitland's ambivalent nurturing and brutalisation of the tramp. On the contrary, Maitland's movement beyond delirium and physical trauma to the novel's final conceit is aided by a religious frame of mind which he seems to have inherited from Proctor—although it is in evidence during his eucharist ceremony as well. The initial description of the interior of Proctor's hovel is suggestive of a sacred space: "On the wooden table a number of metal objects were arranged in a circle like ornaments on an altar. All had been taken from motor-car bodies—a wing mirror, strips of chromium window trim, pieces of broken headlamp" (76). The circular configuration of the objects gives them a sacred quality, as does the altar-like table, and suggests that Proctor finds a certain holiness in the wrecked cars and their drivers. Still later in the narrative, Proctor shows Maitland a more specialised arrangement of parts just from his Jaguar, laid out in the crypt of the ruined church, "like an elaborate altarpiece on which would one day repose the bones of a revered saint" (160)—Maitland himself, presumably. Although Maitland responds to this symbolic premature burial with a certain amount of dismay, he nevertheless seems to have adopted similar practices by the end of the novel. After the acrobat's death, Maitland not only buries him but also considers "leav[ing] a token portion [of food] beside his grave" (176). I think the point one is

supposed to derive from this connection is that Maitland's experiences on the island, and his interactions with Proctor in particular, have resulted in a replacement of his former commodity fetishism (his own hoarding of objects, like the car, the dinner jacket, the bottles of burgundy) with another belief system that seems, to him at least, to carry a greater weight of significance, and therefore constitute an enhancement of his spiritual life.

Maitland's interactions with the island's other inhabitant, Jane Sheppard, are also largely a matter of role-playing. With Sheppard, Maitland takes on or is placed into the roles of capitalist exploiter, petulant child, father-figure, fickle lover, and prostitute's john—among others. I will reserve comment on Sheppard's perspective on these roles (her partial construction of them, moreover) for the discussion of Ballard's characterisation which concludes the following chapter; here, we are concerned only with Maitland's side of the equation. From his point of view, Sheppard combines aspects of Catherine and Helen Fairfax *as Maitland wants to see them*. On the one hand, Sheppard sometimes displays an indifference to Maitland's presence, or a generalised remoteness that reminds him of Catherine. Interestingly enough, he expresses this connection to himself, once again, through the intermediary of domestic space, linking Sheppard's stuffy yet cozy squat in the basement of the ruined cinema[12] to his house with Catherine:

> Sitting over a primus stove with her in this shabby room for some reason reminded [Maitland] of the first months of his marriage to Catherine, and their formal meals. Although Catherine had furnished the apartment herself [. . .], he had felt the same dependence on her, the same satisfaction at being surrounded by strange furniture. Even their present house had been designed to avoid the hazards of over-familiarity. (99)

On the other hand, Sheppard has the sexual allure of a mistress, and thus comes to be identified in Maitland's mind with the illicit quality that he perhaps wants from his liaison with Helen Fairfax, but may not be receiving: "He was puzzled by [Jane's] mixture of warmth and aggression, her swerves from blunt speaking to outright deviousness. More and more, he found himself looking at her body, and was irritated by his own sexual response to the offhand way in which she exploited herself" (99). Conveniently for Maitland, then, Sheppard supports both of his sexist projections. Her presence allows him to enjoy for a time the blending into one object of those things he wished Catherine and Fairfax to be—or had reduced them to in his fantasies.

The only exchange between Maitland and Sheppard that should be commented on briefly is their sexual encounter in chapter eighteen, because it is really the last extreme sensory experience that Maitland will have before Sheppard and Proctor leave the island ("He tried to remember every pressure and movement of this sexual act, the orgasm that bolted through every over-stressed nerve in his body" [142]). Sheppard takes the initiative and decides to initiate sexual intercourse with Maitland, but demands money in return for it (141). From Maitland's point of view, she does this out of "a recognition of their need to avoid any hint of commitment to each other" (142). In effect, the introduction of a miniature currency economy into their 'sex act' allows Maitland to play out the fantasy of a strictly physical relationship beyond affect. In effect, he can experience intense sexual pleasure with this new 'wife,' where presumably the passion had died in his marriage to Catherine, while the business-like exchange of money gives him the noncommital and excitingly sordid sexual liaison that we sense he wants from a

mistress, but never gets from Helen Fairfax, the "sensible" (16) pediatrician. This realization leads Maitland to re-evaluate all of his past emotional relationships: "His relationships with Catherine and his mother, even with Helen Fairfax, all the thousand and one emotionally loaded transactions of his childhood, would have been tolerable if he had been able to pay for them in some neutral currency, hard cash across the high-priced counters of these relationships" (142). In emotional terms, Maitland reaches a zero-point of feeling, here. But ironically enough, Maitland's words actually affirm that human relationships are complex, even though he finds himself attracted to the notion of reducing his former attachments to economic or financial terms. He wants these difficult emotional entanglements to be easily measured out in a 'neutral currency' because that would absolve him of responsibility for fulfilling his end of the commitment. But just because he finds in Sheppard a woman with whom he can symbolically make manifest the latent economic content of his former relationships, it does not necessarily follow that readers should applaud his honesty. The fulfilment of his "need to be freed from his past, from his childhood, his wife and friends, with all their affections and demands" (142) is represented as a necessary moment of self-knowing, but one can, I think, let him have this knowledge as a kind of personal breakthrough without having to sign off on the idea. In longing to "rove for ever within the empty city of his own mind" (142), Maitland in effect desires an illusion, an impossibility. His experience on the island has already alerted us to the fact that no city, and no city of the mind, is ever truly empty; even when apparently uninhabited, ghosts lurk in remote corners, like the island itself. Perhaps, then, Ballard uses this episode to point out, in negative terms, the difference between forms of

commitment or obligation that exceed the restrictive and reductive boundaries of the economic exchange model of relations between individuals, on the one hand, and, on the other, the world of commodity exchange beyond the island, which is the substructure of the consumer-world that has in part produced Maitland.

In any event, the conclusion of the episode undercuts almost everything Maitland had assumed about the "charade" (142) of the exchange of money for sex, and perhaps also about the nature of Sheppard's interest in their role-playing relationship. Simply put, she replaces the money in his wallet (142). Although her motivations for doing this remain a mystery, one wonders whether she was not in fact using the five pounds either to suppress genuine yet conflicted feelings for Maitland, or taking pleasure from acting out the fantasy scenario of her own prostitution—playing at "the caricature of a small-town forties whore" (89) on her own initiative for a change, instead of having to sell sex, most likely to men like Maitland, just to get by—in which case Maitland's involvement is incidental. In turn, Sheppard's eventual departure from the island might signify that she is leaving so as to avoid the further development of an emotional bond with Maitland, or it might be proof of her independence of Maitland—and of her indifference to his fate.

Many critics have read the novel as a gradual working out of Maitland's conquest over and colonisation of the island and its inhabitants, taking the death of Proctor and the final departure of Jane Sheppard as signs of Maitland's triumph. Michel Delville, for instance, writes that "Maitland manages to assert his ascendancy over Sheppard and Proctor by exploiting a strain of ruthlessness and cruelty that seems to develop from his new sense of empathy with the secret nature of the island" (45). The ascendancy brings

with it the emergence of "unknown energies [. . .] buried under the weight of civilized rationality and affections" (45). This argument can be taken in a slightly different direction. Throughout his theatrical phase with Proctor and Jane Sheppard, Maitland is moving gradually toward a fantasy about his own relation to his flesh—a perspectival dreamworld beyond not just feeling (the apotheosis of affectlessness) but also basic consumption. Ballard's narrative introduces the idea in the final few chapters. In one episode, appropriately titled "Delirium," Maitland notes that "[h]is injured thigh and hip, his mouth and right temple, had all now healed, as if this magical therapy [the eucharist] had somehow worked and he had successfully left these wounded members at their designated points" (156). Similarly, in the following chapter Maitland begins to believe that "[h]e had now gone beyond exhaustion and hunger to a state where the laws of physiology, the body's economy of needs and responses, had been suspended" (163). What we see in these passages is a prime example of Ballard's idealised "speculative poetry and fantasy of science" (*A User's Guide* 198)—in this case, a fantasy physiology with its attendant hallucinatory consciousness. In this regard, it is important to note that Maitland's mind is put through the same symbolic divestment process: paradoxically, the act of "shed[ding] sections of [. . .] mind, shucking off those memories of pain, hunger and humiliation" (156), is presented as being full of intentionality, although this leaves us wondering whether Maitland can still be thought of *as* Maitland in these concluding sections of the narrative, or whether every last trace of his former self has been supplanted.

That said, how can we tell that Maitland's delirium is not (only) the visionary experience that he believes it is? As we have seen in the previous novels of the quartet, Ballard's narrative subtleties come into play here. The assertions quoted above have a ring of conviction about them because the narration offers no ironic tags. However, other references to Maitland's feeling of exaltation introduce a hint of equivocation: "[H]e was *convinced* that his body was no longer absorbing anything he ate or drank" (164, emphasis added), for example. The qualification about Maitland's conviction, apart from the narrative's tacit endorsement of that convinction, suggests that his confidence in the credibility of the experience should not prevent readers from imagining a quite different, and less idealistic actuality for his body. Jane Sheppard's perception of his real physical state reinforces this stark distinction between inner world of consciousness and outward appearance: at the end of chapter twenty-two, she tells him bluntly that he looks like "a bag of bones" (166). In this way, Ballard represents the ascetic's moment of transcendence over the limitations of the flesh as inextricable from a more mundane biochemical reality; or in a slightly different vein, imbues the link between psychology and / or perception and physiology with a sense of wonder.

Additionally, the fantasy of a body beyond consumption takes on a political dimension if we approach it with one eye on the world Maitland has left behind. Where Maitland's earlier physical ordeals suggested an intensification of sensory experience beyond technological armouring, the end point of the narrative brings him (back) to an anaesthetic state. But if the before and after images of Maitland are at the very least analogous, has he merely wound up back where he began? The answer is no. Clearly,

the two anaesthetic states may be analogous dreamworlds, but Ballard tries to convince us of the superiority of the latter. Maitland's resplendent solitude is arrived at through the positive assertion of a will which is more independent (if not completely out of control) than that shown by either Maitland as commuter-man, or the more infantile version of himself who tilts at passing cars in the novel's opening few chapters. Maitland's belief in his own movement beyond basic consumption can be seen as a negative reflection of the so-called phantasmagoria of capital, in which the consumption of goods and services is often presented to us, through advertising and by political leaders and their economists, as something like a private virtue (the sign that the individual is benefiting from a solid work ethic), or a public duty (the individual's contribution to his or her country's robust economy and rank among nations locked in competition). In a way, this returns us to an earlier suggestion: that Maitland's sojourn on the island can be read as an intensification of the subjective experience of non-place. Using the novel's architectural metaphors, we might say that the anaesthetic interior of Maitland's Jaguar, as the archetypal structure for that experience, is modulated over the course of the narrative, through the cavernous form of the air-raid shelters, to arrive at the "pavilion" that Proctor builds for Maitland out of recovered car parts:

> Maitland lay back in the small shack, a pavilion of rust, which Proctor had built around him out of the discarded sections of car bodies. A semi-circle of doors formed the sides, tied together by their window pillars. Above, two hoods completed a primitive roof. Maitland lay comfortably in the opening doorway of the pavilion, watching with satisfaction as Proctor completed the last assembly. (162)

Within the hallucination of a new state beyond feeling, Maitland no longer fears physical hardship, and so the structure in which he finds a sense of place, rather than security, has walls composed solely of thresholds, signifiers of possibility rather than enclosure (cf. Stephenson 76)—a less than stately pleasure dome for the culture of the motorway. Overall, then, Ballard follows the more emphatic reversals of fortune contained in the first half of *Concrete Island* with a remarkable aestheticisation of the "prosaic" (Augé 94) experience of non-places in the latter half. The former appears as a more strident strategy of critique, while the latter tries to redeem the experience of moving through the landscape surrounding the island.

This chapter on *Concrete Island* has traced Maitland's path through the physical ordeals of the first half of the narrative, toward a fantastical state of being which is beyond the body's most primary needs and pain thresholds, but which also develops out of the accumulation of extreme sensations and prolonged deprivation. My consideration of the latter episodes of the novel has allowed Maitland the advantage of the visionary conclusion to his story, and in doing so, essentially concurred with Delville that the emergence of both the "unseen powers" of Maitland's body and the feeling of "quiet exultation" that is an outgrowth of it (*CI* 175) are signs of "affirmative [. . .] self-liberation" (Delville 46). While this way of accounting for Maitland's fate has been popular among Ballard's critics, it has had its skeptics, too. David Punter, like Delville, equates Maitland's self-liberation with his ability to dominate the island's spaces and other inhabitants, but rightly points out that Maitland's control over the island at the end of the novel amounts to little more than "useless sovereignty," because such power lacks

meaning beyond the boundaries of human society (17). Without Jane Sheppard, Proctor and, arguably, his former self to exercise control over, there is technically no power dynamic present, nor kingdom to be ruled—which may, after all, be the point: a total retreat from economies of control to match Maitland's movement beyond feeling. Luckhurst goes even further than this by questioning whether Maitland gains sovereignty at all: "It remains uncertain whether Maitland's fevered identifications with the island are being affirmed or ironized[,]" he writes, "The inability to exploit the colonial machinery of the transformation of 'virgin' territory into discursively mapped province would suggest the latter" (137). In other words, the island remains no more knowable to Maitland in the end, than it did during his earlier explorations.

* * *

Like *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* before it, *Concrete Island* emphasises the physical dimensions of Maitland's world. A significant portion of its narrative is devoted to the practical matters of Maitland's survival, to the emblematic link between his injured body and the island's confines, and to Proctor's symbolic role as an uncooperative physical element. Maitland's physical ordeals on the island, spread out over the course of the first ten chapters, impress upon him a sense of the real—the real of elemental corporeality—that had been obscured by the 'anaesthetic envelope' of his car's interior and by his affinity for the architectonics of non-places. In short, these ordeals become an extended lesson in the vulnerability of human flesh. Veering between bouts of delirium and moments of lucidity or calm rationality, Maitland begins to believe in the detachment of his mind and battered body, but underneath these shifts in consciousness, the body

itself—injured, starving and exhausted—behaves like an obstacle to Maitland's aspirations and, through its various traumas, helps generate Maitland's delusion of a mind coming loose from its moorings in the flesh. In this way, *Concrete Island* reiterates the intransigent corporeality apparent in episodes from the previous novels, such as the car-wash scene in *Crash*.

That said, the body also takes on a catalysing role in Maitland's movement toward a feeling of transcendence. While his various physical ordeals frustrate his half-hearted attempts to escape the island, they also come to satisfy his need to 'rove for ever within the empty city of his own mind.' They are the foundation for the transformation of Maitland's consciousness, a process of change that is furthered by other aspects of his island sojourn, such as his discovery of the island's ruins, the regressions back to childhood that accompany these discoveries, and his histrionic interactions with Proctor and Jane Sheppard. With *Concrete Island*, then, Ballard replaces the various gestures toward a bio-technological sublime that we saw in *Atrocity* and *Crash* with what appears to be a disengagement from modern technology; and yet, as is apparent from the novel's latter half, the narrative turns out to tentatively romanticise a core experience of contemporaneity, the institutionalised solitariness articulated by theorists such as Augé and Morse.

The last novel in Ballard's quartet, *High-Rise*, to which we turn now, would in a way build on some of the aspects introduced in *Concrete Island*. The fantasy of a body strengthened, rather than diminished, by its own degradation and deprivation would replay itself in the parallel stories of *High-Rise*'s three protagonists. As well, Maitland's

(enforced) retreat from the world of non-places would be taken in a slightly new direction: the semi-automatic descent of *High-Rise*'s characters into forms of primitive existence within their building of ample conveniences. Finally, Ballard would amplify in *High-Rise* the perspectivism which is faintly apparent in Maitland's dealings with Jane Sheppard. That is to say, he would gesture more emphatically toward a missing 'reality' made up of the competing points of view of his various characters—or more so than is evident in the extreme subjectivism of *Atrocity* and *Crash*, where the reader's perception of the fictional world is proscribed, almost totally, by the perspectives of his central protagonists.

Notes

1. Several critics have commented on the relationships between not just *Concrete Island* and *The Tempest*, but between Ballard's oeuvre more generally and Shakespeare's play: cf. David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet*: p. 49; Gregory Stephenson, *Out of the Night and Into the Dream*: p.79; Nicholas Ruddick, *Ultimate Island*: pp.89–93; Michel Delville, *J.G. Ballard*: p.47.

2. Augé and Morse, totally independent of one another, produced theories of contemporary spatial organisation that update Michel de Certeau's original concept of "non-place" [*non-lieu*, translated by Stephen Rendall as "nowhere" (102–5)] for an urban landscape dominated by, among other newer phenomena, the presence of raised, sunken, or circumferential superhighways. The non-place for de Certeau, writing more than a decade earlier, is essentially an unconscious 'city' of movements produced by anonymous populations of pedestrians traversing various places within the metropolis. Pedestrians create 'space' so long as they are cognizant of how their movements or actions disrupt the established, 'proper' name of a place. By contrast, non-place appears as the result of an absence of such awareness—the effect of movement not thought of as some kind of resistance to the dictates of urban planning and institutional control.

3. Qualitatively speaking, the term *supermodernity* is intended to register the excessive character of contemporaneity, summed up by Augé in three specific figures of excess: excess of time, space, and ego. The first, excess of time, should perhaps read 'excess of history': it is meant to designate a crisis in historical thinking caused by a contemporaneity constantly drawing attention to itself *as* history, as series of events that its subjects assume future historians will refer to as significant moments in *their* history (cf *Non-places* 30). Supermodernity's excess of space is, meanwhile, the effect of paradoxical perceptions: on the one hand, we now perceive terrestrial space as cosmologically tiny when compared to the atmospheric, lunar and intergalactic spaces accessible to our advanced telescopic and still-fledgling interstellar technologies; on the other hand, as Augé states, "the world is becoming open to us [. . .] in an era characterized by changes of scale" (31), by which he means our vehicular and televisual technologies are steadily reducing the extensions of three-dimensional space on Earth's surface, allowing our gazes to consume distant spaces hitherto inaccessible, both as tourists and channel-surfers. Finally, by excess of ego, Augé means the generalised "individualization of references" (39) that results from the current instability of collective identities which in the past dominated cultural discourse: unions, political philosophies, revolutionary ideologies, centralized religions, and so forth. The built environments of supermodernity are in part characterised by the fact that these collective identities no longer have a place in which to form themselves, gain credibility, develop organically, or become institutions. Instead, as Augé will go on to argue in his phenomenology of non-place, supermodernity engenders little or no organic social life of its own (cf. 94).

4. Morse's notion of contemporary nonspace includes a similar form of structured irresponsibility, which she names the "ontology of everyday distraction" (193). Her approach to contemporary spatial practice historicises de Certeau's notion of walking in the city as a potential act of resistance. Morse claims, quite rightly, that de Certeau's theory "bears the marks of its conception in [. . .] a premall, prefreeway, and largely print-literate, pretelevisual world" (195). Starting sometime in the 1970s, then, Certeau's notion of resistance through spatial practice was co-opted by the very systems of control which he was trying to theorise a way out of. "de Certeau's very means of escape are now designed into the geometries of everyday life," Morse writes, "and his figurative practices of enunciation [. . .] are modeled in representation itself" (195). The nonspace that results from this absorption and re-packaging of opposition by the system is characterised by regimented forms of "distraction" (194).

5. My sense is that we should imagine the shelters as military archetypes, their outward appearance transcending their national context (if not historical accuracy as well) in a way that sets them apart from the Victorian and Edwardian houses. Perhaps we should picture them as military archetypes related to forms that Ballard had in mind while writing *The Atrocity Exhibition* pieces. In an annotation to *Atrocity* (the particular text-block to which the annotation is linked bears some striking resemblances to *Concrete Island*: in it, T— finds his way into a weapons range which, like Maitland's island, is defined by a perimeter fence and features its own ruined structures peeking through the grass—a runway, some concrete bunkers, and a quonset [*Atrocity* 3]) Ballard reflected that

> [w]eapons ranges have a special magic, all that destructive technology concentrated on the production of nothing, the closest we can get to certain obsessional states of mind. Even more strange are the bunkers of the Nazi Atlantic Wall [. . .]. Space-age cathedrals, they threaten the surrounding landscape like Teutonic knights, and are examples of cryptic architecture, where form no longer reveals function. They seem to contain the codes of some mysterious mental process. At Utah Beach [. . .] they stare out over the washed sand, older than the planet. On visits with my agent and his wife I used to photograph them obsessively. (*Atrocity* 15)

6. Incidentally, this American serviceman figure appears in *Crash*, too, as the only pedestrian to die as a result of Vaughan's activities; a detail mentioned by Vera Seagrave late in the novel (cf. 163). The serviceman's death is the reason why the police come to question Vaughan in chapter sixteen (115–16). The fact that Vaughan has run down someone defenceless might contribute to his unhinging at the scene of Seagrave's death. That is to say, it seems like another blunt reminder that his theory of the car crash is not working out as he had hoped.

7. Vidler's notion of the posturban does not describe physical modifications in the urban landscape, as does Augé's theory of supermodernity and non-places, so much as an experience generated as the subject moves from suburb, to strip, to urban centre (*The*

Architectural Uncanny 186). The mobile subject perceives them as having "merged indistinguishably into a series of states of mind[,]" and with "no systematic map that might be carried in the memory, we wander [. . .] surprised but not shocked by the continuous repetition of the same, the continuous movement *across* already vanished thresholds that leave only traces of their former status as places" (186). Although there is a certain family resemblance between Vidler's concept and those of Augé and Morse, the latter two tend to describe an experience of space that separates the subject temporarily from places that speak of history.

8. There are problems inherent in this idea of role-playing within non-place. First of all, when Augé writes of 'talent' and 'conviction,' he is in effect smuggling indications of place past the security guards of logic, and thus undermining his own notion of a temporary suspension of "usual determinants"; for surely an individual's talent and sense of conviction are predicated upon the level and type of acculturation he or she has undergone. Additionally, it is conceivable that for each of Augé's three archetypal non-places—freeway, supermarket, airport—we could come up with sets of scenarios in which the individual's passivity or agency would depend to a large degree on elements of identity that cannot be shaken off or suspended. Indeed, the authorities regulating non-places are more likely to tolerate only specific forms of role-playing, and then only from a constituency distinguished by outward signs of race, gender, ethnicity, class, etc. In this regard, would the corralling of different cultures within a major airport, for instance, facilitate or complicate this notion of role-playing? Skin colour, items of national dress, languages and dialects, personal belongings suggestive of specific locales: all of these signs are intensified by the unavoidable physical juxtapositions of the departure lounge. We would have to assume that these signs constitute 'licences to act.' Individuals cannot help but display them, especially within the context of predominantly visual forms of remote surveillance. Hence, outward signs of identity that parallel or even enhance anonymity—that is, make us look like 'inconspicuous passengers'—would become assets in spaces of extensive surveillance. They would give the wearer better 'cover' and, in turn, more latitude if and when he decided to act out or up in the manner suggested by Augé's notion of role-playing.

9. Given that Proctor is a kind of cipher for Maitland's body, his climactic trapeze act in chapter twenty-three might be said to symbolise Maitland's own movement beyond confrontation with a body that has endured much, and may never receive any form of relief. At the end of that chapter, Proctor shimmies up a rope dangling from a workmen's cradle, which has been lowered over the side of the overpass, throws off Maitland's dinner jacket, and begins to go through a series of trapeze-like movements (171), before being garotted in the ropes as the workmen's truck abruptly pulls away. On one level the gesture of divestment symbolises a release from Maitland's authority: the trapeze routine returns Proctor momentarily to the pleasures of his own body, which "radiated confidence in every movement" (171). In more figurative terms, though, it might signify the beginning of Maitland's delirious sense that his own body is actually gaining strength despite the prolonged deprivation and traumas.

10. Cf. pages 68, 74, 86, 89, 102, 105, 118, 128, 155 & 161.

11. In addition to the corporeal, Proctor is also linked to the earth, to the terrain of the island itself. Where the island is described at one point as an "immense green creature" (68), Proctor is its walking counterpart: a "large and docile creature" that Maitland imagines living in the air-raid shelter just prior to being attacked by him (76). And whereas Maitland derives no end of frustration from simply trying to move across the overgrown terrain of the island, Proctor is able to feel his way through the swirling grasses by sense of touch alone (150).

12. If Proctor's air-raid shelter provides the island with its primitive chapel, then Sheppard's cinema basement is its debating hall, art gallery and brothel all in one. It is significant that the first things Maitland notices when he wakes up in the cinema basement, after having been beaten up by Proctor, are posters of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Ché Guevara and Charles Manson, "a Black Power manifesto," and psychedelic artwork on the walls (80). This curious mix of icons sums up Ballard's media landscape very well, by blending signs of popular entertainment, political radicalism, celebrity, violence and fashion. We might view them as the only 'religious' icons available in a world vacated by the divine. The figures depicted preside over the island's scarcity, as they most likely did during the postwar period, as cinema patrons went to see movies amid still-visible signs of wartime structural damage.

Chapter Six

Deviant in Theory, Satiric in Practice: *High-Rise*

The discussion of *Crash* in chapter three explored ways in which Vaughan's elaborate theory of the cultural significance of car crashes was undermined by an aura of consequence emanating from tropes of elemental corporeality. In *Concrete Island*, Ballard's tendency to employ theoretical discourse in the narrative, or to make specific characters spokespersons for various theories, was played down somewhat, although Jane Sheppard's ineffectual political rants would have some bearing on such a discussion (cf. *CI* 96, 98, 113). With *High-Rise* (1975), the final novel in the quartet, theoretical discourse or speculative thought reappears in abundance. All three of the novel's protagonists put forward hypotheses, or three variants of the same hypothesis, about the bizarre events that take place when their apartment complex reaches full occupancy—"critical mass" as one of them calls it (*HR* 15). The conspicuous presence of speculative thought in the narrative leads potentially to an interpretative dilemma that we have already encountered in relation to *The Atrocity Exhibition*. When individual characters, like *Atrocity*'s Dr Nathan, place narrative events and their own behaviour within sophisticated theoretical frames, the critically minded reader is left wondering whether further commentary is even worth making.[1] With *Atrocity* this critical redundancy is a major factor principally because the text at times parrots the discourse and lay-out of scientific reports, instead of placing such passages within a surrounding frame of fiction. Faced with this blurring of the lines between theory and fiction, Roger

Luckhurst wondered whether it was possible "to divide the literary and the theoretical, [to] defend *Atrocity* as a novel centring on T—, with an appendix of scientific reports" (74), and thereby refute the presupposition that the text is little more than "'a minimal overlay of narrative gestures on a mass of theory?'" (Colin Greenland qtd. in Luckhurst 73). In terms of style, *High-Rise*'s narrative is far more conventional than that of *Atrocity*, but regardless of this fact, I am asking essentially the same question of it that Luckhurst asks of its predecessor. To my mind, the 'literary' component of *High-Rise* rests mainly in its implicit satire of the theoretical positions on offer in the narrative.

But how does this satirical component manifest itself? *High-Rise* is markedly different from *Crash* and *Concrete Island* in that its narrative is not centred exclusively on a single protagonist's point of view, but in fact split equally three ways between its protagonists: Robert Laing, a physiologist; Richard Wilder, a television journalist; and Anthony Royal, one of the high-rise's architects. The narrative begins and ends with Laing's story, and this 'bookend' effect raises his profile slightly, by giving him the first and last word. However, the addition of two other points of view creates an emphatic perspectivism, in which the significance of one character's experience cannot be easily promoted above another. Thus, although I interpret Laing's theory and experience of the high-rise's social transformation as the primary 'ideal' scenario in the novel, I try to show that Ballard's decision to contrast Laing's story with another substantive narrative, Wilder's, in which things do not work out nearly as well, creates an unresolvable suspension—and also a more emphatic sense of satirical purpose overall.[2]

The following study begins, then, with an examination of the theory which is ostensibly the central speculative idea in *High-Rise*. Early in the narrative, Laing tries to explain the transformation of social order within the apartment complex, by envisioning the building as a machine which manufactures its tenants into deviants, and thereby offers them an avenue toward a realm of liberated instincts and unmediated impulses. Laing's speculations are subsequently borne out by his own experiences in the slide toward primitivism, and this would seem to suggest that he is the de facto spokesperson for the novel and its author. As we saw in chapter one, Ballard has said elsewhere that the writing of his fiction is a kind of laboratory work ("Introduction" *Crash* 9), and if this is true, then Laing could be said to carry the burden of the author's own speculations by carrying out a successful 'experiment' on himself. The first section explains the significance of Laing's ideas, offers a brief close reading of his experiences, and isolates those factors which reveal his generalising theory of high-rise living to have only limited, perhaps just singular, applicability.

If Laing's experience is the putative success story of the high-rise, then Wilder's story offers us the companion cautionary tale—and the subject of section two. Wilder is yet another of Ballard's 'body' characters, but more intelligent than either *Crash*'s Seagrave, or Proctor in *Concrete Island*. That said, Wilder is like Seagrave in that he is the only one of *High-Rise*'s principal characters who has children. This makes his marked zeal for both the deterioration of social order within the building, and the promise of perverse pleasure without impunity, more troubling in comparison to the solitary figure of Laing, and the married but childless Royal. Where Seagrave's self-destruction could be read as

an intentional stab at *Crash*'s core theory, and from there a desperate protest against Vaughan's exploitation of him, Wilder's fate seems to be both a cruel joke on *him*, and an example of the potentially disastrous implications of Laing's theory. Over the course of two attempts to ascend the high-rise, Wilder forfeits his reason, becoming little more than an adult infant, and is eventually murdered by a group of cannibalistic women who end up looking after the few children that remain in the complex. In section two, I interpret this fate as a symbolic punishment for Wilder's renunciation of fatherhood, as well as for his serial mistreatment of women. Overall, Wilder's trajectory through the high-rise impresses on us just how rarefied Laing's 'success' actually is. By the end of the novel, Laing's unchecked enjoyment of "wayward impulses" (172) looks more and more as if it exists inside a vacuum that is synonymous with his bachelorhood, self-imposed isolation, and general lack of ambition (he ends up where he begins, in his apartment).

The third and final section begins with a consideration of the gender limitations of *High-Rise*, if not of the quartet as a whole. The novel's tripartite narrative may be emphatically perspectival, but the choice of three male protagonists makes one wonder whether Ballard's relativist universe is a boys-only club. *High-Rise* quite noticeably refuses to show us events taking place within the high-rise from the perspective of a woman resident, and the patriarchal organisation of the clan system that emerges once the building's services break down suggests that Ballard writes women into his novel only as chattel for his male characters. At the same time, though, women in *High-Rise* are just as capable of impulsive brutality as their male counterparts. Despite the filtering effect of the three male points of view, the narrative offers us glimpses or hints of the unsavoury

behind-the-scenes activities of the group of female tenants who murder Wilder. This alerts us to the fact that Ballard's representation of cruelty is not gender specific, even though the women in *High-Rise* tend to appear, on the surface at least, mainly as victims of male aggression. The third section does not speculate on the women's hidden story or its potential significance, but instead uses the gendered quality of narrative point of view in *High-Rise* as the starting point for a wider consideration of Ballard's approach to characterisation. Drawing on David Pringle's categorisation of Ballard's characters, I argue that Ballard's repeated use of two-dimensional character 'types,' inclusive of his recurrent male heroes, is both relevant to his guise as satirist and a disappointment coming from a writer whose reputation has been built on his status as an 'imaginative' writer.

1. The high-rise 'high': Laing's theory

High-Rise is set in an anonymous, upscale London docklands development project. Its setting evokes both postwar urban renewal schemes and Britain's larger transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. From its opening chapter, the novel emphasises the self-contained nature of the project, and the idiosyncratic look of its architecture relative to the surrounding city. Surveying the surrounding landscape from his twenty-fifth floor balcony, Robert Laing notes that

> [t]he massive scale of the glass and concrete architecture, and its striking situation on a bend in the river, sharply separated the development project from the rundown areas around it, decaying nineteenth-century terraced houses and empty factories already zoned for reclamation.

> For all the proximity of the City two miles away to the west along the river, the office buildings of central London belonged to a different world, in time as well as space. (8)

In geographical terms, *High-Rise* takes us east of the motorway landscapes of *Crash* and *Concrete Island*, and closer to the urban heart of Greater London, but the impression of a featureless suburban realm at once surrounded by older urban configurations and remote from them remains the same. By emphasising the spatial and temporal separation between the high-rise and the City of London further up the Thames, the narrative promotes the idea that futurity, as an abstract idea, is synonymous with technological innovation—in this case, the development of more efficient, more convenient, and more secure 'machines for living in,' to cite Le Corbusier. Accordingly, the high-rise itself is presented to us as a machine designed "to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation" (10). As in *Crash* and *Concrete Island*, the advanced technology represented in *High-Rise* helps engineer the institutionalised isolation of the contemporary non-place. However, as we saw in those earlier novels, technological innovation brings with it far-reaching psychological changes for Ballard's characters. It is the substance of the psychological transformation fostered by the high-rise that the narrative's theoretical discourse tries to account for.

If *High-Rise* can be said to have a central theory, it would be Laing's speculations early in chapter three. Laing himself appears as the typical middle-class refugee from inner-city congestion: "[W]hen he had sold the lease of his Chelsea house and moved to the security of the high-rise, he had travelled forward fifty years in time, away from crowded streets, traffic hold-ups, rush-hour journeys on the Underground [. . .]. Here

[. . .] the dimensions of his life were space, light, and the pleasures of a subtle kind of anonymity" (8–9). Like Maitland before him, Laing is clearly at home in the institutionalised isolation of non-place. He moves to the high-rise in the hope of being left alone in the wake of his failed marriage, and of finding a living space that will facilitate his avoidance of the emotional demands of a new relationship (13). And it must be admitted that he finds what he is looking for. Although the unique concentration of living, work and recreation spaces within the confines of the development project would seem to promise only an intensification of social life, that is, no substantial break from daily encounters with other people, the project is nevertheless an ideal non-place in that the residents could conceivably move seamlessly from apartment, to automobile, to workplace and back again with very little in the way of meaningful social interaction.

After attending a string of prolonged and boisterous floor parties, Laing comes up with the theory that the architecture of the high-rise generates a curious psychological effect. "By its very efficiency," Laing surmises, "the high-rise took over the task of maintaining the social structure that supported them all. For the first time it removed the need to repress every kind of anti-social behaviour, and left [residents] free to explore any deviant and wayward impulses" (36). He goes on to conclude that the building's real but hidden cultural significance lies in the way it ushers the tenants into a realm of "truly 'free' psychopathology" (36). To bring this in line with my readings of the quartet's other novels, we might say that life within the apartment complex moves the residents beyond a sense that their actions beget materially real consequences. This is the 'high' of the high-rise, and it follows on from analogous feelings of intoxication apparent in *The Atrocity*

Exhibition and *Crash*. We could connect it to T—'s inability to distinguish between flesh and photographic image; there, the image saturation synonymous with the media landscape provides T— with the illusion of a body beyond pain and pleasure. It could also be linked to the 'transport' which James Ballard and Vaughan experience through automotive transportation, an ecstasy which reaches an apotheosis in their LSD-fuelled joyride together. If Robert Maitland's experiences of exhilaration in *Concrete Island* do not quite fit this mould, it is because he finds them in the extreme absence of facilitating technologies, in the delirium of starvation, fever, exhaustion, and exposure to the elements—something that becomes a factor in *High-Rise*, too, once food becomes a scarcity within the apartment complex. Laing's ideas should be familiar to us, then. His theory echoes discourse about the automobile's larger cultural significance found in both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* (cf. *AE* 116–17 & *CR* 107), as well as more general comments Ballard himself has made about the role of technology in our lives: "It seems to me that we're moving into an area where the moral structures of society, the whole basis of the lives we lead, are provided for us externally without any sort of contribution by ourselves—they're provided to a large extent by the nature of modern science and technology" (Vale & Juno 46). The fact that Laing's speculations on high-rise living are in the same vein as these precedents from the other novels of the quartet helps support the notion that his theory of high-rise life is the dominant ideology in the narrative.

Quite apart from previous precedents and the author's own pronouncements, the prominence of Laing's speculations is bolstered within the narrative itself by the fact that Anthony Royal's reflections on the building presuppose the same 'deviance-engine'

effect. Royal's point of view, set out in chapter seven—an episode in which he and wife Anne prepare to leave the high-rise in response to the decline in living conditions (68–78)—amounts to a re-tooling of the original utopian dream behind the development project,[3] so that it suits the new social reality of tribalism and inter-floor rivalry; it should be pointed out, by the way, that by the time Royal's thoughts are introduced into the narrative, the tenants' deviant behaviour has developed from the minor acts of vandalism and raucous partying that Laing observes early on, to running battles between floors and a fledgling clan system. Noting this emerging social order, Royal decides not to vacate the building after all, and instead sets out to reassert his stubbornly optimistic view of the high-rise:

> Royal was certain that a rigid hierarchy of some kind was the key to the elusive success of these huge buildings. [. . .] As he told himself repeatedly, the present breakdown of the high-rise might well mark its success rather than its failure. Without realizing it he had given these people a means of escaping into a new life, and a pattern of social organization that would become the paradigm of all future high-rise blocks. (70)

Royal's utopianism is in effect an anthropological variant of Laing's theory. He re-contextualises the present violence by emphasising the tribal framework in which it occurs, and thereby reassures himself that the growing delinquency among the tenants is in fact an emergent social order, a hardening of caste sensibility, rather than a descent into anarchy. Moreover, this hardening of clan consciousness allows Royal to maintain his personal sense of superiority, because his tribe already occupies the top position on the pile.[4] That said, while Royal may be more elitist, his speculations are nevertheless like Laing's in that they take for granted that the building is an active principle in the

emergence of this new order. The residents, by contrast, are assumed to be a relatively inert mass, all more or less equally susceptible to the deviance-engine effect, and thrilled by the high it gives them.

How the building-as-machine actually generates this effect is never fully explained by either Laing or Royal, but it is possible to piece together details from the logic behind Laing's speculations. The high-rise accomplishes two things in particular: first, to speak in Freudian terms, the building short-circuits the super-ego by being, in effect, a second skin for the tenants; secondly, it separates them from the material foundations of their existence. In strictly spatial terms, the intensified isolation of the development project from the rest of London armours the residents against codified systems of morality and legality. In real terms, this means they are also sheltered from the prying eyes of the authorities who enforce those codes. Ballard dramatises this cocooning effect after the mysterious falling death of a jeweller from one of the upper floors, in chapter three (41). Police are never called in to investigate his suspicious plunge, and one senses that even though the residents have no spoken agreement on such matters, they are involved in a conspiracy of silence. The authorities will never bother with them because no one will ever ask them to.

If the tenants live, or think they live, beyond established legal frameworks, they also exist within a kind of bubble of affluence. A significant amount of the narrative is devoted to establishing the cushioning effect of the high-rise's many amenities—the way in which modern gadgetry distances the tenants from basic material considerations: food is never noticeably delivered to the building, a multitude of appliances are built in to

assist with the drudgery of everyday domesticity, air conditioning and electricity lengthen the day artificially throughout the building,[5] and waste is spirited away via a network of chutes—even children are cared for by "[e]lectronic baby-minders" (24). The sum total pampering effect of these amenities is not lost on Laing: he observes early on that the building's "staff of air-conditioning conduits, elevators, garbage-disposal chutes and electrical switching systems provided a never-failing supply of care and attention that a century earlier would have needed an army of tireless servants" (10). All of these elements produce an illusory aura of self-containment and self-sufficiency. With the building taking care of, or *appearing* to take care of, these menial tasks all by itself, the high-rise dweller is literally and figuratively left to his or her own (labour-saving) devices. Overly dependent on the building's systems and gadgets, the tenants end up with a great deal of disposable *time* as well as income, and are deluded into the belief that nothing within the mundane world of the everyday is of any consequence. Within this thoroughly bearable lightness of being, they turn to delinquency to amuse themselves.

At this point, we might be tempted to ask why something less destructive does not flourish within the building. Why do things like altruistic behaviour, contemplative spirituality, artistic pursuits—to name only a few possible alternatives—not become the norm once the building has arbitrarily suspended the repressive structures synonymous with socialization? Genre conventions have a role to play here. Ballard's chosen field, the 'catastrophe' sub-genre of science fiction, must be taken into account as a determining factor. However, this explanation alone does not satisfactorily justify Ballard's single-minded dedication to the destructive element in *High-Rise*, and in the

other novels of the quartet. His default position throughout these novels is that a society's heavy reliance on advanced technology will, almost inevitably and exclusively, engender sinister forms of behaviour.[6] Certainly, none of the principal characters in *High-Rise* manage to deviate from this pre-determined path, even though their individual experiences of that path are quite diverse. While this might reflect a too-narrow point of view on Ballard's part, it still makes sense if the satirical force of the fiction is given at least as much weight as its speculative aspirations. When looked at from this perspective, Laing's description of the high-rise effect—reflecting as it does the unwavering logic apparent throughout the quartet—is also an implicit caricature of the meagreness of imagination at the heart of Western middle-class consumer society. In effect, *High-Rise* is premised on the assumption that when the benefits of civilization are identified merely with accumulated labour-saving devices, consumer goods, and status symbols—in the novel, anything from pedigree pets, to abstract art, to the most convenient parking spaces—the possibility that over-reliance on such objects will lead to non-destructive behaviour seems less plausible than the notion that it will produce a commitment to modes of conduct.

For Laing, this turn toward more impulsively destructive modes of behaviour constitutes a positive liberation from repression. The litany of deviant behaviours that begins to characterise life in the building after 'critical mass' is reached—which include minor acts of vandalism and violence, extensive partying, running battles in the hallways, willful over-consumption of energy, and sexual promiscuity—are to him promising signs of the advent of a much-needed social revolution in miniature. In sum, Laing believes he

is faced with a choice between the lesser of two evils. On the one hand, he foresees an unending future dominated by people like his closest neighbours, a couple called the Steeles, who are what their name suggests: "cool, unemotional personalit[ies] impervious to the psychological pressures of high-rise life, with minimal needs for privacy, [. . .] thriv[ing] like an advanced species of machine in the neutral atmosphere" (35). On the other hand, the *steeliness* of Laing's neighbours is also the ideal foundation for what he hopes will emerge, a future resident characterised by, among other things, ruthlessness, paranoia, resourcefulness, and impulsiveness. If the Steeles are receptive to the building's mysterious effect, it is because their emotional detachment constitutes a fundamental disconnect which, in turn, opens the way toward ambivalence to, acceptance of, or even enjoyment of shocking events. This icy unconcern is revealed to be widespread when everyone in the building, except Richard Wilder, fails to respond to the jeweller's falling death. (For a time, Wilder assumes that a full-scale investigation will be launched, and is even rebuffed by Laing, at one point, for thinking so [55].) By looking forward to the arrival of this new High-Rise Man, Laing's theory endorses the notion that aberrant behaviour, for its own sake, is a viable form of therapy for people trapped in their own addiction to the certainties of bourgeois comfort, convenience and security.

If there is a potential problem with Laing's theory, it has to do with the question of connoisseurship. Perhaps he is looking to a point in time when the individual tenant will no longer be able to distinguish between 'normal' and 'deviant' behaviour, a future when such designations not only are not understood in contradistinction to one another, but

simply become meaningless signifiers. Laing's own trajectory through the narrative does not really bear this out, though—as we will see momentarily. My impression of Laing is that he wants to be able to savour the unsavouriness of what he and his fellow residents get up to. However, this would seem to present a double-bind, for the ability to enjoy the charge or frisson of destructive impulses *as* transgression would be predicated on the individual tenant's retention of an element of civilised intellect. That is to say, Laing would ideally prefer to have the licence to act in ways that are considered less civilised, but not wholly relinquish, or lose involuntarily, the very intelligence that allows him to concoct his theory in the first place. My sense is that the ideal tenant from the point of view of Laing's theory would be able to maintain enough presence of mind to appreciate the value of his or her new-found impulsiveness—to see the turn from sensory deprivation to acuity, from convenience-addiction to increased resourcefulness and independence, and from unexamined self-recriminations to guilt-free enjoyment of 'wayward' desires—as in fact an overall enhancement of being. When we follow Laing's trajectory through the narrative, we find that he does manage to strike this balance, unlike Wilder, who seems to lose all capacity for rational thought as a kind of symbolic punishment.

Compared to Wilder's mountaineering narrative, Laing's story is relatively uneventful. The highlights include an abortive trip to work, which ends abruptly because he suffers a bout of agoraphobia in the building's parking-lot (103), some auxiliary but nonetheless enthusiastic participation in raiding expeditions to other floors, during which he detours to bring his sister Alice back to his apartment (108–11), and a final retreat to

the confines of his apartment with her and Eleanor Powell (153–54). Over the course of these events, Laing's senses become more acute as the building's services deteriorate. Like the majority of the tenants, Laing gradually acquires a sense of smell equal to the challenge of discriminating between the powerful body odours emerging from beneath a lifetime of impeccable grooming: "As [Laing] inhaled the stale air he was refreshed by his own odour, almost recognizing parts of his body—his feet and genitalia, the medley of smells that issued from his mouth" (104). Additionally, the continual search for resources and need for vigilance against attack wake him up to a new universe of sounds which had been masked by the typical human reliance on stereo vision: "Listening to this complex and remote music [the sound of water in the building's pipes] had sharpened [his] ears, a sensitivity that extended to almost any kind of sound within the building. By contrast, his sight, dulled by being used chiefly at night, presented him with an increasingly opaque world" (145–46). These physical developments can be seen as the fruits of Laing's theory, a welcome invigoration of the body's senses which effectively counters institutionalised docility. Incidentally, it should be added that Royal's experience of a similar physical invigoration revives the 'body-beyond-consumption' fantasy apparent at the end of *Concrete Island*: "For two days Royal had eaten nothing, but far from exhausting him the absence of food had stimulated every nerve and muscle in his body. [. . . H]e felt himself beyond hunger" (162). In this way, Laing and his fellow tenants do in fact manage to exchange a comfortable but sterile life, ruled by convenience and efficiency, for the more heady delights of a less-mediated sensory experience of the world, and the satisfaction of increased self-reliance and resourcefulness.

However, if we are intent on assessing how or whether Laing's theory of high-rise life works out for Laing himself, the aspect of his experience that perhaps matters most is the concluding frame: the incestuous menage with Alice Laing and Eleanor Powell. As we saw above, Laing's understanding of the transformations taking place within the building is predicated on the idea that "the ultimate goal of the high-rise [is] a realm where their deviant impulses were free at last to exercise themselves in any way they wished" (150). The menage—in Laing's mind 'a happy arrangement' borne of "perversities created by the limitless possibilities of the high-rise" (154)—comes to signify that he has reached this goal. And yet, the nature of the power dynamic that exists between these three characters makes one wonder whether the 'freedom' they find through their perversities, and through one another, is not in fact a vision of incarceration.

Our impression of the menage is built out of just the final few pages of the novel. Reflecting Laing's point of view, the narrative emphasises the theatrical quality of the interactions between the three. Laing uses the word "pantomime" several times (171–72) to describe the menage, and thereby gives a veneer of artificiality to the things that he, Alice and Powell do to one another. If truth be told, little in the way of detail is given: all we learn is that Laing catches and prepares their meals, while the women lie in bed together, "wheedling" him (172). But even though the narrative is short on details, Laing's emphasis on the histrionic quality of their interactions is still unnerving, not because the women are not acting out roles just like him, but because the stress on the artificial seems simply incongruous next to the fact that their exploration of deviant impulses is taking place in the realm of the real. The "loosely evolving pantomime"

(172) suggests something that the three individuals can set aside, as actors would their scripts. But this is not what we are confronted with in the menage: the theatrics and the real are hopelessly confused in Laing's mind, if not in those of the two women as well.

Still more worrisome is the fact that it is Laing, primarily, who gets to enjoy the more conceptual side of the arrangement, while the women must play their parts out of far more material considerations: "[The women] knew that they were dependent on Laing. Despite the 'pantomime' their behaviour was entirely geared to meeting Laing's private needs in return for his attention to the business of their physical survival. The exchange suited Laing admirably" (171–72). I would reinforce that point: it suits *him* admirably, but there remains a substantial amount of uncertainty about whether the women are even physically capable of pursuing their own wayward impulses as a game. In this respect, the women's callousness remains primarily conceptual, teasing threats to banish Laing from the apartment (171), while Laing's scheme to counter these threats are far more physical in nature: he intends to begin administering morphine injections to the women as a way of "tilt[ing] the balance of authority in his direction" (145). I am not trying to argue that the women are completely cut out of taking delight in the unfolding psychodrama, nor trying to suggest that they have not willed this arrangement, too—inasmuch as *High-Rise*'s characters *have* wills outside of what the combination of relative isolation from the surrounding city and the building's array of technological conveniences once 'willed' for them. Alice, for example, is not coerced into moving to Laing's apartment, but rather packs her own bags for the journey (111); Powell, meanwhile, seems to get enjoyment out of tormenting Laing once her position in his bed is assured (171–72). It is just that

Ballard's representation of the menage makes Laing's perception of this balance of authority a distortion of the facts. Laing may relish the thought that "it was the two women who were in charge, and that they despised him totally" (172), but they are not playing these psychological games on an equal footing.

My reservations about this distortion do not change the fact that Laing has managed to actualise his theoretical understanding of the high-rise's effect by 'shacking up' with Alice and Powell, but they do express a concern over the singularity of his 'success.' What Laing presents to us as theory seems to apply in practice to a test group numbering only one—himself. His theory is best understood, then, as a personal rationalisation, not a credible generalisation. In turn, one's willingness to enter into the spirit of Laing's perverse panto is predicated on the one thing that Laing, Alice and Powell all have in common: a lack of attachment. None of them has children; Powell appears to be single; Alice's thoughts of her husband are insincere at best (cf. 148); and Laing has long since left his spouse. Their relatively unattached state makes it far easier for us to adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude toward their menage, and vicariously enjoy the excitements of transgression—here, mainly Laing's incestuous interest in his sister—for its own sake. However, the building is not populated by a homogeneous collection of childless bachelors, and in the next section we will see how Richard Wilder's pursuit of perverse pleasure carries more weight of consequence on account of his status as a parent, and therefore constitutes a substantive counterpoint to Laing's 'success.'

2. Infantilisation as consequence: Wilder's practice

As the surname suggests, Richard Wilder is, like Seagrave and Proctor before him, one of Ballard's 'brute' characters, or what David Pringle calls his "jester" types—"coarse, prone to violence, uncommunicative, and frequently [. . .] a threat to the protagonists of the stories in which they appear" (45).[7] Much of our initial impression of Wilder comes via Laing's point of view, and from that perspective he appears loud, uncouth and eager for confrontation:

> A thick-set, pugnacious man who had once been a professional rugby player, Wilder lived with his wife and two sons on the 2nd floor [. . .]. The noisy parties he held with friends on the lower levels [. . .] had already put him at the centre of various disputes. [. . . .] However, [Laing] liked Wilder, with his loud voice and rugby-scrum manners. He let a needed dimension of the unfamiliar into the apartment block [. . .]—his powerful sexual aggression was overlaid by a tremendous restlessness. (14)

Even in chapters not keyed to Laing's point of view, Wilder projects the same impression of imposing physicality (cf. 47, 88–89 and 108). And yet, to lump Wilder in with Seagrave and Proctor without any qualifications is to overlook the fact that he is their intellectual superior. Because Wilder occupies roughly the same socioeconomic bracket as Laing, we can assume that his level of education trumps Seagrave's, who was decidedly lower class compared to the other characters in *Crash*; and it perhaps goes without saying that Wilder is not hampered by a mental disability, as is Proctor in *Concrete Island*. Often in the narrative, then, Wilder is depicted in starkly dualistic terms. Laing's early observation that Wilder "was continually touching himself, for ever inspecting the hair on his massive calves, smelling the backs of his scarred hands, as if he

had just discovered his own body" (15) certainly gives us the impression of an inquisitive mind almost surprised to find itself at home in the body nature has given it. So, too, does Wilder's estimation of himself as "[i]n the mental as well as physical sense [. . .] almost certainly the strongest man in the building" (47) suggest a sharp split between mind and body.

Because Wilder is, at least initially, a more multi-dimensional individual than either of his predecessors, *High-Rise* could be said to mark a substantial development in Ballard's use of these 'brute' characters. But aside from being a sign of more care on Ballard's part when it comes to characterisation, Wilder's combination of brawn and intellectual competence is significant for two specific reasons. The first reason we have encountered before in relation to *Crash*. Like Seagrave before him, Wilder acts as the locus for the limitations of the novel's underlying speculative idea, the theory of the high-rise's 'effect' posited by Laing. Because much of the deviant behaviour that subsequently takes place in the building is characterised by physical violence, we might assume that Wilder, with his obvious physical prowess, will thrive in the new reality of inter-floor raiding—and for a time he does. But Wilder never achieves an equilibrium between the impulsiveness that leads to emergent animality and diminished (perhaps *modified* is more accurate) but still working powers of reason. The complete sacrifice of the intellect he once had strikes us as less liberation than imprisonment, and thus Wilder appears as the high-rise's hard luck case.

If this complete loss of reason were Wilder's only significance within the text, *High-Rise* would not be substantially different from *Crash* in the way that it deploys the 'brute'

character. To my mind, Wilder improves on the precedent set by Seagrave because his story clarifies the cautionary significance of the 'brute' figure's family life—the capacity for his pursuit of perverse pleasure to impinge upon the lives of dependants or innocents. This would constitute the second major significance of Wilder's role in the novel. He appears to be the only tenant who not only acquires the acute sensory perceptions of an animal, but also reverts back to an infantile, pre-linguistic form of consciousness. If we compare Wilder, as husband and father, to Laing, a childless bachelor, with this regression in mind, it is reasonable to conclude that a certain amount of poetic justice is involved in his fate. By thoughtlessly renouncing his role as parent and spouse, and embarking on a journey up the high-rise—a decision that, admittedly, he has little hope of making consciously—Wilder becomes what he leaves behind: a child. His fate does not cancel the 'success' that Laing achieves, but it does remain a parallel, and no less important counter to that accomplishment.

Ballard establishes Wilder's intellectual capabilities relative to, say, Seagrave before him, principally through Wilder's own theory of the high-rise effect. When, in chapter four, the narrative shifts for the first time to reflect Wilder's point of view, we find that he is able to think critically about what is just beginning to take place within the building, and is in the process of putting together a documentary film that will give voice to those reservations. That said, Wilder's motivation for embarking on the project is more ambiguous than he lets on. As with the theoretical discourse of Laing and Royal, Wilder's proposed film, in part, reflects a "personal bias" (48). At the end of chapter four, Wilder is forced to admit to himself that one of his primary motivations is a vague

desire for revenge against the building and its architect. In short, by shooting the film he hopes to confront and overcome an "aware[ness] of the immense weight of concrete stacked above him" (48). This personal mission can, I think, be taken as a rationalization, a specious explanation that gives a sense of purpose to his fledgling addiction to the thrill of violence, something substantiated in the same passage when Wilder tries to account for why he drowns another resident's Afghan hound in the tenth-floor swimming pool:

> He was sure he had drowned the Afghan, not because he disliked the dog particularly or wanted to upset its owner, but to revenge himself on the upper storeys of the building. He had seized the dog in the darkness when it blundered into the pool. Giving in to a cruel but powerful impulse, he had pulled it below the water. As he held its galvanized and thrashing body under the surface, in a strange way he had been struggling with the building itself. (48–49)

There is an element of uncertainty in the passage, as if Wilder were searching for a suitable explanation for his actions. Reading between the lines, we suspect that the struggle with the dog was thrilling for its own sake. Wilder finds some sort of satisfaction or pleasure in his submission to that 'cruel but powerful impulse,' with or without the abstract adversarial quality of the building as a cover story. This is worth pointing out because the physical sensations resulting from violent behaviour increasingly outweigh Wilder's sense of purpose as the narrative unfolds.

Perhaps to strengthen his sense of purpose, and to play down the amount of enjoyment he really derives from random acts of cruelty, Wilder outlines a more propagandistic justification for the documentary in the following chapter. In other words, immediately after flexing his physical muscles with the dog in the pool, he renews his intellectual efforts to come to grips with the building. Wilder's stated intention is to use

the film as an exposé of the limitations of Royal's original vision of the development project's merits. Wilder recalls that "[a]ll the evidence accumulated over several decades cast a critical light on the high-rise as a viable social structure" (52). Oddly enough, this indicates that Wilder's initial concern about high-rise life was essentially the same thing that worried Royal during the design phase—that a self-contained, remarkably isolated, and largely homogeneous collection of individuals could never become a vital community. It also suggests that Wilder's mind was set against the apartment complex as means of social engineering long before he ever moved in with his family. Initially, his resistance to the idea of living in the apartment complex was even remarkably fatherly, a belief that it was not a suitable place to raise a family: "[T]he trouble with these places[,]" Wilder comments to Laing and company in chapter one, "is they're not designed for children" (16). If we find these kinds of comments vaguely amusing, it is because we sense that Wilder is clinging desperately to aspects of civilised, middle-class existence through platitudes as a means to disguise his growing addiction to the giving and receiving of pain for its own sake.

Out of Wilder's initial resistance to the idea behind the development project come two hypotheses: first, he claims that the vandalism practised by his neighbours is an understandable, even admirable, response to the smooth functioning of the building's many services and facilities. "Every torn-out piece of telephone equipment," he reasons, "every handle wrenched off a fire safety door, every kicked-in electricity meter represented a stand against de-cerebration" (52). What Wilder is developing here is really the flipside of Laing's assumption that the building itself generates deviance. Wilder's

rhetoric about the tenants being in a state of rebellion against the "eventless" (52) quality of daily life in the development project gives the active principle back to the people, so to speak, politicising their behaviour. At this point at least, he is not looking forward to a less conscious, more impulsive way of life, but rather resents the fact that his own culture of convenience and consumerism fosters a kind of mindlessness. According to him, his neighbours are actively seeking a more substantial sense of the real through unmediated sensory experiences.

While Wilder's critique potentially applies to all the tenants regardless of what floor they are on, his position at the bottom of the building's hierarchy politicises his perspective on this "de-cerebration." Consequently, his other hypothesis is that residents living on the upper floors enjoy a better standard of numbness than everyone else—"What angered Wilder most about life in the apartment building was the way in which an apparently homogeneous collection of high-income professional people had split into three distinct and hostile camps. The old social subdivisions, based on power, capital and self-interest, had reasserted themselves here as anywhere else" (53). Not surprisingly, the very thing that heartens the aristocratic Royal ends up angering Wilder. In spite of his anger, though, Wilder's proposed film (it never actually gets made) is intended to compound this rekindled class consciousness, not necessarily critique it: "The documentary would dramatise all [lower-floor] resentments, and expose the way in which the services and facilities were being abused by the upper-level tenants" (54). In essence, then, the film will be a propaganda piece, a means to strengthen the group identity of Wilder's fellow lower-floor residents (54).

Ultimately, both statements of purpose—the mission to avenge himself on the building, and the class consciousness-raising motivation for the documentary—are never fully reconciled to Wilder's delight in the thrill of violence for its own sake. Eventually, he becomes less and less a spokesperson for the building's 'exploited' class, or a man capable of overcoming the building's imposing verticality "by guile rather than by brute force" (63), and more and more a thrall to the violence he perpetrates. I have already suggested that his killing of the Afghan hound might have been primarily a joyful submission to a vague destructive impulse; he simply enjoyed wrestling with the animal *as another animal*. This trope is expanded in later episodes where the nature of his involvement in the many "running battles" that take place in the corridors and stairways does not jibe with his earlier statements of purpose. The following are two similar examples:

> A group of residents [. . .] leapt out and hurled themselves into the mêlée. They were led by [. . .] Wilder, cine-camera gripped like a battle standard in one hand. Royal assumed that Wilder was filming an episode from the documentary [. . .]. But Wilder was in the thick of the fray, aggressively wielding the cine-camera as he urged on his new allies against his former neighbours. (88–89)

> In one hand [Wilder] still held his cine-camera. Like a large animal pausing for breath, he followed the huge projection of himself cast upon the walls and ceiling, as if about to leap on to the backs of his own shadows and ride them like a troupe of beasts up the flues of the building. (108)

In the first passage, taken from chapter nine, Wilder has already rejected the class affiliation that he had earlier considered one of his primary motivations—the very subject of his documentary. In the second quotation, from chapter eleven, Wilder appears to be

completely out of control, possessed by the building's mysterious effect.[8] The discrepancy between stated purpose and resulting action can be accounted for partly by the constant shifts between nighttime hijinks and daytime truces that make up a substantial portion of the narrative; that is to say, Wilder loses himself in the evening and then tries to contextualise his actions with recourse to the idea of the documentary during the day. And yet, in both passages Wilder seems caught up in the action to a degree that exceeds that of any of his neighbours. Eventually, he comes to a point where the daytime contextualisation never arrives, and instinct comes to define his conscious engagement with the world.

What might be considered Wilder's last conscious decision occurs at the end of chapter twelve. There, he makes a choice between ascent and the domestic sphere—between his appointed date with Anthony Royal, and whatever attachment he may still have to Helen and his two sons. Standing before an open elevator full of residents, Wilder wrestles with opposing impulses: a compulsion to go up—"Like a climber resting a hundred feet from the summit, he had no option but to ascend"—and an urge "to turn and run down the staircase to his apartment" (122). Wilder manages to master the inclination to return home, taking a fateful step into the elevator, but his justification for doing so is what interests us here. Wilder believes that by leaving his wife and children, he is actually surmounting a desire for security that had placed limits on his involvement in the high-rise's night games all along:

> His one ambition now was to get away from Helen, and overcome that need to return to the apartment each afternoon and whatever threadbare links it maintained with his own childhood. By leaving Helen he would

> break away from the whole system of juvenile restraints he had been trying to shake off since his adolescence. (117–18)

Here, ascent is identified with a courageous spirit of independence—a triumph over the lingering effects of having been socialised during adolescence. In the paradoxical realm of the high-rise, Wilder is led to believe that by following the impulse to go up, he is actually taking a positive step *toward* adulthood or maturity, instead of retreating from it.

How are readers to respond to Wilder's decision to desert his wife and children? Because Wilder's wife Helen is represented up to chapter twelve as a helpless, ineffectual, and overly passive individual, readers might not blame him for wanting to get away. In any case, so much of his time is taken up by adultery that we sense no real loss in his separation from her. Meanwhile, Wilder perceives his two sons as merely clamorous mouths to feed—"Glad to see Wilder, they banged their empty feeding-bowls with their plastic machine pistols [. . .]. The boys were hungry" (118)—and this suggests he has no genuine affection for them in the present, and maybe never did. All told, Wilder's domestic situation is presented to us as an unwelcome burden, and this encourages us to play down the significance of what little family life actually exists within the building. Perhaps we have no choice but to conclude that family life simply does not matter in *High-Rise*. Indeed, children factored so little in the three previous novels that it seems reasonable to conclude, here, that Wilder's decision to take up the challenge presented by the building's height and verticality, and thereby renounce even the basic duty to provide for his sons, is the right one for a Ballard character to make—a

choice in favour of self-reliance, resourcefulness, increased hardship, uncertainty, unforeseen dangers, etc.

However, we must keep in mind that our impression of Wilder's family is filtered through his point of view. Along these lines, there is some suggestion in chapter twelve that Wilder's perspective on his surroundings is, even this early on, hardly reliable. When he notices that his wife is subsiding from hunger, for example, and asks her why she has not mentioned it before, she tells him that she has in fact let him know about her physical deterioration "a hundred times" (119). Her reply suggests that a missing actuality is being distorted because the narrative is filtered through Wilder's vision. At the very least, Helen's comment makes us aware that Wilder is becoming inordinately self-centred, to the point where his mind censors aspects of his surroundings.

With the limitations of narrative point of view in mind, we might be inclined to pay more attention to Wilder's obligation as parent, even if that obligation is reduced merely to the role of hunter–gatherer. I would contend that from chapter twelve onward, Wilder's renunciation of his role as father is the focal point for the narrative's satire on Laing's theory of idealised liberation. Wilder not only begins to follow his impulses, as per Laing's theory, but also becomes increasingly child-like; perhaps *infantile* is a more accurate term, because it can be distinguished from the adolescent socialisation that Wilder assumes he overcomes by taking that fateful step into the elevator. Under the stress of ever-increasing deprivation and imminent assault, Wilder, like Laing and Royal, acquires the acute sensory perceptions of an animal; but of the three, only Wilder is totally infantilised into the bargain. Royal, just prior to his death at the end of the

narrative, still feels a sense of guilt for the murderous proclivities his building has fostered (cf. 173), and there is residual maturity in this sense of personal responsibility. Although we have already touched on Laing's equilibrium between animality and diminished reason, the main points are worth repeating here, with an eye to the question of childishness. While Laing's perception of being involved in a "pantomime" with Alice and Eleanor Powell suggests a child-like delight in games and make-believe, he can still contemplate the subtle exploitation and counter-exploitation that their 'games' entail (cf. 170–73). Furthermore, the very fact that Laing is still aware that he is acting on "wayward impulses" (172) indicates a grown-up intellect, an appreciation that his actions transgress former social taboos. Wilder, meanwhile, is not afforded the same luxury. His movement toward what he considers adult independence is thoroughly reversed by his subsequent development in the novel's later chapters—particularly in his movement toward an almost pre-linguistic form of consciousness. Wilder's reversion to toddler-hood is revealed, in stages, to be not a positive liberation of impulsive energies, but a thorough-going infantilisation that he cannot hope to control, and which has potentially monstrous consequences.

The first important episode in this respect occurs in chapter thirteen, following his desertion of Helen and the boys. There, the implications of his gradual exit from the confines of organised speech are truly disturbing. Near the end of the chapter, Wilder spends a few happy moments trashing Charlotte Melville's apartment, before sexually assaulting her. Just prior to the rape, he amuses himself by recording "grunts and belches" on a tape recorder and "playing them back to himself" (129). After the attack,

he admits to feeling disenchanted with the supposed inadequacy of language as an interpretive framework for what is going on in the high-rise: "He resented speaking [. . .] as if words introduced the wrong set of meanings into everything" (130). In the wake of this casual disavowal of the referential link between word and thing, the passage recounting the actual rape functions like a test case, both by referring to Wilder's attack as a 'rape' and by implying that this designation may be inaccurate:

> The first time he struck her, cuffing her to the bedroom floor, he tried to record her gasp, but the reel had jammed. He freed it carefully, bent down and slapped her again, only stopping when he had recorded her now deliberate cries to his satisfaction. He enjoyed terrorizing her, taping down her exaggerated but none the less frightened gasps. During their clumsy sexual act on the mattress in the child's bedroom he left the tape-recorder switched on beside them [. . .] and played back the sounds of this brief rape, editing together the noise of her tearing clothes and panting anger. (130)

In keeping with much of the text, it is difficult, here, to sort out details that convey reliable information about the real situation involving Wilder and Melville from others that are heavily inflected by Wilder's point of view, and therefore distortions of fact. Select words make the nature of Melville's involvement in her own brutalisation ambiguous. She makes "deliberate" and "exaggerated" sounds, as if her part in the attack is somehow contrived, and in this way, the passage toys with the masculine fantasy of the woman as willing victim. Melville might be performing her part in the 'rape' for the cassette tape in the same way that Wilder believes he is doing something which the word *rape* does not precisely designate. Perhaps, in the manner of *Crash*'s Vaughan, she believes that the 'sexual act' will attain a fuller reality in the final audio representation.

But are readers to conclude that the assault is to both parties merely a matter of role-playing? Yes and no. Despite the apparent histrionics, the assault is patently unrehearsed, hardly a sado-masochistic 'session' in which the participants are fully cognizant of the power relationships involved, and bound by agreed-upon limits. The aside about the child's bedroom may be an indirect suggestion that Wilder is not fully aware of the nature of what he is doing. And more importantly, in the pivotal sentence the emphasis is placed on the genuineness of Melville's terror—on her 'none the less frightened gasps.' It is as if she were gamely trying to treat the event as inconsequential, only to find herself *actually* fearful and angry. In either case, the uncertainty in the passage helps us see through what is, after all, Wilder's impression of the assault, and this despite having *to see* the assault literally through his childish eyes; we might recall this narrative device from our reading of T—'s point of view in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. In turn, Wilder's disenchantment with the representational inadequacy of words is revealed to be perhaps the surest route to very real victimization.

Wilder's loss of linguistic competence is reiterated in chapter seventeen, when he rests briefly beside the thirty-fifth floor swimming pool—now full of yellowy water, garbage and floating bodies. During his stay, he attempts to communicate with a young woman, after subduing her, an elderly "crone," and a tax consultant (156–57), but finds himself merely "grunting, unable to form the words with his broken teeth and scarred tongue" (159). This particular episode does not carry forward the rape scene's implicit concern over the loss of referentiality, but the reason why it does not do so is perhaps more significant than the fact that it doesn't. In short, by this point Wilder is no longer at

liberty to *choose* not to use words. He seems almost taken aback to be grunting like an animal. In Melville's apartment, he was at least still able to make such sounds intentionally, that is, for the sake of the cassette recorder. But whatever process of change was beginning to overtake him there, moves beyond his control from the "Lakeside Pavilion" episode onward.

In later chapters, the childishness of this regression to the pre-linguistic is made unambiguous. We watch as Wilder—almost naked, skin smeared with lipstick, and brandishing a pistol—runs through the top floor hallways, "pointing [the gun] playfully at the open doorways" (165). We also note that the trip up the building has taken him back to a space dimly remembered from childhood: "The high ceiling and masculine furniture reminded him of a house he had visited as a small child. He wandered around the refurnished rooms, almost expecting to find his childhood toys, a cot and playpen laid out for his arrival" (165). If this is the terminal point of a valuable psychoanalytic regression, or a positive recovery of impulsiveness beyond the symbolic order, we are hard pressed to see it.

A further reversal of Wilder's fortunes occurs in his encounter with Royal, in chapter eighteen. Wilder had earlier assumed that this confrontation would be the culmination of his ascent, but by this point he no longer possesses the mental faculties that would have made sense of this longed-for meeting. Accordingly, Wilder finds himself "unsure whether Royal had come to play with him or to reprimand him" (166). As in the earlier rape scene, the narrative manages to convey to us that Royal perceives their brief struggle quite differently from the way Wilder does. Wilder cannot help but see it as a part of his

ongoing game of hide and seek, while Royal still understands the danger he is in. As Wilder points his pistol at Royal, the old man "flinched back, *as if pretending* to be frightened"; after Wilder shoots him, Royal's "body lay awkwardly across the staircase, *as if he were pretending* to be dead" (166, emphases added). Oddly enough, the repeated phrase 'as if he were pretending' conveys the genuineness of Royal's fear, and the fact that he is actually in the process of dying. The semblance of pretense from Wilder's infantile point of view constitutes an indirect statement of authenticity. It is Ballard's subtle means of conveying something of Royal's experience of the encounter without abruptly switching the narrative point of view. In any case, the killing of Royal gives Wilder no sense of achievement at having triumphed over his nemesis, principally because the mission that drove Wilder early on no longer makes sense in his new pre-symbolic realm. The encounter fails to live up to earlier expectations, while his state of mind is such that he cannot even articulate his disappointment. The irony of his 'mission,' then, is that it leads him to this state of relative mindlessness. He makes war on one kind of 'de-cerebration' only to receive another.

Ultimately, Wilder's fate lies with a group of women who have been steadily reclaiming the upper few floors for themselves. The important thing to note about this "bloody matriarchy[,]" as David Pringle has christened it (42), is its emphasised associations with child-rearing: they are led by an "elderly children's-story writer" (65); Helen Wilder, herself a reviewer of children's books, eventually joins their ranks after the group assists her with looking after the Wilder children (118); and the group is obviously behind a lower-floor initiative to reopen the building's day-school (118). Still further,

several of its members become disciples of an upper-floor gynaecologist, aptly named Dr Pangbourne, who seems able to control the women by playing back to them his "library of record birth-cries" of newborns, although a certain amount of ambiguity surrounds the level of authenticity of the women's instinctual response to these sounds (140). The matriarchy's unification around the figure of the child presents an interesting contrast to Wilder's abdication from parental responsibilities. Indeed, his abdication makes his eventual delivery—self-delivery moreover—into these women's hands all the more symbolic, a pronounced comic reversal.

In spite of its one-way trajectory of ascent, then, Wilder's quest toward the building's summit can be thought of as describing a full circle. Initially, he is enticed away from wife and children by the thrill and illicit pleasure of brutality without impunity. Next, he becomes addicted to these excitements under the mistaken assumption that they allow him to express a spirit of independence. And finally, he loses himself amid the total re-emergence of instinctual life and the more symbolic infantilisation that it brings with it. The problem for Wilder is that the need to be mothered, to be gratified by a mother-figure's attentions, eventually reasserts itself along with all of his other impulses; this is essentially what lulls him into a false sense of security next to the young woman and the hag in the "Lakeside Pavilion" episode, and it is even more pronounced when, in chapter eighteen, he finally emerges, stark naked, onto the building's roof. There, he finds children playing in the sculpture garden and members of the women's group positioned around a fire and spit:

> Wilder waited for them to speak to him. He was glad to be naked and show off his body with its painted patterns. At last the woman kneeling by the fire looked over her shoulder at him. Despite her change of dress he recognized her as his wife Judith [*sic*]. He was about to run forward to her, but her matter-of-fact gaze, her unimpressed appraisal of his heavy loins, made him stop. (167)

The language throughout this section of the text emphasises the near-completion of Wilder's infantile regression. He dimly recollects the names of the women he has neglected (Helen), stalked (Jane Sheridan), and brutalised (Charlotte Melville) during his struggle to reach the top, but his mind is now predominantly child-like. But this rediscovery of the boy within the man has none of the ring of a romantic epiphany about it. Wilder returns to these women an utterly dependent man-child. His rooftop reunion with Helen is in effect a capitulation to the mother-figure he had earlier tried to escape, and thus constitutes a comic reversal of his aspirations. As well, his new-found innocence leaves him without the ability to distinguish friend from mortal enemy:

> The circle of women drew closer. The first flames lifted from the fire, the varnish of the antique chairs crackling swiftly. From behind their sunglasses the women were looking intently at Wilder, as if reminded that their hard work had given them a strong appetite. Together, each removed something from the deep pocket of her apron.
>
> In their bloodied hands they carried knives with narrow blades. Shy but happy now, Wilder tottered across the roof to meet his new mothers. (168)

The confluence of the literal and the symbolic on the site of Wilder's body is quite remarkable. Wilder's intellectual state, brought on by extended physical hardship, constitutes a literalised version of a psychoanalytic construct—he is not merely *like* a baby; he *is* one. In turn, the innocence associated with that condition makes him, as has

been just suggested, vulnerable in a very real, physical sense, and yet this inability to tell friend from enemy leads directly to a symbolic punishment: by becoming the very thing he would not take responsibility for earlier on, that is, a child, Wilder is consigned to his own helplessness. Wilder's demise is left to the reader's imagination, but the fire, makeshift spit and carving knives obviously signify the women's intention to render Wilder into the sustenance he would not help provide for his own sons.

As a result of this punishment, Wilder's story acts as a substantial counterpoint to the more open-ended, indefinite future of transgressive 'delights' that might be associated with Laing's final menage. The argument could still be put forward that Wilder's departure from Helen and his two boys, and from the torpor that pervades their apartment through the middle sections of the novel, is, figuratively speaking, an affirmative action for a number of reasons. Through it, Wilder asserts his independence and rebels against his 'place' at the bottom of the social hierarchy encoded within the high-rise's architecture. It also brings to an end a marriage that had seemed a failure in the making. Finally, the sensory invigoration and released instinct that Wilder experiences can be viewed as a symbolic refutation of the over-domesticated, hyper-convenient day-to-day existence of the late twentieth-century bourgeois consumer. For all these reasons, Wilder can still be credited as a kind of psychoanalytic hero, casting off the repressive structures of civilised existence. However, if these interpretations account for the symbolic dimensions of Wilder's mission, then the less heroic aspects of that symbolic quest—the rape and pool scenes, and the encounter with his 'new mothers'—must be taken into consideration as well. The severing of ties with Helen and everything she represents to

him (the mundane routine of domestic life and a castrating mother-figure) turns out to be less a liberating exploration of the id, and certainly not a positive assertion of ego. Instead it is little more than a complete loss of self, first within the maternal comforts of the young woman beside the swimming pool, and second within the murderous embrace of the matriarchy. Through it all, what might be called Wilder's coordinating intelligence is completely sacrificed, and by this I mean he loses what Laing, as the smarter animal, is able to maintain at the end of his section of the narrative—a residual sense of self that moderates the emergence of instinct, and relishes this partial transformation as a rejection of overly domesticated existence.

3. Limited perspectives / limited imagination: Ballard's automatic characterisation

Throughout my reading of Wilder's mission to scale the apartment complex, I have cast the matriarchy as an instrument of retribution, but also implied along the way that women often appear in the novel as victims: Helen Wilder suffers abandonment; Charlotte Melville is raped by Wilder, but also caught within her own inability to recognise and designate the experience *as* victimisation; and arguably, this same semantic trap ensnares Alice Laing and Eleanor Powell in their menage with Laing. On the basis of just this short list of episodes, it is tempting to conclude that Ballard is indulging in a disconcerting imaginary violence against women under the guise of a narrative focussed on the possibility of individual liberation through the exploration of instinctual life. That said, this gendering of victimisation does not amount to an accurate picture of what goes on in *High-Rise*, for it is not just Wilder whom the matriarchy dispatch in the end.

Rather, the women initiate a building-wide slaughter, the enormity of which cannot be satisfactorily justified by the idea that they are only redressing past wrongs.[9] In general, then, women *appear* in *High-Rise* in victim roles, but they are no less brutal than Ballard's male characters in their hidden agency. If acts of violence directed against women stand out from this equal-opportunities cruelty, it is because the narrative itself is gendered, that is, events within the building are shown to us filtered through the gazes of the three male protagonists, while the bloodier deeds of female residents, murder and cannibalism foremost among them, are only implied—taking place 'behind the scenes.'

If we cast a glance back over the other novels of the quartet, we might see a pattern emerging in this respect. The fragmented narrative of *The Atrocity Exhibition* would be an exception: in it, the psychopathological action is solely the work of T— and his several imitators, and we cannot imagine the few women in the novel undertaking similar actions because, as we saw in chapter two, Ballard never reverses the roles along gender lines: T— and his imitators remain the assailants throughout, while Karen Novotny appears as the default victim. That said, the extremely subjective quality of *Atrocity*'s narrative does, in a way, set the groundwork for what we see in the other three novels—or are not given to see, as the case may be. The narrative point of view in *Crash* is no less subjective than that of *Atrocity*, but through it, Ballard manages to convey to us that women experience the erotics of the car crash quite apart from their involvement with the novel's male characters. Chapter twelve is indicative of this: Catherine Ballard appears to be in the driver's seat, figuratively speaking, directing both James Ballard's movements in bed, and the fantasy about Vaughan which the couple uses as a sex aid (cf.

Crash 91–93)—and we are aware of Catherine's agency despite the fact that the narrative does not merely reflect, but *is* James's point of view. Even closer in spirit to the 'behind-the-scenes' appearance of the matriarchy in *High-Rise* would be Helen Remington's relatively brief part in *Crash*. She more or less disappears from the narrative once her post-crash affair with James runs its course; and yet, her exploration of car-crash sexuality is not merely the necessary off-shoot of James's interest in her car, her body and her dead husband. We infer this, in part, from her reappearance at the end of the novel. There, James sees Remington and Gabrielle, now a couple, in the wrecker's yard where his crashed car (his second crashed car, the one in which Vaughan dies) is being held (*Crash* 170). This final detail suggests to us that Helen has been pursuing a trajectory parallel to the one James has been following with Vaughan, even though James's narration does not make us privy to it. And finally, *Concrete Island* may offer a less subjective narration than either *Atrocity* or *Crash*, but the depiction of Jane Sheppard still fits the pattern I am trying to sketch out here. In this respect, we note that Maitland once or twice observes her leaving and returning to the island; on their own, these details would not establish her as much more than a figment of his imagination, but the narrative provides enough details about Sheppard's whereabouts off the waste ground, and about her life prior to winding up there (cf. *CI* 99, 106–7 & 138–40), that we can infer the island is a shared space in which Maitland and Sheppard are trying to fashion new selves after renouncing the various disappointments of a previous existence.

In an interview with Ballard, already cited elsewhere in this study, Graeme Revell has suggested that much of his fiction is best understood as the writing of *petit récit*, that is to

say, narratives in which the restrictive quality of point of view is emphasised (Vale & Juno 42). The pattern I have just outlined is one consequence of such an approach. Throughout the novels of the quartet, women appear to us filtered through the male protagonist's gaze, and for this reason, it seems somewhat superfluous to criticise Ballard's representation of women according to some abstract standard of objectivity. Female characters in the quartet are always partly constructed by the male protagonist's desire for, assumptions about, or fears of women. And the reader is left to sort out why it is that the narrative point of view presents them in the way that they are made to appear. In this respect, Ballard's representation of his male protagonists bears some resemblance to critical theories which stress how the subject is manufactured by its socio-historical context. In *Atrocity* and *Crash* we find men consumed by the images of the fantasy women they consume: T—, Vaughan and Seagrave all obsess over the personas and bodies of Hollywood starlets, at least as their image is constructed in the media; T— and James Ballard can interact sexually with their respective partners, Karen Novotny and Catherine Ballard, only by visualizing them as fully manipulable doll-women or fetishised body parts dislocated from the whole. In *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* the partial 'construction' of women still occurs, but the switch from total immersion in the media landscape to extended retreats from late capitalism's cocoon of convenience and consumption brings with it different fantasies. In both novels, the men end up experiencing less restrained expressions of whatever it was that characterised their former domestic lives, and the women end up in symbolic roles that are, in a way, the necessary counterparts to that experience. In *Concrete Island*, Maitland harbours resentments

toward both his wife and mistress, and is also preoccupied with the lack of depth in his affection for them, for reasons that the narrative leaves vague, but the anaesthetic quality of that former life convinces us that none of this emotional material was ever expressed openly. His more chaotic interactions with Jane Sheppard, in part, bring to the surface all of this tension, and with her Maitland is able, for a short time, to role-play these resentments and reach the logical end of feeling apparent in his affectlessness, increasing his enjoyment in the process. In *High-Rise*, meanwhile, the consumer's petty fantasy of amassing commodities as status symbols is made comically literal, but at the expense of the building's women. Once the building's services and conveniences begin to decay, the emergent tribalism simply removes what was, after all, merely a deceptive element of civility from the real covetousness at the core of middle-class marital relations. The "struggle for territory and womenfolk" (89) which Laing, Wilder, and Royal take part in effectively transforms pride in the possession of a new blender or piece of abstract expressionist art into proprietorship over more and more female residents. And it adds an unsettling amount of honesty to Ballard's repeated references to women in the building as merely 'the wife of' someone with such-and-such a profession.

If Ballard's female characters have an 'existence' apart from this filter, it is for the most part left up to the reader's imagination, or must be pieced together from patchy details provided in each narrative. With *Atrocity* and *Crash*, the extremely subjective point of view makes this nearly impossible, but readers can still examine what the appearance of women as dolls, or as objects around which to spin elaborate fantasies, might imply about the male protagonist, and about the author's thoughts on the consumer

society that forms him. Meanwhile, the more conventional third-person narration in *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* holds out the possibility of more objective representations of women, capable of providing a stronger counterpoint to the chauvinistic assumptions of the central male gaze, that is, to the way in which Maitland and the three protagonists of *High-Rise* tend to, or prefer to, think of the women in their lives as signs for something else first and foremost, and individuals a distant second. And to an extent this is what we see in characters such as Jane Sheppard and Charlotte Melville. Ballard's depiction of Sheppard, in particular, is evidence that there is room in subjectively limited forms of fiction for more multi-dimensional secondary characters. She is by turns shrewd, vindictive, caring, hysterical, and sensible; but the 'Maitland-centred' narrative of *Concrete Island* makes it difficult for us to decide when these aspects of her character might only reflect Maitland's need to see her as an unruly daughter, an obliging mother-figure, and a mean-spirited whore all in one.

Ballard's studious exclusion of the female protagonist's point of view has another implication that strikes us as odd considering the ambitious statements he has made about the power of the human imagination; in the same interview with Revell quoted above, he commented that "the imagination is capable of devising almost anything—I don't see any restraints on it. I think it's capable of living—it *does* live—in an *unlimited universe*" (49). On one level this would hold true in that the male protagonists of Ballard's 'minor' narratives in a sense re-fashion the people around them, often to the point of cruelty—seeing them not as they might be in actuality, but as they need to see them to remain true to their visionary dreams, or merely to meet immediate contingencies. On an

entirely different level, though, such a constraint suggests that Ballard is incapable of re-envisioning his role as a writer, or of exercising his imaginative muscle in order to offer more counterpoints to the central point of view in many of his stories. In this respect, one wonders what the narrative of *High-Rise* could have been like if one of the matriarchy's members were permitted to speak, even if it were to give only a fragmented perspective on the group's exploits, and an intriguing alternate vision of the way Laing, Wilder and Royal behave. A perspectivism is already offered at specific moments in the narrative, when the male protagonists encounter one another, as I have tried to show in my readings of Laing and Wilder. But given Ballard's own grandiose claims for the human animal's imaginative faculty, the absence of a counter-balancing woman's point of view becomes a conspicuous weakness. Indeed, by setting the precedent of a tripartite narrative in *High-Rise*, Ballard opens the way toward other perspectivist texts in which his female characters would be granted what novelist Angela Carter, herself a defender of Ballard's work, calls "an equal share in the right to vision" (*Shaking a Leg* 512), and so it remains a perennial disappointment that he cannot or will not pursue such an endeavour.

Having said that, though, I am struck by the possibility that the persistence of restrictions to narrative point of view along gender lines, not only in the quartet but throughout Ballard's body of work, might also reflect his presumption of an essentialised difference between the ways men and women view the world—a perceptual or consciousness divide rooted in biology that the imagination cannot surmount in the same way that Ballard can pretend to be inside the head of a 'brute' character such as Richard Wilder. Certainly, T—'s fascination with wombs in *Atrocity*, and the matriarchy's

instinctual relationship with Pangbourne's recorded birth-cries in *High-Rise*, reify physiological differences between the sexes, and therefore constitute a crosscurrent in Ballard's fiction: a trope that works against the notion of the human body as a revisable text. My sense, however, is that the claims which could be made on behalf of Ballard's gestures toward biologically determined consciousness are limited. In terms of Ballard's use of narrative point of view, the exclusion of an essentialised woman's point of view—if such a thing even exists—seems dubious because of the lack of experimentation with alternate 'male' perspectives in the work. Ballard's representation of Wilder is to my knowledge the *only* example in his oeuvre of such a character acting as a substantive filter for events taking place in the narrative. As a result, the general prohibition in Ballard's work against the perspectives of female characters has very little to do with a refusal to speak on a woman's behalf—an aim that could be theorised as politically progressive—and much more to do with a generalised form of male chauvinism.

In a way, my comments up to now on Ballard's general exclusion of the perspectives of female characters have presupposed that such perspectives would in fact be substantively different from those of Ballard's men, and somehow enhance the subjectivism of *Atrocity* and *Crash*, and the more emphatic perspectivism of *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*. If I am wary of taking this argument any further, it is because of the risk of veering too far into pure speculation. There is, however, another way of approaching this problem, and that is by addressing the wider implications of the conspicuously repetitive and two-dimensional quality of Ballard's characterisation. If Ballard's representation of women is wanting, this is, I would suggest, symptomatic of a

more systemic problem affecting his approach to character. In this respect, I want to examine more closely David Pringle's comments on Ballard's characterisation. The 'type' categories into which Pringle separates Ballard's characters remain helpful descriptive tools after two and half decades, even though I tend not to agree with several of the conclusions he draws from this classification system.

The thesis behind Pringle's system has at least the virtue of clarity: he aims to establish Ballard's status as a "symbolist fantasist" (51). In terms of characterisation, what this means is that Ballard's characters are "usually personifications of psychological urges rather than 'real people'" and are "best seen as figures in an inner landscape" (51)—that of the central male protagonist. In support of this claim, he divides Ballard's characters into protagonists, jesters, lamia and kings. This study has already made reference to his 'jester' category in readings of characters such as Seagrave, Proctor and Wilder, so I will not reproduce those comments here. An extended explication of the 'king' group is not necessary either; all that needs to be said is that the designation covers those characters in Ballard's work who function as guide figures, in the manner of Dr Nathan and Vaughan, or project an aristocratic disdain for the world around them, apparent most obviously in Anthony Royal's elitism. With both 'jesters' and 'kings' the important point is that they are to be thought of as extensions of the protagonist's psyche first and foremost—allegorical personifications for the psychoanalytic age, as it were—and individuals hardly at all. A more central concern, here, would be Pringle's two other categories, the male protagonists and the lamia. While Pringle does not really consider Ballard's protagonists as 'types' in the same way as the other three, this is

precisely what they are. This fact needs to be emphasised because it complicates the way we receive Pringle's system of classification.

Lamia is a designation Pringle borrows from the John Keats poem of the same name, in which she appears as "an enchantress, a liar, and a calculating expert in *amour*; but [. . .] apparently intends no harm, is genuinely in love, and is very beautiful" (*Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1798). Pringle separates Ballard's lamia into two sub-categories: lamia proper and "bitch wives" (Pringle 40–42). The bitch wife category is troubling because it appears to cover women who are demonstrably the intellectual inferiors of their male counterparts *and* women who simply assert themselves in one form or another. Pringle defends Ballard's use of this stereotype on the grounds that, because "the 'death of affect'—the growth of a ruthlessly emotionless and guiltless form of individualism—is one of the great themes of Ballard's fiction [. . . i]t could be argued that his female characters are stupid or vindictive precisely to the degree that Ballard wishes to make this point" (41). Here, Pringle equates stupidity and vindictiveness with callous independence, and this amounts to damning Ballard's female characters for acting in much the same way as his heroes. Catherine Ballard in *Crash*, for instance, is relegated to the bitch wife category without much in the way of explanation (Pringle 40), and we can only assume that it is because at times she dares to be as indifferent to James as he is to her, or because she has casual affairs with her flight instructor and secretary, or because she challenges James's assumptions about Vaughan. (During the sex scene in chapter twelve, Catherine refutes James's early assumption that Vaughan, and he himself, is interested not in sex but rather technology, and uses a sex fantasy of her own to underline

the point [*CR* 91–92].) That said, if this category has purchase on Ballard's fiction, it is as a description of the resentment Ballard's male characters feel for being challenged. In this respect, one thinks back to the exchanges between Dr Nathan and Margaret T— in *Atrocity*, Maitland's verbal sparring with Jane Sheppard in *Concrete Island*, and Laing's brief argument with Charlotte Melville early in *High-Rise*. The problem with the way Pringle outlines this category is that he considers 'bitchiness' something that Ballard's women possess as part of their individuality, whereas the whole tenor of his argument—that the personalities of these subsidiary characters should be read as projections originating from the central figures—works against such a claim.

More in keeping with the overarching trajectory of Pringle's argument is his defence of Ballard's lamia figures against accusations of sexism. Here, Pringle makes reference to Jungian theory, suggesting that these "remote, beautiful, and almost unattainable women" (41) are "reminiscent of [. . .] Anima figures," and thus are what they are principally because of the way Ballard's leading men want to imagine them (42). So, where Pringle locates the assertive persona of the 'bitch wife' in the woman herself, the lamia type is given far less credibility as a representation of an autonomous individual. The specific examples given indicate that, in constructing this category, Pringle is thinking mainly of women who appear in short stories which Ballard wrote in the early sixties (cf. 41–42). *Concrete Island*'s Jane Sheppard and the entirety of *High-Rise*'s matriarchy are referenced as well (42), but to my mind the only thing these women have in common is the quality of remoteness—and even then their individual performances of it are not necessarily uniform. Furthermore, I do not see these women conforming to a

single standard of beauty, unless one equates 'beauty' with the pronounced cosmetic effect that tends to define their appearance, in which case it is the illusion created by the cosmetics of a woman whose body can be re-made according to a pre-existing and preferred model which Ballard's men find most alluring. As for unattainability, we are hard pressed to think of any of the quartet's characters in this way, if only because casual promiscuity is so strongly thematised in all of them. That said, Pringle may be thinking more in terms of a form of total possession, in which case T—'s inability to 'have' Novotny except by murdering her, or Jane Sheppard's decisive departure from Maitland and the concrete island, or Laing's ambiguous menage with his sister and Eleanor Powell, might make these women unattainable in a deeper sense. In any event, what is disappointing about Pringle's introduction of the lamia figure is that he refrains from exploring in detail how Jungian theory, or other psychoanalytical theories for that matter, might help us understand the male protagonist's irrational fears of this archetype, which is, according to the theory, an aspect of his own psyche. Nor does Pringle offer a hypothesis about what the repeated use of this archetype might tell us about the author. Pringle mentions Ballard's male protagonists typically having a "[f]ear of the mother, fear of castration[,]" but refrains from exploring the implications of these anxieties in depth, suggesting instead that Ballard's use of these tropes is most often only half serious (43). So, on the one hand psychoanalytic theory is used to explain a substantial aspect of the writer's work, while on the other, the critic argues that the work aims, in part, to deflate the male protagonist's anxieties, and perhaps psychoanalytic interpretation along with them, through irony and wit.

Pringle's approach to Ballard's protagonists, meanwhile, collapses them, quite rightly, into one recurrent individual or point of view: "that of an intelligent man of the world, wry and introspective, slightly perverse, and eternally suspicious of his own motives" (37). "The typical Ballardian hero[,]" he goes on to say, "is fond of inspecting himself in a mirror or photograph; he generally has a distaste for his own body, although he rarely has any gross physical deformities. [. . . H]e is usually well-muscled, a big man, tending to leanness rather than fat. Women find him attractive" (37–38). The description is generally positive and, to my mind, an accurate assessment of James Ballard, Robert Maitland, Robert Laing, and perhaps T— as well, although the extent of his nervous breakdown makes him seem far too vulnerable to be thought of as an 'intelligent man of world.' At the same time that he establishes these protagonists as the most well-defined characters in Ballard's fiction, though, Pringle also considers them to be less than credible as individuals: he calls them instead "convenient areas of awareness" (39). By this he seems to mean that Ballard's talents as a writer are most evident in his evocations of the landscapes of symbols which drift through these 'areas of awareness'—in opposition to landscape considered either as the background through which a character moves, or more ambiguous fusions of inner and outer spaces. And yet, there is a certain amount of self-contradiction in Pringle's understanding of these male leads, because although he privileges their status as points of view which merely coordinate an unfolding spectacle—the play of symbols for its own sake—he also concludes that these introspective men are constantly on a quest for "a state of grace, or integration with the universe [. . .] wish[ing] to find themselves and create a whole" (49). This statement

would seem to subsume the play of symbols within the overarching story of the isolated individual's personal transformation. Regardless of this contradiction, what needs to be emphasised is that Ballard's repeated use of this solitary male consciousness—"the only character that *matters*, in the last analysis" (Pringle 49)—makes it a 'type' like the other categories, although perhaps slightly less two-dimensional. Pringle's description of Ballard's recurrent protagonist-figure basically implies this point, but it is never stated explicitly. As a result, one suspects that he is mistaking narratives which reflect a central and recurrent point of view to the exclusion of others, with more fully developed characterisation.

Does this then mean that Ballard trades on dismissive caricatures of the Western middle- and upper-class consumer? To a degree, yes. There is a certain mean-spiritedness toward either sex in his reduction of individuals to roughly two dimensions, and this is reinforced by the way he represents entire societies. Ballard creates characters who conform to what seem like scripted modes of behaviour, but this aura of social regimentation is, in turn, reflected in his depictions of anonymous crowds of spectators and traffic jams (*Crash*), ceaseless traffic flows (*Concrete Island*), floor parties and elevator behaviour (*High-Rise*)—in *High-Rise* this uniformity extends even to the onset of the breakdown of regimentation within the building. Because *Atrocity*'s visible world is so bound up with T—'s permeable consciousness, there are few if any crowd scenes, but T— does have imitators in Koester, Vaughan, and the students who attend his lectures, and at least one fellow-traveller in Dr Nathan; and furthermore, the mock-scientific reports in *Atrocity*'s later chapters speak of panels of anonymous test-subjects

whose psychosexual responses can be accurately measured and predicted. Much of this approach has to do with the subject matter Ballard inherited from his early engagement with science fiction. The preoccupation with suburban landscapes and their anonymous mobile masses is clearly in line with representing "the dynamics of human societies"—a topic that Ballard felt was studiously ignored by "the traditional novel" (*Crash* 6). The question might be: at what point does a writer's engagement with this topic cease to be a science-fiction trope and become a sweeping satire of a culture's practices, or appear to us as both at the same time? Scenes of mass movement and crowd dynamics inevitably project a sense of de-individualisation. Depending on how much the reader values his or her freedom and will, this basic image of being in the group might begin to look like metaphors for dehumanisation because they project a pervasive inability to avoid the all-embracing norm, or even speak to the end of the delusion that one is 'free' to choose not to participate. But are we to respond to Ballard's vistas of traffic jams and flows, stuffed lobbies and elevators with an appalled laughter, as in response to scenes of all-consuming folly, or are such representations simply necessary in an accurate depiction of life within non-places, regardless of the surrealist cast that that depiction is given (i.e., traffic flows cannot help but project homogeneity so there is little point in despairing over the [mechanised] herd mentality implicit in them)? Or, should we loop this topic back around to the discussion of narrative point of view, and ask whether our perception of the dynamics (or lack of dynamics) of group behaviour in Ballard's work depends very much on the perspectives of the main characters?

To my mind, elements of all three are involved. I think it is safe to say that Ballard's view of human behaviour under late capitalism is for the most part a totalising vision which mocks the presumption of free will and individual autonomy, so often promoted as foundational concepts of major Western liberal democracies—and especially so in the Cold War era, in contradistinction to the centrist state planning of Soviet communism. Within the aura of homogeneity, however, Ballard makes room for variations. Indeed, much of my reading of the quartet's cautionary or satirical dimension depends on paying close attention to the possible significance of specific divergences from the ostensible psychological 'norms' in each text: Seagrave versus Vaughan, Wilder versus Laing, and so on. Also, if one looks closely at specific representations of group behaviour, it is apparent that Ballard takes some pains to single out idiosyncratic figures within the mass, even though these exceptions do not seriously challenge the group's overall homogeneity; one thinks of the incongruous detail of "a thirteen year-old boy in a cowboy suit" among a group of roadside crash spectators in *Crash* (120), or the affable American serviceman who slows down to offer Maitland a lift in *Concrete Island* (cf. 34–35). Of course, both our awareness of such figures and our overall impression of Ballard's attitude toward the collective entity are closely bound up with the way individual characters situate themselves relative to the group. T— does not really encounter crowds in *Atrocity*, but the mock-scientific report chapters flaunt the idea of free will; so long as a test, poll or questionnaire can be devised, these pieces seem to argue, the majority of individuals will fall neatly into line. In *Crash*, James Ballard's observations of groups of accident site spectators project a desire for community. At one accident site, for instance, the one with

the cowboy-suited child, he eagerly projects his own understanding of the car crash onto the crowd of strangers: "Clearly the most vivid erotic fantasies would be moving through our minds, of imaginary acts of intercourse performed with enormous decorum and solicitude upon the blood-stained loins of this young woman while she lay within her car" (120). This is not to say that the crowd itself does not behave with uniformity ("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 bloodstock sale" [120]), only that one needs to consider the filtering effect of James's narration carefully. By contrast, his mentor Vaughan assumes that the anonymous automotive masses "were already dead" (106), and for the most part plunges through crowds as if they were not really there or constituted an annoying obstacle, as at the site of Seagrave's death (cf. 142–43).[10] In *Concrete Island*, Maitland hurls a lot of abuse at the passing traffic in chapter two, but this has more to do with his ever-deepening delirium than with a bona fide contempt for his fellow drivers. And finally, *High-Rise*'s perspectivist narrative offers us three competing orientations relative to the population of residents: Laing is generally amiable and interested in the comments of his fellow tenants, but is eventually relieved to find so many of them succumbing to the deprivation of basic needs because their deaths mean that there will be less chance that his menage with Alice and Powell will be observed and scrutinised (cf. 147); Wilder begins his story as a putative subversive, on the side of the 'little tenants,' only to end up looking for society with the building's few remaining children; and Royal generally sneers at the plebs below, identifying himself with the nobility of "the unfamiliar species of estuarine gull" (79) who come to roost on the building's roof. In

turn, Ballard himself projects an aura of tongue-in-cheek disdain by incessantly referring to all tertiary characters in the novel by their profession or by 'wife of that profession.'

Overall, this variety of perspectives creates a multi-layered satire of the multitudes living in and moving through the paradigmatic spaces of non-place. At times we find ourselves unnerved by the aura of uniformity or conformity that hangs about both Ballard's individual characters, and his fictional societies as a whole, while at others we may sense that the subjective point of view is trying to convince us that that very homogeneity is the closest thing possible to a sense of community within those zones—if only we could see it through such-and-such a theory or in a visionary light.

This variety is not matched, however, by Ballard's approach to narrative point of view, to bring us back to our initial focus. The sheer scope of conformity within the fictional worlds of the quartet should perhaps make the specific identity of the protagonist fully negotiable, and yet Ballard's decision to stick with the solitary white male consciousness risks implying that this 'type' perceives events in a way that stands out from the rest, and deserves special attention. Stressing gender concerns again, we note that in three of the four novels there are possible precedents for a female version of the 'wry, introspective' protagonist—Helen Remington in *Crash* certainly, and perhaps also Jane Sheppard in *Concrete Island*, and Eleanor Powell and Charlotte Melville in *High-Rise*. Their presence underscores the startling lack of variety in Ballard's apportioning of roles in the quartet. And although we might be tempted to ascribe the uniformity of Ballard's protagonists to artistic immaturity, a weakness specific to an earlier part of his writing career, a quick survey of his oeuvre reveals that he has yet to really change in this

respect. To date, for example, only one female psychopathological 'hero,' that is, a 'female Vaughan,' exists: Dr Barbara Rafferty in *Rushing to Paradise* (1994). To be fair, though, in the wake of the quasi-autobiographical novels *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*, which display Ballard's most multi-faceted secondary characters to date, his approach to characterisation generally has shifted toward representations that are more 'well-rounded,' but still a far cry from the "consular characters [of realism] grandly inhabiting their domains within an ample time and space[,]" whose validity within the contemporary moment he questioned in 1974 (*Crash* 8).

I have a hard time, then, accepting Pringle's assumption that Ballard's unwavering use of these types, including the Ballardian hero, supports the idea of an "intelligent manipulation of symbols, properties, landscapes[,]"—the means through which the 'symbolist fantasist' achieves his artistic effects (39). Is there intelligence in the recurrent limitation of the sign-function of secondary characters, or in the largely interchangeable quality of his male heroes? Ballard's manipulation of characters *qua* symbols has all the hallmarks of automatic reproduction, as does his tendency to recycle familiar names for his characters (Catherine, Robert, Vaughan, Helen, Jane, etc.), a practice that risks appearing to the reader as a lack of inventiveness. But perhaps we need to question the term *intelligence* itself: how is it being defined? Throughout his examination of Ballard's characters, Pringle tends to equate 'intelligence' with wit or irony. So long as the critic is able to establish through close readings that the male protagonist's aspirations are, after all, being treated with wry humour, then he can rest assured that Ballard's rehearsal of stock characters or genre conventions has been redeemed, and elevated above an

indulgence in hurtful stereotypes. While it is important to value Ballard's wit, a dosage of irony in one area of a text is not really sufficient to cure it of its other weaknesses—nor should the presence of one necessarily cancel out the other. In this specific context, I would be more inclined to make intelligence synonymous with the writer's ability to create variety, or to make the reader question both the meaning of recurrent symbol-characters and the implications of their frequent use—which is only in keeping with the enthusiasm Ballard has for the limitless ingenuity of the human imagination. In spite of individual exceptions, such as Jane Sheppard and Richard Wilder, Ballard does not move far enough in this direction in the quartet.

Of course, in assessing whether or not Ballard's manipulation of symbols shows 'intelligence,' one also needs to consider that the mechanical effect produced by re-hashing the same character types might actually be reiterating, at the level of style, the death of affect experienced by the characters, be they central or secondary. Where the construction of entire societies of mechanistic characters suggests disdain on the author's part for mass culture in the postwar period, the pairing of character and style moderates this contemptuousness. There is some truth to this claim, but its application appears limited to just *Atrocity* and *Crash*. Both novels present a pronounced and sophisticated parallel between character experience and narrative style. The unconventional organisation of *Atrocity*'s narrative evokes a mechanically processed text, as we saw in chapter three, and therefore indicates Ballard's attempt to write like a machine as an aesthetic experiment (or *appear* to write like a machine, for aside from *Atrocity*'s numbered lists, which were supposedly arrived at through "free association" [*Atrocity*

14–15], the text is not an example of extended 'automatic writing,' in the manner of certain surrealist texts). Meanwhile, it perhaps goes without saying that in *Crash* the explicit and precise depiction of the sexual behaviour of the characters doubles the way in which they envision their intimate relationships with modern machines and technology, and with one another. With both novels, then, the author's use of style is implicated in the unorthodox actions of his characters, and this closing of the distance between author and fiction makes Ballard's critical stance relative to his characters, and relative to the society in which they live, harder—but not impossible—for readers to re-construct. My own close readings of those texts tried to focus on episodes or specific features which project an honesty about corporeal consequence, and thereby engender anxiety over the loss of humanity which has resulted in these machine-characters.

With *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* the more conventional quality of the narration excludes the possibility of this doubling effect, but in its absence Ballard has produced what is, in effect, a compromise between the two-dimensional brand of characterisation apparent in the previous novels, and the more fully developed characters that one tends to expect from realist fiction. Jane Sheppard obviously possesses a past in a way that many other secondary characters in Ballard's work do not, and she displays a fuller, more unpredictable range of emotions in her dealings with Maitland. There is even some suggestion that she is constructing Maitland according to fantasies of her own, the flip-side of his treatment of her as symbolic wife, mistress, mother and child: Maitland's discovery of a photograph of Jane, pregnant, alerts us to the fact that she has, at some point in the past, lost a child (*CI* 106–7), but the information about this past trauma, in

turn, helps explain why earlier she had rocked him to sleep (89), and why later she directs a semi-coherent rant at him about a past dysfunctional relationship (165–66). From Sheppard's point of view, then, Maitland is also a convenient body out of which she can construct a symbolic 'lost child' and 'adversarial lover.' *High-Rise* carries out a similar compromise through its levelling of the narrative playing field between Laing, Wilder and Royal. My reading of Wilder's ascent of the high-rise hopefully indicated that his story has meaning both in relation to Laing's and Royal's respective stories, and in its own right. In other words, Ballard gives to Wilder a more prominent role than those of his counterparts in *Atrocity* and *Crash*, but his expanded share of the narrative does not substantially alter the two-dimensional quality of characterisation apparent in each of these novels.

In conclusion, an initial concern with the limitations of Ballard's representation of women tends to give way to a more considered attention to the overall tenor of Ballard's characterisation, and his critical use of subjectivist and perspectivist narration, not just in *High-Rise*, but throughout the quartet. Although Ballard gives his characters a more or less equal opportunity to pursue the path of deviance, and does not limit the capacity for (self-)destructive behaviour to one gender or the other, his persistent identification of the 'Ballardian man' with what Nicholas Ruddick calls the "insular nature of the self" (*Ultimate Island* 90), and its attendant point of view on the world of non-places, takes on a regrettable reductive quality—especially if our awareness of this identification is extended to other works in his oeuvre. On one level this privileging of the male protagonist's point of view seems rather incongruous next to the homogeneity and

interchangeability of experience which arises out of Ballard's satirical representation of late-twentieth-century commuter / consumer societies. On another level, though, we worry that Ballard's tendency to align the powers of the imagination with the (male) individual's private obsessions works against the bold claims he makes for the imaginative faculty generally. Instead of being the starting point for intellectual efforts to bridge distances between competing subjective experiences of the world, and thereby build sites of commonality without necessarily creating a compulsory norm, the imagination-as-obsession risks moving the writer toward a lackadaisical rehearsal of cliché and stereotype. Ballard tries to mitigate this problem in *High-Rise* and elsewhere by making psychopathology a metaphor for absolute Otherness, and having his protagonists discover that this continent of experience and perception was within them all along, but certain limitations within his use of limited point of view risk sabotaging the ethical claims that could be made for such an imaginative endeavour.

Notes

1. Roger Luckhurst's reading of *The Atrocity Exhibition* articulates this problem by citing another critic's concerns over Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: "'[A]ny act of criticism would seem misplaced . . . for seeming to be everywhere anticipated, pre-empted, forced into an unsettling critical sphere between the welcome and the redundant'" (Noel King qtd. in Luckhurst *'The Angle Between Two Walls'* 75).

2. Royal's narrative is no less important in this respect, but I have chosen not to pursue his particular trajectory through the novel, principally to maintain continuity. This chapter, and those on *Crash* and *Concrete Island*, have made the pairing of a central figure or figures, and a subsidiary character linked to the corporeal, a recurrent theme: James Ballard and Vaughan versus Seagrave; Maitland versus Proctor; Laing versus Wilder. Additionally, a lengthy consideration of Royal's point of view on the high-rise's transformation might constitute something of a redundancy within this particular study, on two fronts. First, in contradistinction to Wilder, both Royal and Laing display an optimism about the effect that the high-rise has on its tenants, although the reasons for this optimism differ from one another. Thus, the theories Royal and Laing develop regarding the 'high-rise effect' bear striking resemblances to one another. Second, Royal's fate (he is shot by Wilder late in the narrative, and slowly bleeds to death as he makes his way down through the apartment complex) is no less grim than Wilder's, and thus an analysis of Wilder's trajectory suffices as evidence of the singularity of Laing's 'success' at negotiating his way through the building's social transformation.

It is worth noting, though, that Royal, in contrast to Laing, retains (or gains?) a conscience by the end of novel. In the final chapter, Laing recalls his puzzlement at the fact that Royal had felt pangs of "guilt before his death" (173). Unlike Laing, who remains on the building's middle floors for the majority of his own story, readers are aware of the gruesome truth that Royal has learned about the structure he helped design—that it has given birth to a literal bloodbath while he was busy consolidating his status atop the building's increasingly primitive social structure. When Royal and Laing eventually discover the "bone pit" in the tenth-floor swimming pool (170), then, they respond to it in quite different ways: Laing seems unruffled by the sight, mainly because he is no longer able to distinguish between the real and the artificial / histrionic; Royal, meanwhile, looks upon the pile of bodies with the eyes of a man who has finally come down from his pedestal. The bone pit completes Royal's process of recognition of the actuality within the building, a process initiated in chapter eighteen when he discovers that the children's sculpture garden—a structure he had designed—had at some point in the building's transformation been covered in human blood and tissue. In this sense, Royal's trajectory through the novel is relevant to my overarching concern with intimations of corporeality and consequence in the quartet.

3. The original vision lies somewhere amid the architectural drawings, photographs of the high-rise, and random images of the development project scattered about Royal's penthouse studio, which together "described a *more real* world than the building which

he was now about to abandon" (69, emphasis added). In Royal's mind, these representations of the project have an aura of substantive reality about them which the actual building could never equal. Royal first assumes that the unruly behaviour of his fellow tenants marks the end of this ideal, and, even more of an affront to him, constitutes their indirect assault on his own person (69).

4. Incidentally, it is difficult to tell what criteria Royal believes will shape this future social order within the high-rise. Its formation is mostly left up to the verticality of the building itself. Still, as the narrative progresses, Royal's aristocratic disdain for his fellow tenants reaches a point where he believes he alone should sit in judgment on his neighbours, i.e. become the building's principal *royal* (I am taking a cue here from David Pringle's allegorical reading of the architect's name [48]). He begins to despise even the refined tastes of his closest allies:

> He looked down on them for their good taste. The building was a monument to good taste [. . .] to that whole aesthetic sensibility which those well-educated professional people had inherited from all the schools of industrial design, all the award-winning schemes of interior decoration institutionalized by the last quarter of the twentieth century. Royal detested this orthodoxy of the intelligent. (81)

Royal's autocratic utopian vision does not simply slot his fellow upper-floor residents in at the top on the basis of the relative size of their disposable income. Instead, his hope lies with the potential for aesthetic provocation within the increasing deterioration of living conditions: "Royal would have given anything for one vulgar mantelpiece ornament, one less than snow-white lavatory bowl, one hint of hope" (81). In short, he is restless for a revolution in taste. However, Royal is naive if he thinks that a choice for filth or the abject, carefully placed tawdriness, contrived stupidity, etc.—for the transgressivity they supposedly carry—will actually escape re-containment by the aesthetic sensibilities they are intended to outrage. In a building where certain residents have the means to hang works of pop art and abstract expressionism in their apartments (64), it stands to reason that even kitsch could be re-couped by high-art sensibilities. In other words, Royal stakes a lot on the genuine naivety of bad taste, but it remains doubtful whether such innocence truly exists among his well-educated neighbours.

5. Most of the tenants complain of insomnia (13) because they have in essence entered "Party Time" (22), literally the title of chapter two, but figuratively a fitting name for the waking dream that *is* the building's extended daytime.

6. Although sinister behaviour is on average the dominant mode in *High-Rise*, it should be pointed out that one benefit of the move toward uncivilised behaviour is, in fact, a kind of artistic sensibility summed up very well in the following passage from Laing's third of the narrative:

> Still uncertain how long he had been awake, or what he had been doing half an hour earlier, Laing sat down among the empty bottles and refuse on the kitchen floor. He gazed up at the derelict

> washing-machine and refrigerator, now only used as garbage-bins. He found it hard to remember what their original function had been. To some extent they had taken on a new significance, a role that he had yet to understand. Even the run-down nature of the high-rise was a model of the world into which the future was carrying them, a landscape beyond technology where everything was either derelict or, more ambiguously, recombined in unexpected but more meaningful ways. (146–47)

The passage expresses something like the Dada idea of the readymade, although the effect of dereliction and recombination is quite different from the assault on the institutions of art and the art museum initiated by figures like Marcel Duchamp.

7. Pringle's study of Ballard's archetypal characters works on the assumption that it features only one substantial character, the central protagonist—almost always a man—and several subsidiary characters who represent the same aspects of that protagonist's psyche. Pringle works from a curious mix of Jungian and Freudian psychological terminology, as well as allusions to the *Tempest*. Thus, characters like Vaughan and Royal, and sometimes the protagonists themselves, appear as Prospero figures; characters like Seagrave, Proctor and Wilder are "jesters," by which Pringle means a combination of aspects of Caliban and Ariel; and all Ballard women can be divided into either "bitch wives" or "lamia," although some of them are depicted as possessing Miranda's innocence (37–51); later in this chapter I return to consider Pringle's argument in more detail. My approach to Wilder parts company with Pringle in that it assumes Ballard expands his role in the narrative of *High-Rise* for a specific reason: his ascent up the building makes sense on its own, as well as in relation to Laing's 'success.'

8. As a counterpoint to my own interpretation of Wilder's behaviour, here, it should be observed that elements of both passages suggest that Wilder's 'wildman' routine is just that—a performance. For the sake of argument, I have had to emphasise the unconscious quality of his actions as the narrative progresses. However, the fact that throughout *High-Rise* Ballard plays with the notion that the residents are at times approximating 'primitive' behaviour should not be too hastily glossed over. In the second passage, for instance, the presence of the camera coupled with Wilder's enthusiasm for the flickering outline of himself on the hallway walls evoke the interiority of a cinema as well as a cave, and thereby leaves some doubt as to whether Wilder is not, in fact, aping the apeman.

9. The reason Pringle is right in calling the group a *bloody* matriarchy has to do with the slaughter it initiates in order to install itself at the top. The dawning of a new era under their control is symbolised in the final few chapters by signs of "a recent attempt [. . .] at housekeeping" on the top floor: garbage bags disposed of, furniture righted, graffiti covered by fresh paint (165). But while the return of cleanliness and order might be a relief after the narrative's mayhem, the matriarchy has effectively transformed the building into a 'whited sepulchre,' with newly white-washed walls "gleaming in the

afternoon sunlight like the entrance to an abattoir" (160–61). Arguably, their victory is pyrrhic for their new order is left with very few tenants, male or female, to rule over; indeed, if their goal is to re-organise high-rise life along matriarchal lines, such a reversal of social norms seems a total failure in the wake of the horrific purification they much initiate to achieve it.

10. Hence Scott Durham's reading of the novel. For him, the narrative's final irony is that Vaughan crashes into these crowds in his attempt to crash into Elizabeth Taylor, and thus rejoins the very populace who, in part, generate her celebrity by consuming images of her in the first place (cf *Phantom Communities* 70–71).

Chapter Seven - Conclusion

On the Role of Instinct in the Quartet

Over the course of this study of Ballard's early seventies quartet, I have concentrated on those aspects of each novel which foreground or evoke the corporeal, generate a sense of consequence within their suburban landscapes, and thereby cement their underlying cautionary dimension. Along the way, an unmistakable motif has emerged—the troubling persistence of extreme forms of (sexual) aggression—which has made a concluding consideration of the role of instinct in the quartet necessary. Indeed, it seems only fitting that the discussion should end with this issue since so much of my argument about the cautionary dimension of these novels has been concerned with clashes between, on the one hand, the limitless quality of the characters' conceptual ingenuity, and on the other, Ballard's gestures toward more intransigent forms of corporeality, that is, elements of his characters' humanity which resist or complicate their transformations, whatever they may be and however they might come about. The question of human instinct has come up in the preceding chapters, but remained a somewhat secondary consideration. In the space remaining, I want to offer two summary observations about its role in the quartet, and its importance to the view of postwar Western culture that Ballard espoused throughout the period, if not consistently ever since.

The first comment relates specifically to *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash.* Ballard's unflinching preoccupation with the more instinctual dimension of human existence acts as a kind of counter-trajectory in those novels. Their thematic concern

with the possibility of artificially extending, expanding or complicating the category of 'the human,' figured in the characters' refusal or inability to distinguish themselves from their representation in images and from the technological objects they use, is in effect superimposed on a backdrop of residual human nature. In this way, the preoccupation with instinct works alongside Ballard's gestures toward pre-discursive corporeality, and against the idea that 'the human' is unequivocally a 'soft machine' fully interactive with its 'harder' counterparts. (By comparison, in *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise* this crosscurrent effect is not as much of a factor, mainly because it is clearer in both narratives that the characters believe, or the reader comes to realise, that technology's role in their lives is principally to make room for these instincts.) That said, because the element of human nature that Ballard focusses on is so bound up with fundamental drives, its presence throughout the quartet can also be read as the most automatic aspect of the human animal, and therefore a substantial platform for the entire dream of compatibility between organic and technological realms. As a result of this paradox, we need to refine our terms: Ballard's preoccupation with instinct points up the difference between the (human) automaton and the machine. Just as I spoke of gradations of artificiality and the organic in relation to Ballard's representation of the body in *Atrocity*, so too might we speak of gradations of predictability apparent in the quartet's various comparisons and contrasts between the instinctual motivations of the human animal and the regularised workings of technological objects.

This general observation, and in particular the distinction between automaton and machine, in effect revives the affiliation between the readings presented in the preceding

chapters and those of Ballard's Lacanian critics suggested in both chapters one and three, in contradistinction to the broadly formulated Baudrillardian position—which itself identifies the world 'represented' in the quartet with a smooth-functioning hyperreality—from which this study has sought to distinguish itself without rejecting wholesale its implications. In short, the argument that Ballard's characters are subjects of (perverse) desire is more persuasive than the notion that if they represent anything, it is their own constitution as semiotic objects or machine-bodies devoid of subjectivity. As we have seen, Ballard's Lacanian critics offer complex but, I think, accurate theorisations of both the bodily experiences that his characters go through, and the unorthodox sexual behaviour that develops as a result of their enjoyment of those experiences.

A basic consonance, then, exists between my interest in Ballard's reliance on 'un-machined' carnal drives and the psychoanalytic conviction that Ballard's characters both gain access to a more instinctual, infantile corporeality through their (often sought after) traumatic experiences and come to desire the unorthodox pleasures of its reawakened sensorium. Such an approach begins with the average adult's pleasure of experiences in which he or she finds some kind of 'child within' and / or polymorphously perverse sensation. In the novels, these experiences usually occur during moments of technological breakdown, during which the characters are confronted with an experience of the real that either seems to or does in fact exceed representation. The car crash is of course Ballard's primary figure for such experiences. His characters are, in effect, rejuvenated by the feeling of helplessness associated with their damaged bodies, but cannot shake the erotic stirrings which appear in conjunction with that feeling (Foster

"J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses" 524). In short, they start enjoying being pampered too much, and seek out repetitions of the original event which placed them in that position of dependence. As was apparent in chapter one, it is the exploration of that recovered instinctuality and the obsessions which follow it that sets the Lacanian approach apart from the focus on Ballard's semiotics which one associates with a Baudrillardian line of argument. In turn, Lacanian theorisations of the perverse behaviour at the centre of Ballard's characterisation become the platform for a convincing picture of the complex individual subjectivity reflected in the fiction. Although the novels of the quartet generally presuppose a self whose interiority is compromised by the intrusions of late capitalist society, the more personal idiosyncrasies of that self still seem to have a role to play in shaping the overall picture of the Lacanian subject. By comparison, the Baudrillardian focus, which is in any case limited in its applicability to *Atrocity* and *Crash*, arbitrarily sets aside the question of subjectivity altogether, and thereby oversimplifies what is taking place in the fiction, although sometimes for special effect, as was noted in chapter one.

To extend this digression further, I find myself allied with Ballard's Lacanian critics in another area as well, that is, on the potential for Ballard's novels, *Atrocity* and *Crash* in particular, to act as cultural critique, an approach which accords with the stress placed throughout this study on the moral awareness that one can cultivate through careful close readings of Ballard's texts. In contrast to the Baudrillardian line, there is at least room in Lacanian approaches for an articulation of the late-twentieth-century phenomenon that Ballard responds to with a marked level of anxiety: in Dennis Foster's words, not only

"the deep persistence of the images of perversity" but also "the ways the world of technology and consumption appeals to them" (525); in other words, within consumer culture, those with a vested interest in compelling us to open our wallets have hit upon marketing strategies that appeal to this appetite for perverse enjoyment.

Although Ballard does not offer strident criticisms of this economic practice in the quartet, there is nevertheless an implicit critique dramatised in particular episodes—the most effective being the Ford commercial which James Ballard produces in *Crash*, with its seductive illusion of Elizabeth Taylor emerging unscathed from a car crash. The advertisement admits openly to what most commercials only imply, or what the automotive industry and the driving public would rather not acknowledge: that the profitable and entertaining sexualisation of the automobile extends past the moment of collision or breakdown. The commodification, enticing packaging and normalisation of perversity apparent in the scene moves in the direction of Baudrillard's ironic interpretation of Ballard's work, with its stress on functional dysfunction, the total absence of perversity, the breakdown in distinctions between body and technology, and, following in the wake of all of those things, the abandonment of a critical stance for a 'cooler' position of fascination. But, as the preceding chapters have sought to show, the suburban landscape of communications and mass transportation represented throughout the quartet does not amount to a complete, let alone a fully operational, hyperreality. Because Lacanian critics tend to explore the meaning of Ballard's obsession with the unanticipated and unforeseeable eruption of the real within the generalised fiction effect of late capitalist space, and approach his texts as allegories of the impossibility of

banishing the real from a generalised order of simulation, with its intensive planning and paramount themes of efficiency, reproducibility and consumerism, they are able to analyse the complicated, entangled and vertiginous mixture of levels of experience apparent in the fiction.

The second summary observation I would make about Ballard's preoccupation with instinctuality, especially after looking back over the discussions set out in the preceding chapters, is that much of Ballard's representation of instinct is bound up with a long-established satiric tradition. In short, he deploys the animal limitations of human beings against the loftiness of their ideals and their pretensions to intellectual mastery. Ballard's repeated juxtapositions of his visionaries' provocative ideas with the more impulsive behaviour and relative ignorance of the brutish characters is, of course, the most obvious manifestation of this genre convention. To be more specific, he tends to set the core psychopathological ideas of his novels in motion through pairings of sophisticates and brutes. We have touched on several of these pairings in the preceding chapters: Capt. Webster, Koester and Vaughan oppose T— and Dr Nathan in *Atrocity*; in *Crash*, Seagrave acts as a foil to Vaughan; Proctor counters Maitland's attempts to teach him to read and write in *Concrete Island*; and in *High-Rise* it is clearly Wilder versus Laing and Anthony Royal. Obviously, nuances distinguish each of these relationships, and I have tried to account for these differences over the course of the study. The overall dynamic between these rivals remains fairly consistent, though: the brute figure attempts to use the 'perverse' theory preached by or embodied in the sophisticate, but his innate cognitive limitations only distort the original message, whatever it might have been. In other

words, through their words and actions these figures pervert the perverse theory even further—and sometimes end up bearing the weight of physical consequence into the bargain. To a degree, of course, the brute's misapplication of the central character's ideology merely affirms the latter's superiority. But as I have tried to show, Ballard has taken too much care in positioning the brute figures to make their role in each novel exclusively a matter of elevating the central figures through their crudity. Thus, the brute becomes a parodic mirror of the more central character(s); his actions comically deflate the intellectual aspirations of his 'betters' and expose the psychotic quality of their ideas.

While those comments outline the basic structural relationship between these characters, they do not necessarily give us a clear summary statement about how Ballard's focus on instinct comes into play. More important, then, is the fact that the dynamic between sophisticate and brute tends to play itself out within the realm of sexuality—and for a very specific reason related to Ballard's ambivalent response to postwar Western culture. Although in Ballard's work human sexuality does not carry the weight of shame that would have made its exaggerated presence an immediate deflation of the ideal of the 'rational animal' in satirical writing from earlier centuries, the general contrast between the characters' analytical detachment in their discussions of sex, and their unrelenting pursuit of novel sexual experiences still generates uncertainty regarding their motivations. Are they really making momentous discoveries about themselves through their sexuality, merely indulging in forms of promiscuity that are no less disposable than the glut of images and commodities circulating through their consumer culture, acting on far more pathological compulsions, or motivated by some more complicated combination of all

these possibilities? The inclusion of the brute character is integral in generating the uncertainty between these options, because he embodies one half of a duality that Ballard repeatedly creates between the ingenuity of perversion—or rather, the engineering of new perversions prompted in large part by modern technology—and more singular, pathological fixations that appear drive-based.

Before clarifying those points, it should be made clear that in speaking of the engineering of perversions, I am not trying to suggest that Ballard's main characters believe that the pleasure they derive from sexuality has been completely translated into a strictly metaphysical realm of ideas. Ballard's characters are not represented as disembodied conceptualising entities taking pleasure in pure ideation. However, such a 'sexuality of the concept' is implicit in their rhetoric from time to time. We have come across examples throughout the preceding chapters, so here it is necessarily to cite only a comment from *Atrocity*'s Dr Nathan. "Now that sex is becoming more and more a conceptual act, an intellectualization divorced from affect and physiology alike," he says to Capt. Webster in chapter six, "one has to bear in mind the positive merits of the sexual perversions" (85). Nathan's comment exaggerates the way certain types of psychoanalytic discourse already theorise perversion, that is, as a psychic construct (cf. my note on Bruce Fink's definitions of *perversion*, *neurosis* and *psychosis* in chapter one: 94 n13), and thereby points the way toward a hypothetical extreme that is reflected in the practices of many of Ballard's characters. Following their rejection of the few established social prohibitions left within their already permissive society, they spend a great deal of time expressing their perversity via less concrete means: artistic practices, abstract

thought, elaborate plans and schemes, and voyeuristic observation of other characters who are acting out what they prefer to conceptualise. This is not to say that they refuse to get their hands dirty altogether, only that Ballard goes to some length to emphasise the histrionic or artificial quality of what they do, and this in turn generates an aura of disembodiment when it comes to the sexuality being described.

This hyper-conceptualisation of sexuality is, in turn, usually represented as an off-shoot of modern technology. In their most affirmative guise, the four novels suggest that technology will eventually become both the facilitator of future permutations of perverse sexuality, and a prospective sexual partner along the way—resulting in, or necessitating, a radical change in the relationship between the perceiving self and the sensing body. This is precisely the sentiment one hears in the following passage from *Crash*: "The deviant technology of the car-crash provided the sanction for any perverse act. For the first time, a benevolent psychopathology beckoned towards us" (107). On one level at least, the passage invites us to consider the car crash as a precursor of the complex conceptual and sensual experiences that citizens of the near-future will be able to enjoy through some kind of artificial, yet fully interactive event—a virtual reality.

The point this study has tried to make, however, is that Ballard never quite dramatises the ideal perverse act in this sense—if such a thing is even possible. It is very often difficult to tell where in his work the (wayward) drive ends, and the privately devised and / or socially manufactured 'perversion' begins. Time and again in the quartet, the will to conceptualisation cannot, on its own, satisfactorily harness or contain an undercurrent of sexual aggressiveness. The consideration of the 'triggering' process that affects T— in

Atrocity, for instance, took note of an intersection between fragmentary memories from his past and the intrusions of image material generated by the communications landscape all around him, but to some degree this convergence also involved a basic, aggressive sex drive which helped turn his repeated experiments into repetitious acts of murder. Either the drive is, in and of itself, malevolent or the combination of cultural and personal factors steers it that way.[1] In either case, Ballard reinforces the point by refracting T—'s actions through those of his imitators: Koester, Vaughan and even Capt. Webster. Their more marked lasciviousness and / or brutality may be a means to distinguish the substantive quality of T—'s thoughts and practices, and yet the repeated sex-deaths of Karen Novotny prevent us from overlooking the possibility of an identity between all of these figures. This dynamic is reiterated in *High-Rise*, in the way Richard Wilder's initial sentiments of solidarity with his fellow tenants are undermined by the *frisson* he experiences while drowning the Afghan hound—an inclination toward violence which is relatively less contrived than Laing's participation in inter-floor raiding expeditions. *Concrete Island*, meanwhile, constitutes the one main exception or variation, because only Maitland's admission that his behaviour in a car is more markedly aggressive than his otherwise cautious, everyday self seems apposite to the discussion.

Of all the available examples, though, the relationship between Vaughan and Seagrave is the most instructive in this respect. Seagrave may be driven to do what he does by the way Vaughan exploits him, but the pure brutality conveyed in the few words he is given to say is suggestive of an inherent trait manifesting itself. Seagrave does not embody a concept of absolute evil; the fictional world reflected throughout the quartet is

devoid of such moral absolutes. But, in addition to his layperson's (mis)understanding of Vaughan's project, he certainly displays a predisposition to extreme sadism. Vaughan, by contrast, manages for a time to act out his perverse fantasies away from the actual body of Elizabeth Taylor, only to have certain contingencies—his vehicular homicide of a pedestrian, the 'meaning' of Seagrave's death, James's ascendancy in their relationship—precipitate his own slide toward what seems more natural in the stunt-driver. While that may suggest Vaughan is the victim of circumstance, one cannot help suspecting that Seagrave's words and actions are meant to show Vaughan, and the reader, an integral component of his psychopathological project, which he prefers to sublimate in a variety of ways. Thus, if we feel an inclination to admire Vaughan, and his analogues in the other novels, as part of an imaginative project of our own, or assume, as Warren Wagar and others do, that he is more fully alive than the people all around him (cf. Wagar 61–62)—a Nietzschean superman on wheels, as it were—then this means admiring Seagrave into the bargain, or appreciating the significance of Seagrave's words, actions and death at Vaughan's expense. The idealism and the horror cannot be easily uncoupled in the quartet. As has been shown throughout the preceding chapters, close readings of Ballard's construction of specific episodes, and in particular those depicting sexual acts, tend to reveal the sense of alarm which attends his excitement at the seemingly limitless possibilities of the near-future through which his characters move.

It seems, then, that the instinct which concerns Ballard the most is what he perceives to be an aggressiveness or capacity for destruction linked to the sex drive, and more often than not the sex drives of his male characters. My sense is that the more manifest

aggression displayed in Koester / Vaughan, Seagrave, and Wilder is but one incarnation—and for Ballard the most worrisome—of a much broader concept that he calls, in the Introduction to *Crash*, "our innate perversity":

> Do we see in the car crash, a sinister portent of a nightmare marriage between sex and technology? Will modern technology provide us with hitherto undreamed-of means for tapping our own psychopathologies? Is this harnessing of our innate perversity conceivably of benefit to us? Is there some deviant logic unfolding more powerful than that provided by reason? (*Crash* 9)

If the phrase 'innate perversity' sounds incongruous in conjunction with the quartet, it is because, as we have just seen, Ballard tends to use *perversity*'s related term, *perversion*, to denote not just the imaginative component of human sexuality, but moreover an exaggeratedly conceptual sexuality. Indeed, depending on the context, Ballard will push the idea to the point where he seems to be talking about a sexuality so contrived that biology is not even a factor—again, we think of Dr Nathan's phrasing: "an intellectualization divorced from affect and physiology alike" (*Atrocity* 85). As a result, talk of innateness and Ballardian perversion in the same sentence might sound like a flat contradiction in terms. To clear up the confusion, it is important to take note of the fact that *perverse* also appears in Ballard's writing as a synonym for *psychopathological*, *wayward* and *deviant*—a lack of discrimination evident in the string of questions in the above quotation. Although Ballard is well versed in Freudian psychoanalysis, if not other variants as well, his use of such terms does not strike us as rigorously theoretical. Instead, the terms are used to refer to anything from mild acts of unusual behaviour, to sexual kinks, to forms of theoretical or philosophical extremism, to moments when his

characters thrill to their own participation in acts of brutality—not that any of those things can be easily separated from one another within the context of the quartet. When Ballard speaks of 'innate perversity,' then, it seems he is talking about not only sexual practices deemed aberrant by established culture, but moreover a universal, even natural, unmanageableness. And within that framework, the more unrestrained and automatic sexual aggression displayed by the brutish figures looks increasingly like a worst-case scenario—the most extreme variant of this much broader concept.

But is there a reason for Ballard's insistence on these extreme cases beyond the fact that they embody ironic reflections of his central characters and the ideas they espouse? To answer that question we need a better sense of Ballard's ambivalent response to the 'nightmare marriage between sex and technology' that he foresaw in the late 1960s, as well as his views on the socioeconomic climate which would give rise to it. What we will find is in accordance with the comments made at the end of the last chapter about the 'automatic' quality of Ballard's approach to characterisation. More specifically, the psychotic limit embodied in characters like Seagrave begins to look like a convenient alibi for Ballard—a series of functional characters whose presence allows him to explore in figurative terms, through his main characters, the idea of a positive technological expansion of perversity, but without risking a complete movement into facile forms of fantasy.

Since the late sixties, Ballard's fiction, non-fiction and interviews alike have evinced his interest in the loosening of sexual mores within late twentieth-century Western culture, either as a topic in its own right, or under the rubric of larger movements of social

transformation commonly associated with that era. A review Ballard wrote in 1969 for *New Worlds*, of a sex manual entitled *How to Achieve Sexual Ecstasy*, is noteworthy in this respect—and worth reading for his sense of humour alone. After giving a sympathetic and considerate synopsis, he points out how the very "conceptualization of sex" (*A User's Guide* 258) which the manual had inherited from twentieth-century scientific studies of human sexuality had, under other guises, already led its readership away from the "idealized sexual encounters which [such] handbooks describe[,]" that is, away from monogamous, procreative and emotionally enriching sexuality (258). The attitude in the review is enthusiastic, principally because Ballard assumed that on-going changes in sexual mores were widespread, at least among the middle classes, and therefore constituted a kind of popular revolt. "To a large extent this book is a nostalgic hymn to a kind of sexual Garden of Eden," he commented, "whose doors Havelock Ellis, Marie Stopes and numerous other pioneers tried for so many years to re-open. Alas, the original tenants are no longer interested. In all probability, what will put an end to the population explosion is not birth control, but buggery. Sex does not exist, only eroticism" (258). Over time, his generally positive response to sixties-era sexual liberation would be folded into a somewhat trite nostalgia for the period's general aura of tumultuous social change: "I thought the sixties [. . .] were a wonderfully exhilarating and releasing period[,]" he told an interviewer in 1994,

> All those energies, particularly of working-class youth, burst out; class divisions, which had absolutely strangled and imprisoned the English, seemed to evaporate. Those divisions genuinely seemed to vanish or become as unimportant as they are in America, where there is a class system but one that doesn't serve a political

> function of controlling the population. [. . .] When the class system began to . . . well, it didn't disintegrate but it seemed irrelevant in the sixties, I thought, 'How wonderful, this country is about to join the twentieth century.' And then in 1971 [. . .] I heard someone use the phrase 'working class' and I thought, 'Oh, God, here we go again.' Now, of course, things are better than they were—I remember England in the late forties and fifties. Hopefully there will be another leap forward. (Self 340)[2]

These are but a few examples of Ballard's comments on sixties-era social change, and I would not want to speculate too far on them. They do, however, link up with other comments he has made in the past, and help us put together an image of his ideal England: a culture of upwardly mobile citizens, receptive rather than resistant to the intrusions of American popular culture, unfettered by historical tradition and sexual taboos, and as well-appointed with material comforts as the latest luxury sedan.[3] Indeed, it is not too much of a stretch to claim that his political sympathies have always rested with a socio-cultural climate which would allow for the type of relatively anxiety-free existence that his characters ordinarily enjoy—what in contemporary neo-conservative parlance is often referred to pejoratively as 'permissive society.' My sense is that he felt, or now believes, that the sixties had, to a certain extent, helped to usher in such a climate.

And yet, alongside this overall image of promising liberalisation and personal freedom, Ballard has also consistently put forward a counter-representation of the conformity and social control that has also characterised the period. (Of course, his confusing picture of the late twentieth century might be merely reflective of major contradictions inherent in the era.) The lengthy quotation above makes reference to a post-sixties anticlimax, associated with the retrenchment of English class consciousness.

Yet what is sometimes particularly puzzling about Ballard's political affiliations is that his disappointment at post-sixties clawbacks of gains made in the area of social equality exists alongside his dismissive response to "the New Puritanism" (Vale & Juno)—a blanket term Ballard has been fond of using since the early 1980s to disparage healthy living fads, environmental conservationism and political correctness alike. Indeed, while Ballard is often quick to champion socially progressive changes, he has also characterised mixed-economy social democracy, which would have made a dissolution of class divisions possible in the first place, as the root of a stultifying bourgeois conformity. The problem, as Ballard has continually posed it, is that no matter how advantageous this kind of modern society might be, its general aura of stability, equality and order—order right down to the idea that 'doing your own thing' is in fact doing more or less what is expected of you—is somehow inherently an insult to the individual human spirit. He expressed this view of modern society as a system of comfortable coercion or friendly repression in a recent radio interview:

> [I]f you look at the world that's emerging in the first years of [the twenty-first] century, despite the wars that are going on, the civil unrest, the desperate poverty of the Third World, [. . .] the West on the whole is enjoying unprecedented prosperity. It's also a deeply conformist world. We all subscribe to the humane and liberal values of our welfare state democracies, we all accept enormous interventions in our lives by the state: the right way to bring up our children, the right way to treat our wives and husbands, the right way to behave in the office. Our lives are circumscribed by enlightened legislation almost every minute of the day. The purity of the food we eat, the water we drink, the sorts of plants we can grow in our gardens virtually: all are legislated out of this benign and sensible and caring administration that governs the Western world. And we're suffocating under it. (Interview with John Gray)

Although Ballard is, here, speaking specifically of the early years of this century, he is simply putting into plain language the kind of benign social homogeneity that, for instance, the characters of *High-Rise* abandon at the first sound of a smashed champagne bottle. And so, one can assume that his view of Western consumer society has remained consistent, or he has remained merely obstinate, since the late sixties and early seventies.

Throughout that period, Ballard, with the sexual revolution of the 1960s in mind as an emblem, has responded to his own caricature of consumer society by speculating on the social role of 'innate perversity,' particularly as it has been facilitated by modern technology. Texts like the book review mentioned above suggest that, on one level, Ballard viewed the 'conceptualisation of sex,' itself, as a kind of technology—a techne for sexual arousal. Indeed, this was a hypothesis he would try to communicate through his characters, although, as I pointed out already, in the fictional setting Ballard tends to exaggerate the split between conceptual sexuality and the flesh. Dr Nathan's cryptic comment about "the positive merits of the perversions" (85) is suggestive of a belief in the social utility of perversion. And the idea is repeated, in a somewhat less serious context, by T— (in chapter seven, he borrows Nathan's terminology to impress Novotny, but her attention wanders off to a glossy magazine): "[I]t's probably only in terms of the perversions that we can make contact with each other at all. [. . .] We need to invent a series of imaginary sexual perversions just to keep our feelings alive . . ." (95). Either Ballard is, through his characters, speculating that only the widespread and guilt-free pursuit of perversity would keep the middle classes interested in sex at all—and reproducing into the bargain—or the 'positive merits' are a dividend in terms of

individualised pleasure (physical or conceptual in nature) alone, and thus an indirect expression of Ballard's take on sixties-era sexual liberation. In either case, it is clear that he was toying with the notion of sexual perversion as a kind of technology unto itself, and perhaps even the key component of a project of social improvement.

What the quartet adds to this basic representation of perversion as a social tool is a marked preoccupation with technology itself, the role it would play in the future course of the sexual revolution. Implicit throughout the quartet is the idea that the pursuit of pleasure would be further revolutionised when the technological means were available to allow average individuals to experience 'sex crime'—as perpetrator, victim or voyeur—on a regular basis and with no residual feelings of guilt. ("Too many of us would rather be involved in a sex crime than in sex" Ballard quipped in his review of *How to Achieve Sexual Ecstasy* [*A User's Guide* 258].) It seems reasonable to assume that Ballard believed this kind of experience was already being offered to the average television and / or film viewer in the sixties, but only as a vicarious experience. What the quartet suggests is that Ballard favoured a more direct, active and therefore meaningful involvement in such experiences, that is, if they were already going to be marketed to, or demanded by, the general population; in this regard, the phenomenology of driving provided Ballard with an activity that, on the surface at least, could be taken as a figure for this more assertive participation. In effect, I am suggesting that Ballard was, in part, looking forward to substantial changes in the nature of adult recreation facilitated by technology—and perhaps also re-creation, in the sense of a deliberate rehearsal of set scenarios and events, no matter how unsavoury they may be.[4]

For the sake of argument, these concluding remarks have highlighted Ballard's more affirmative response to the possibilities apparent in the nexus of sexuality and technology as he perceived it in the late sixties. If the affirmative stance is figured metaphorically in the quartet, it appears in the putative 'success' stories of the main characters, which I have tried to articulate in the preceding chapters; Laing's menage with Eleanor Powell and his sister at the end of *High-Rise*, even with the qualifications given in the preceding chapter, is the best example. The transformative experiences that the main characters go through can be read as symbols of the ecstasy that is available through the 'marriage' between sexuality and advanced technology. In saying this, I am putting a very specific technological spin on the individual adventures of the central characters, but despite that focus, the argument would still amount to an alternate version of the 'transcendentalist' reading of Ballard's work. Wagar's argument in support of Ballard's Nietzschean 'transvaluations,' for instance, would have us believe that we are to admire the main characters without reservation because they represent an elite few who can handle existence in a world beyond conventional bourgeois morality (cf. 61–62). My comments here would only add to that amoral existence a more marked technological dimension.

The problem facing Ballard, however, was that a wholesale celebration in fiction of that near-future utopia would amount to little more than a capricious fantasy. And in any case, it would not have expressed very well the substantial concerns he did have about the intersection between sexuality and technology. Many of his commentaries from the period indicate just as much trepidation about the future as enthusiasm—and none more

astringently than his comments about the 'death of affect,' a reference to which brings us full circle:

> [The] demise of feeling and emotion has paved the way for all our most real and tender pleasures—in the excitements of pain and mutilation; in sex as the perfect arena, like a culture-bed of sterile pus, for all the veronicas of our own perversions; in our moral freedom to pursue our own psychopathology as a game; and in our apparently limitless powers for conceptualization—what our children have to fear is not the cars on the highways of tomorrow but our own pleasure in calculating the most elegant parameters of their deaths. (*Crash* 5)

Here Ballard is, as Vivian Sobchack argues, "[e]xcoriating the world around him in an explosive prose quite unlike" that of the novel it precedes ("Beating the Meat" 311).[5] Within the context of the fiction itself, however, Ballard needed a strategy to counter his more metaphorical gestures toward a viable existence within the "glaucous paradise" (*Crash* 5) of instant gratification described above. The parodic mirror relationship between visionary and brute characters *is* that strategy.

The comic deflation generated by the juxtaposition of these character types does not diminish the fact that the force of Ballard's conviction—his conviction in his own speculations as a fiction writer—is behind the central characters and the journeys of 'transvaluation' which they embark upon. But the brute figure's more disastrous treading of the same perverse path does implicitly censure the society that makes room for manipulative individuals such as Vaughan. As we have seen, Ballard's political sympathies ultimately lie with societies that maximise personal liberties, even when those liberties are vacuous; in the fiction, he tends to metaphorise such freedoms through the perverse sexuality of his characters. But the representation of this type of polity in the

quartet evinces his awareness that their openness invites the threat of the Seagrave type, whether as the result of drives which are themselves pathological (poor wiring, to reintroduce the mechanical metaphor) or because of a predisposition to aggression that is only intensified by their involvement with the central characters. In a way, Seagrave, in particular, represents the unfortunate individual who has no chance of handling the radical form of moral freedom he has been given—the kind of individual who watches violent entertainment and *is* compelled to go out and live it, heedless of the cost to himself and others. In this way the quartet cautions us that if we choose a culture of 'sensation for its own sake,' and find delight in the instantaneous, technologically facilitated fulfilment of our needs, be they trivial or serious, we cannot divorce that cultural practice from its more pathological double. And with that realisation should come a sense of humility and responsibility.

Notes

1. Incidentally, this second option is at the core of Hal Foster's brief account of the novel in his essay on Andy Warhol, "Death in America." Foster develops his response to *The Atrocity Exhibition* out of a blending of two theoretical concepts: Michael Warner's notion of the 'mass subject' and Mark Seltzer's idea of the 'pathological public sphere.' The basic question that Foster asks of Warhol, or that he gives Warhol to ask, is: 'how does one represent the mass subject of consumer capitalism?' Foster's reply is twofold. On the one hand, artists can "evoke the mass subject through its proxies, that is, through objects of its taste [. . .] and / or its objects of consumption" (362), as Warhol had done with his Campbell's soup cans and Brillo boxes; or they can represent the mass subject as witness, which, Foster points out, Warhol both depicted in his art and embodied in his own persona (363). Whereas Warhol lived the mass witness in its masochistic mode, by "his servility before the likes of Imelda Marcos and Nancy Reagan[,]" Ballard's *Atrocity*, Foster claims, "tends to explore the sadistic side of mass witnessing" (363)—and in support of the assertion he, quite rightly, offers up "Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy" and "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan" as evidence.

2. This nostalgic sentiment has clearly become one of Ballard's interview routines. He laid out basically the same memory, with slight variations, ten years before in a different interview:

> In the mid-60s, thanks to the pop explosion (the Beatles and the like), *change* took place. It was also fueled by the `States—the Vietnam War, the Space Program, the Kennedy assassination, and all that—but here it came up from a new generation. Here it was an *aesthetic* revolution that made the changes. For five years the class system didn't seem to exist—nobody ever used the word.
>
> I know this is a trivial example, but I remember about 1970, for the first time in something like five or six years, I heard someone who was being interviewed on the radio use the word 'working class.' Which would have been unthinkable in, say, 1967 or 1968. Unthinkable. I thought, 'My god, that's the death knell of change. It's coming to an end.' And it did, and now we're back to the same closed, confined, class-conscious little society, but one which [. . .] has the benefits of a reasonably functioning consumer goods society, to give it a little more style and ease. (Vale & Juno 52)

The fact that Ballard repeats himself from interview to interview does not necessarily diminish the importance of his ideas. In short, through statements like these one gets the impression that Ballard, at the end of the sixties, was looking forward to a time when Britain would become essentially a little America, in terms of its economic prosperity and material wealth, but also in terms of its self-image and national psychology—if such a thing can be said to exist.

3. Incidentally, it is remarkable how quickly Ballard moves from enthusing over the released energies of working-class youth to complaining about the classist overtones of the phrase 'working class.' It seems that Ballard's ideal England is also the kind of place where individuals from privileged backgrounds can patronise their social inferiors through encouragement, but without having to relinquish altogether the distinctions that separate them.

It should also be pointed out that Ballard's vision of an Americanised England should not be taken as an accurate picture of life in the US in the 1960s. When Ballard associates the US with a less class conscious outlook, a decrease in sexual repression, and economic prosperity, he seems to be constructing a myth with which to attack areas of British society which were, and perhaps still are, conservative to the point of being reactionary.

4. The naive futurism implicit in this stance sounds almost quaint now, especially in the wake of post-1970s anxieties over finite world energy reserves, the AIDS epidemic, and the skyrocketing costs of basic middle-class living—to name only a few concerns. But perhaps with the advent of the first home camcorders, and now digital cameras and Internet webcams, the techno-sexual realm that Ballard foresaw in the late 1960s is now even more of a possibility.

5. Interestingly, Graeme Revell reads the very same words in precisely the opposite direction, as an expression of Ballard's excitement at the thought that the "abandonment of sentiment and emotion [. . .] has cleared a space for the free play of our perversions and [. . .] unlimited capacity for abstraction" (Vale & Juno 145). I do not agree with Revell, if only because he does not note, as Sobchack does, the difference in tone between the Introduction and the fiction it introduces. My sense is that Revell correctly diagnoses one aspect, and perhaps the main thrust, of that fiction; but even then, *Crash* and the other novels do not represent the space of perverse play as fully 'cleared.'

Bibliography

Abrams, M.H. et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*. 6th edition. New York: Norton, 1996.

Acker, Kathy. "Of Death and Desire: Cronenberg Does Ballard." *Transit Lounge: An Interface Book from 21 C*. Eds. Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar. North Ryde, NSW: Craftsman House, 1997: 37–38.

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Ahearn, Edward J. *Visionary Fictions: Apocalyptic Writing from Blake to the Modern Age*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996.

Altieri, Charles. *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts*. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

Amis, Martin. *The War against Cliché: Essays and Reviews, 1971–2000*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2001.

Augé, Marc. *A Sense for the Other: The Timeliness and Relevance of Anthropology*. Trans. Amy Jacobs. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998.

----. *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds*. Trans. Amy Jacobs. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999.

----. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Trans. John Howe. London: Verso, 1995.

----. *War of Dreams: Studies in Ethno Fiction, The*. Trans. Liz Heron. Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1999.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964.

Back, Les. *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives*. London: University College London Press, 1996.

Ballard, J.G. "A Response to the Invitation to Respond." *Science-Fiction Studies* Vol. 18 (1991): 329.

----. *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*. London: Flamingo, 1997.

Ballard, J.G. *Atrocity Exhibition, The*. London: Flamingo, 2001.

----. *Atrocity Exhibition, The*. Eds. V. Vale and Andrea Juno. San Francisco, CA: Re/Search, 1990.

----. *Concrete Island*. London: Vintage, 1994.

----. *Crash*. London: Flamingo, 1993.

----. *High-Rise*. London: Flamingo, 1993.

----. *Kindness of Women, The*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil, 1990.

----. "Semiology and Urbanism." *The Semiological Challenge*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1988.

Baudrillard, Jean. "*Crash*" & "Science Fiction and Simulacra." *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

----. *Fatal Strategies: Crystal Revenge*. Trans. Philip Beitchman et al. New York: Semiotext(e) Pluto, 1990.

---- and Phillipe Petit. *Paroxysm*. Trans. Chris Turner. New York: Verso, 1998.

----. *Seduction*. Trans. Brian Singer. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

----. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

----. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant. London: Sage Publications, 1993.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1986.

Bogel, Fredric. *The Difference Satire Makes: Rhetoric and Reading from Jonson to Byron*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2001.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *In Other Words: Essays toward a Reflexive Sociology*. Trans. Matthew Adamson. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Brigg, Peter. "J.G. Ballard: Time out of Mind." *Extrapolation* 35:1 (1994): 43–59.

Broderick, Damien. *Transrealist Fiction: Writing in the Slipstream of Science*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Brottman, Mikita, ed. *Car Crash Culture*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Buck-Morss, Susan. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics." *October: the Second Decade, 1986–1996*. Eds. Rosalind Krauss et al. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

----. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000.

Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

----. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Authority*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Butterfield, Bradley. "Baudrillardian Symbolic, 9/11, and the War of Good and Evil, The." *Postmodern Culture* 13.1 (Sept 2002): 27 pars. Jan. 30, 2004. <http://80-use.jhu.edu. exproxy.library.dal.ca/journals/postmodern_culture/v013/13. 1butterfield.html>

----. "Ethical Value and Negative Aesthetics: Reconsidering the Baudrillard–Ballard Connection." *PMLA* 114:1 (1999): 64-77.

Carroll, David. *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida*. New York: Methuen, 1987.

Carrouges, Michel. *Les machines célibataires*. Paris: Arcanes, 1954.

Carter, Angela. *Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings*. Ed. Joan Smith. Toronto: Penguin, 1997.

Caserio, Robert L. "Mobility and Masochism: Christine Brooke-Rose and J.G. Ballard." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 21 (1988): 292–310.

Clark, John. *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1991.

Connor, Steven. *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Conrad, Joseph. *Lord Jim*. ed. Cedric Watts. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001.

Crary, Jonathan. "Eclipse of the Spectacle." *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*. Eds. Marcia Tucker and Brian Wallis. Boston: Godine, for the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984.

----. "Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory." *October: The Second Decade, 1986–1996*. Eds. Rosalind Krauss et al. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

Cronenberg, David. *Crash*. London: Faber & Faber, 1996.

Day, Aidan. "Ballard and Baudrillard: Close Reading *Crash*." *English: Journal of the English Association*. 49:195 (Autumn 2000): 277–93.

de Certeau, Michel. *Culture in the Plural*. Ed. Luce Giard. Trans. Tom Cowley. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

----. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Foreword by Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

----. *Practice of Everyday Life, The*. Trans. Stephen Rendell. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988.

---- et al. *Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living and Cooking, The*. Trans. Timothy J. Tomasik. Ed. Luce Giard. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Malcolm Imrie. New York: Verso, 1990.

----. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley et al. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Delville, Michel. *J.G. Ballard*. Plymouth, UK: Northcote House, 1998.

Derrida, Jacques. "Generations of a City: Memory, Prophecy, Responsibilities." *Alphabet City* 6. Toronto, ON: House of Anansi, 1998.

Derrida, Jacques. "Khōra." *On the Name*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit. Trans. Ian McLeod. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995: 88–127.

----. "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)." Trans. Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis. *Diacritics* (Summer 1984): 20-31.

----. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Intro. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenburg. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Docherty, Thomas. *Reading (Absent) Character: Towards a Theory of Characterization in Fiction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.

Durham, Scott. *Phantom Communities: The Simulacrum and the Limits of Postmodernism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998:

----. "The Technology of Death and Its Limits: The Problem of the Simulation Model." *Rethinking Technologies*. Ed. Verena Andermatt Conley. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Eliot, T.S. *Notes towards a Definition of Culture*. London: Faber & Faber, 1972.

Enos, Katherine. "*Crash* and Pornography Culture." *Pomegranates* 1997: 1+. 22 Mar. 1998. <http://www.pomegranates.com/rat/crash/crashall.html>.

Faith, Nicholas. *Crash: The Limits of Car Safety*. London: Boxtree, 1997.

Foster, Dennis A. "J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses: Perversion and the Failure of Authority." *PMLA* 108 (1993): 519–532.

----. *Sublime Enjoyment: On the Perverse Motive in American Literature*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Foster, Hal. "Death in America." *October: the Second Decade, 1986–1996*. Eds. Rosalind Krauss et al. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

----. "Prosthetic Gods." *Modernism / Modernity* 4.2 (Apr. 1997): 5–38.

----. *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

Freud, Sigmund. *Art and Literature*. The Penguin Freud Library 14. Trans. & ed. James Strachey. Toronto, ON: Penguin, 1990.

Freud, Sigmund. *Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. & ed. A.A. Brill. New York: Random House, 1938.

----. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. & ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961.

----. *Case Histories I*. The Penguin Freud Library 8. Trans & ed. James Strachey. Toronto, ON: Penguin, 1990.

----. *Interpretation of Dreams, The*. Trans. & ed. James Strachey. New York: Avon, 1965.

----. *Psychopathology of Everyday Life, The*. Trans. Alan Tyson. Ed. James Strachey et al. Penguin Freud Library 5. Toronto, ON: Penguin, 1991.

Garreau, Joel. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. New York: Anchor Books, 1992.

Glicksberg, Charles. *The Literature of Nihilism*. Canbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1975.

Gray, John. Interview with J.G. Ballard. BBC Radio Four, Sept. 24, 2000.

Greenland, Colin. *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British 'New Wave' in Science Fiction*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983: 92–120.

Griffin, Dustin. *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1994.

Hayles, N. Katherine. "The Borders of Madness." *Science-Fiction Studies* Vol. 18 (1991): 321–323.

Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen, 1979.

Heise, Ursula K. *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. New York: London, 1994.

Jameson, Fredric. *Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998, The*. New York: Verso, 1998.

----. *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991.

----. "Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Art After Modernism : Rethinking Representation*. Eds. Marcia Tucker and Brian Wallis. Boston: Godine, for the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984.

Johnson, R.V. *Aestheticism*. London: Methuen, 1969.

Jones, Mark. "J.G. Ballard: Neurographer." *Impossibility Fiction: Alternativity –Extrapolation–Speculation*. Eds. Derek Littlewood and Peter Stockwell. Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996: 127–145.

Kostof, Spiro. *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings through History*. Toronto, ON: Bulfinch Press, 1991.

Krauss, Rosalind. *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985.

Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock, 1982.

----. *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, The*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1981.

Laing, R.D. *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1967.

Landon, Brooks. "Responding to the Killer B's." *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 18 (1991): 326–327.

Laurie, Peter. *Beneath the City Streets: A Private Enquiry into the Nuclear Preoccupations of Government*. London: Penguin, 1970.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

----. *Writings on Cities*. Trans. & ed. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996.

Lehan, Richard Daniel. *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

Lewis, Jeremy. "An Interview with J.G. Ballard." *Mississippi Review* 20:1–2 (1991): 27–40.

Lewis, Wyndham. *Men without Art*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964.

Li, Victor. "Policing the City: Modernism, Autonomy and Authority." *Criticism* 34:2 (1992): 261-279.

----. "What's in a Name?: Questioning 'Globalization.'" *Cultural Critique* 45 (Spring 2000): 1–39.

Luckhurst, Roger. "Petition, Repetition, and 'Autobiography': J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*." *Contemporary Literature* 35:4: 688–707.

----. *'The Angle Between Two Walls': The Fiction of J.G. Ballard*. Liverpool, UK: University of Liverpool Press, 1997.

Lynch, Kevin. *Image of the City, The*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960.

----. *What Time Is This Place?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

----. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Marsh, Peter and Peter Collett. *Driving Passion: The Psychology of the Car*. Boston, MA: Faber & Faber, 1989.

McCarthy, Patrick. "Allusions in Ballard's *The Drowned World*." *Science-Fiction Studies* Vol. 24 (1997): 302–10.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987.

McKee, Alan. "Intentional Phalluses: The Male 'Sex' in J.G. Ballard." *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction* 57 (Spring 1993): 58–68.

Morris, Meaghan. "Banality in Cultural Studies." *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Mellencamp. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1990.

----. "Room 101, or A Few of the Worst Things in the World." *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*. New York: Verso, 1988.

Morse, Margaret. "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television." *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Mellencamp. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1990: 193–221.

Murphy, Richard. *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Experience of Freedom*. Trans. Bridget McDonald. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993.

----. *Inoperative Community, The*. Trans. Peter Connor et al. Ed. Peter Connor. Theory and History of Literature Vol. 76. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

----. "War, Law, Sovereignty—*Techné*." *Rethinking Technologies*. Ed. Verena Andermatt Conley. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Palmeri, Frank. *Satire in Narrative: Petronius, Swift, Gibbon, Melville and Pynchon*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990.

Platzner, Robert L. "The Metamorphic Vision of J.G. Ballard." *Essays in Literature* 10:2 (Fall 1983): 209–217.

Porter, Roy. *A Social History of Madness: The World through the Eyes of the Insane*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989.

----. *London: A Social History*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1994.

Porush, David. "The Architextuality of Transcendence." *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 18 (1991): 323–325.

Presta, Peter. *Writing the City: Eden, Babylon, and the New Jerusalem*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Pringle, David. *Earth Is the Alien Planet: The Four-Dimensional Nightmare of J.G. Ballard*. San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1979.

---- and Jim Goddard. Interview with J.G. Ballard. Jan. 4, 1975. at J.G Ballard: 20th Century Chronicler. Online. WWW 26 Sept. 2003. <www.solaris-books.co.uk/BallardPages/Framesets/framebase.htm>.

Punter, David. *The Hidden Script: Writing and the Unconscious*. Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Raban, Jonathan. *Soft City*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974.

Rajchman, John. *Constructions*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

Rodley, Chris ed. *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*. London: Faber & Faber, 1997.

Rothenberg, Molly Anne et al, eds. *Perversion and the Social Relation. SIC* 4. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003.

Ruddick, Nicholas. "Ballard / *Crash* / Baudrillard." *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 19 (1992): 354–360.

----. *British Science Fiction: A Chronology, 1478–1990*. Bibliographies and Indexes in World Literature 35. New York: Greenwood Press, 1992.

----. *Ultimate Island: On the Nature of British Science Fiction*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993: 137–172.

Safdie, Moshe and Wendy Kohn. *The City after the Automobile: An Architect's Vision*. Toronto, ON: Stoddart, 1997.

Schnapp, Jeffery T. "Crash (Speed as Engine of Individuation)." *Modernism / Modernity* 6:1 (Jan. 1999): 1–49.

Self, Will. "Conversations: J.G. Ballard." *Junk Mail*. London: Penguin, 1996: 329–71.

Seltzer, Mark. *Bodies and Machines*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

----. *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Shildrick, Margrit. *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries/: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Sinclair, Iain. *Crash: David Cronenberg's Post-mortem on J.G. Ballard's 'Trajectory of Fate'*. London: British Film Institute, 1999.

Sobchack, Vivian. "Baudrillard's Obscenity." *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 18 (1991): 327–329.

----. "Beating the Meat / Surviving the Text, or How to Get out of This Century Alive." *The Visible Woman: Imaging Technologies, Gender, and Science*. Eds. Paula A. Treichler et al. New York: New York UP, 1998: 310–320.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. London: Penguin, 1979.

----. *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Delta Publishing, 1969.

Steiner, George. *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1971.

Stephenson, Gregory. *Out of the Night and into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J.G. Ballard*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1991.

Stewart, Susan. "Coda: Reverse Trompe L'Oeil \ Eruption of the Real." *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

Tilton, John W. *Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1977.

Timms, Edward. *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*. Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1985.

Trotter, David. *The English Novel in History 1895-1920*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Vale, V. and Andrea Juno, eds. *J.G. Ballard*. San Francisco, CA: Re/Search, 1984.

Vidler, Anthony. "Agoraphobia: Spatial Estrangement in Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer." *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* 54 (Fall 1991): 31–45.

----. *Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely, The*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

Virilio, Paul. *Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Trans. Philip Beitchman. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.

----. *Art of the Motor, The*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

----. *Bunker Archaeology*. Trans. George Collins. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994.

----. *Lost Dimension, The*. Trans. Daniel Moshenberg. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.

---- and Sylvère Lotringer. *Pure War*. Trans. Mark Polizzotti. New York: Semiotext(e), 1987.

Virilio, Paul. *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*. Trans. Mark Polizzotti. New York: Semiotext(e), 1986.

----. "Third Interval: A Critical Transition, The." *Rethinking Technologies*. Ed. Verena Andermatt Conley. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Wagar, Warren W. "J.G. Ballard and the Transvaluation of Utopia." *Science-Fiction Studies* Vol. 18 (1991): 53–70.

Warner, Michael. "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject." *The Phantom Public Sphere*. Ed. Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Watson, Sophie and Katherine Gibson, eds. *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995.

Wolfreys, Julian. *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Wood, David, ed. *Writing the Future*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Youngquist, Paul. "Ballard's Crash-Body." *Postmodern Culture* 11.1 (Sept. 2000): 28 pars. Jan. 25, 2004. <http://80-muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/journals/postmodern_culture/v011/11.1youngquist.html>.

Ziegler, Robert. "Reader–Text Collisions in J.G. Ballard's *Crash*." *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 29:2 (1999): 10–12.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Welcome to the Desert of the Real." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.2 (2002): 385–89.