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Stimulacra: The Accident and the Identity Crisis

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1. An Improper Introduction

In novel form, the science fiction genre is given the breadth to explore all the possibilities of other worlds, the vastness of deep-space, and the lengths of centuries. Curious, then, it is that acclaimed science-fiction writer, J. G. Ballard, would choose to limit his iconic 1971 novel, *Crash*, to then-present-day London, England. Prior to this, between 1962 and 1966, Ballard had composed an epic trilogy of more typical SF fair, *The Drowned World*, *The Burning World*, and *The Crystal World*. In the five years between *Crystal World* and *Crash*, he released a number of short story collections each one becoming increasingly idiosyncratic, culminating in 1970's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, a collection of loosely associated stories (one of which is entitled "Crash!"). If a reader were follow Ballard's works chronologically, they would see him slowly decaying into the mad genius (or maybe madman) who wrote *Crash*. Even still, there is little that can prepare readers for the jarring prose of this subversive and provoking novel. However, is *Crash* as controversial as it appears on its surface? Is there some deeper meaning hiding beneath its perverse veneer? Or is it simply the vapid illusion of a demented author? Or is that the point?

Before any discussion of this novel can begin, it may be necessary to provide a disclaimer. *Crash* is a shockingly graphic book, so much so that one reader for the publisher supposedly warned them, "This author is beyond psychiatric help. Do Not Publish!" (Svedsen). Regardless of whether or not this is true, the fact that it is believable speaks to the content of the novel. With our reader given fair warning, let us begin our analysis of Ballard's novel with a summary of the plot, as not all are familiar with the story.

2. Sex, Drugs, and Technology

Crash begins with a jump into the action, starting at what we eventually realize to be the end of the story. Our narrator, James Ballard (to avoid confusion this character will be referred to by first name and the author by last), is at the site of an automobile crash involving apparent friend Vaughan and film actress Elizabeth Taylor. In the accident, Vaughan died brutally, but Taylor escaped. James speaks as if this was Vaughan's idealized car crash. We are then taken back to the true beginning of the story, James' first automobile collision. In this crash, James lost control of his car on the Westway into London, killing "a chemical engineer with an American foodstuffs company" (Ballard 19), and injuring the man's wife, Dr. Helen Remington. Afterwards, James is bedridden in the nearby airport's hospital, where we are introduced to his wife, Catherine. Their marriage is of a perverse nature, in that they 'openly' cheat on one another in order to provide material for sexual fantasies. We also catch a glimpse of Vaughan, who James believes him to be, "a graduate student specializing in accident surgery," but has a "hoodlum

image” (Ballard 42).

Upon being released from the hospital, James is trapped in his apartment recovering for a week. Once able to drive again, he begins renting a different car each day. During this time, Vaughan is stalking James incessantly for no apparent reason, but soon they introduce themselves to one another. Eventually, James ends up buying the same make and model of car he crashed into Helen Remington. While at the impound lot, looking over his old, wrecked car, James meets Dr. Helen Remington. Soon after, they enter into an affair, eroticizing the car crash that brought their lives together and killed her husband. During this affair, they visit the stock car races at Northolt where they meet Seagrave, a crazed stunt driver who Vaughan has ‘under his thumb’. However, James becomes Vaughan’s new disciple after Seagrave disappears. James and Vaughan begin spending most days and nights driving around looking for car crashes where Vaughan photographs the wrecks and victims. When not doing this they often pick up prostitutes, who Vaughan has intercourse with while positioning them like of crash victims he photographed.

After weeks of this, James and Vaughan find Seagrave dead in a deliberate car accident, dressed in drag as Elizabeth Taylor. Disillusioned over this preemption of his ideal crash, Vaughan becomes unstable. In their last meeting, James and Vaughan ‘drop acid’ and drive about dangerously, Vaughan even urges James to crash the car. Avoiding death, they park under the Westway and engage in sexual intercourse, which James had been fantasizing about for weeks. However, James begins having a bad trip, seeing insects crawling everywhere inside the car. After he leaves the car to let the acid wear off, Vaughan tries intentionally running him over with the car. While James is recovering from this trip, he is trapped in his apartment as he was after his crash with Dr. Remington. Vaughan begins following Catherine, much like he did James, and ‘rehearsing’ accidents with her. From these rehearsals, Vaughan’s car is trashed, so he steals James’ car. Ten days later, we find ourselves at the beginning, as Vaughan is dead from his ideal car crash and James’ car is once again wrecked.

3. A Wax Simulacra: Ballard on his Book

The unique world built by an author is one of the most important facets of any SF novel. The reader may be wondering how *Crash* could possibly fall into the realm of science fiction or fantasy. Set in early 1970s England, it appears to simply recount the tale a mad scientist and his followers’ obsession with fetishizing car crashes. However, Vaughan is much more than a mad scientist, he is the “nightmare angel of the expressway,” (Ballard 84) who possesses, “a strain of naive idealism, his strange vision of the automobile and its real role in our lives,” (Ballard 64). As Ballard himself suggests in the introduction to *Crash*, “We live inside an enormous

novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality," (Ballard). This is what makes the world of *Crash* so fascinating; all of its science fiction content is provided by real, existing technology. Though the world may appear familiar, the characters distort reality to the point that seems as distant as another galaxy. The violence of the automobile collision reshaped James' mind, revealing to him the true nature of the modern world, "[he] realized that the human inhabitants of this technological landscape no longer provided its sharpest pointers, its keys to the borderzones of identity," (Ballard 48).

The marriage of humans and their technology is what defines Ballard's deconstructed world. Often, it becomes difficult to tell where a person begins and their automobile ends. In this world where lines of demarcation have been blurred, the violence of the car crash has taken on a sexual significance. James realizes this when watching the aftermath of Seagrave's death, noticing, "the complex of wounds that fused together [Seagrave's victim's] own sexuality and the hard technology of the automobile" (Ballard 189). However, sexuality is always presented in a technical manner, using terms like penis, vulva, and coitus, as if Ballard could just as well be describing the operation of some future vehicle as he could sexual intercourse.

Within all of this sex and violence there does seem to hide some deeper meaning. Though it may look as if Ballard is warning us against becoming too reliant on our technologies, it appears more likely that he is making the point that the possibilities of technology are too beneficial for us to ignore or avoid, we just need to be cautious of which possibilities we select. This is reflected in his introduction in which he leaves us with open-ended questioning. "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?" (Ballard).

4. A Metallic Simulacra: Baudrillard on Ballard's Book

However, there does seem to be some cause for disagreement with Ballard over his opinion of his own work. In one of the seminal works on hyperreality, 1981's *Simulacra and Simulation*, postmodern French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard addresses *Crash* at length. He suggests that, despite Ballard's claims of a new *deviant logic*, "one must resist the *moral* temptation of reading *Crash* as perversion," (Baudrillard 113). Instead, in the universe of the Accident, as he calls Ballard's world, perversion and dysfunction are not possible. "Everything is reversed. It is the Accident that gives form to life, it is the Accident...that is *the sex of life*," (Baudrillard 113). With this in mind, it becomes clear that the sexuality

found the novel takes on a symbolic meaning. Just how intercourse is a symbolic exchange of sexuality, the car crash is a symbolic exchange of violence. Even still, these exchanges lack true meaning, rather they only possess simulated meaning. This loss of meaning is the result of the technological abstraction of humanity, giving rise to simulation.

The concept of simulation recurs throughout *Crash*. In three chapters that parallel one another, simulation is presented in the literal sense. In one, Vaughan encourages Seagrave to simulate an accident at the stock car races. In another, James, Helen, and Vaughan witness, “[t]he technology of accident simulation at the [Road Research Lab],” (Ballard 123). In the other, a commercial is being shot featuring Elizabeth Taylor as an accident victim. “The make-up woman, a refined girl with a reassuring sense of humour – so unlike those casualty ward nurses whose opposite number, in a sense, she was – had worked for more than hour on the simulated wounds.” (Ballard 108). Furthermore, simulation can be seen as being presented metaphorically in the cyclical nature of the story and in Vaughan’s *rehearsals* for his ideal car crash. Rather than distorting reality, perhaps Ballard’s characters are revealing the fact that there is no reality to be had.

This is the essence of the simulacra as Baudrillard presents it. The simulacra is not an illusion, it is not a lie; it is the truth that hides the fact that there is no truth. Yet, this simulacra extends beyond the characters of *Crash*, Ballard’s entire universe of the Accident is one of simulated meaning, hyperfunctionality, and hyperreality. “In *Crash*, there is neither fiction nor reality anymore – hyperreality abolishes both. It is there that our contemporary science fiction, if there is one, exists,” (Baudrillard 125). Possibly Ballard was wrong about his own work, the job of today’s writers is not to invent fiction or reality, but hyperreality.

5. A Simulated Equivalency

While Ballard sees his novel as a cautionary tale about the social implications of technology, Baudrillard views Ballard’s novel as a giant *synchronous machine* of technology, death, sex, and simulation. But who is right? The author or the critic? Perhaps, to a point, both are correct.

At the same time though, neither of them answer the more pressing question. Have Ballard’s worries become reality? Or has Baudrillard’s hyperreality undermined and overtaken Ballard’s invented reality? With any SF work (even one that may not be science fiction), it is necessary to consider the relevance of the fiction to current reality. With more fanciful SF, we often find ourselves grasping at the straws of feasibility. With the realistic SF of *Crash* though, we need not look too far in to the future to see what has become of the universe of the Accident. The world has changed a great deal since the days of Ballard and Baudrillard. No longer

do we find ourselves solely as cogs of the automobile, rather we have also become images inside our computer screens, trapped within the universe of the Internet. That is not quite right though, the Accident and the Internet are not entirely analogous. The internet is more akin to the automobile as the medium of exchange. More so, we have begun to find ourselves struggling for meaning in the universe of the Identity Crisis.¹

Gone is the violence of the Accident. It has been replaced with the confusion of the Identity Crisis. Everywhere on the internet we are constantly bombarded with the thirty second adverts, pornography, facebook profiles of distant relatives, and news of dead celebrities that cause us to half-heartedly mourn their passing with “an exercise in moral gymnastics,” (Ballard 36) in 140 characters or less. The connection between people and their online identity has become abstracted, much like link between people and the automobile in *Crash*. In the same way that it is difficult to relay sarcasm through text, people’s true meaning is distorted through ambiguity of the Internet. However, by reversing the logic, people can also meticulously manipulate their online identity. It is possible ramble on endlessly about the dangers of ‘catfishing’ or Tinder hook-ups, but those are obvious and played. A much more interesting example is found in the pop culture microcosm that is music.

Recently, there has been an ostensibly new and unique surge of post-ironic attitudes among young musicians.² Nowhere is this more prevalent than at the upcoming-and-coming London-based label PC Music. Their distinctive brand of off-kilter, bubblegum pop is often (somewhat derogatorily) referred to as post-ringtone music by critics and bloggers. While many of PC Music’s artists are male, their music is decidedly *girly* sounding (often including pitch-shifted male vocals, making them sound like female vocals). Only adding to the confusion, many artists go by non-descript or intentionally-misleading names like QT (a real life avatar created to sell a fictional energy drink) and SOPHIE (a male electronic artist who has supposedly performed in drag). Despite all of this, PC Music is full of serious artists making serious music. The only difficulty is that some question their

¹ This futuristic possibility was even foreseen by Ballard’s character, James, while he was having intercourse with a handicap crash victim. “I dreamed of other accidents that might enlarge this repertory of orifices, relating them to more elements of the automobile’s engineering, to the ever-more complex technologies of the future. What wounds would create the sexual possibilities of the invisible technologies of thermonuclear reaction chambers, white-tiled control rooms, the mysterious scenarios of computer circuitry?” (Ballard 179).

² There is much disagreement of the true uniqueness of current post-irony, for more see the work of David Foster Wallace or Tom Gauld’s NY Times article entitled “Another Thing to Sort of Pin on David Foster Wallace” <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/another-thing-to-sort-of-pin-on-david-foster-wallace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1>

sincerity and authenticity, suggesting that the label and their artists are one huge, ironic joke. Through numerous thinkpieces and critical analyses, PC Music's critics are only proving the label's ambiguous nature. Where the line between sincerity and irony, authenticity and inauthenticity, is blurred, that is the site of the Identity Crisis. That is where post-irony is born. "PC Music's post-ironic manifesto: not to parody pop culture – that would merely be funny – but to inspect the world's ugliness and try to reflect it, ideally in a fun and creatively radical form," (Monroe). And is that not what Ballard's *Crash* is really all about, except maybe replace 'fun' with 'sexual' and 'creatively' with 'perversely'. This distinction is unimportant though, as Baudrillard suggests, "sexuality was only one of the possible metaphors of symbolic exchange," (Baudrillard 115).

6. A Proper Conclusion

This brings us back to the beginning (or did we start at the end), the true, underlying question posed by *Crash*, is the publisher's reader right, does the novel's graphic content justify it not being published? With *Crash* it seems likely that people fall into two categories, the people who get it and the people who don't. The people who don't will throw the book against the wall after the first few pages, the people who do will not be able to put it down. The sexuality and violence are mere contingencies – conveniently shocking contingencies – but contingencies none the less. If the reader is unable to recognize this and look past it, then the deeper meaning of *Crash* will be lost on them.

But what of the publisher reader's other claim, is J. G. Ballard beyond psychiatric help? It could be argued that he is, only inasmuch as society as a whole is in need of psychiatric help. By distorting reality, Ballard is merely reflecting the true nature of reality, the reality that there is no objective reality. *Crash* was only the beginning of Ballard's inquest into arguably hyperreal science fiction. In his following three novels, *Concrete Island*, *High Rise*, and *the Unlimited Dream Company*, Ballard would expand on many of the elements of *Crash*'s post-modern commentary. Much like in *Crash*, these novels hold up a fun house mirror to society, amplifying its flaws while simultaneously highlighting its beauty, leaving the reader to decide which image is the truth.

Perhaps, both images are simultaneously true and false. This is the third category of readers, the people who get that there is nothing to be got. These are the same "fans [of PC Music] who accept that there both is and isn't a joke; and that part of the joke is that there is no joke," (Monroe). And much like the artists at PC Music, J.G. Ballard was a serious author who wrote serious stories. He was not the perverse pornographic writer that some may see him to be. His stories are sexy in only the most abstract sense of the word. His stories are SF by only the loosest definition of those two letters (perhaps the generally detested abbreviation *sci-fi*

would fit better). Humans and the automobile, humans and the Internet. Sexuality and the Accident, creativity and the Identity Crisis. Reality and fiction, sincerity and irony. Where all of these dualities become confounded and confused, that is the realm of the hyperreal. In that realm, floating about in a perpetual state of post-ironic flux, that is where we find Ballard's masterpiece, *Crash*.

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