Crash Culture

Actually, if the *accident* is solely *what occurs*, and not, like *substance*, *what is* . . .
—Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*

The essence of modern technology is by no means anything technological.
—Martin Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology"

With driving, very soon, came the searing reality of the crash. The various authorities differ on when the first car crash occurred. Most cite the case of Margaret Driscoll, a poor woman crossing the road in South London in August 1896, when she was knocked down and killed by a speeding car. Others refer to Mr. H. H. Bliss of New York, who on September 23, 1889, while assisting a woman passenger from a trolley car, was struck by an electric taxi.[1] The historians' refusal to agree alerts us to the reasons why they feel the need to discern an original moment. It seems important to fix the first car accident not because accidents involving traffic were by any means unknown before the invention of the motorcar; Charles Dickens, for example, when writing *Our Mutual Friend*, had been deeply traumatized when a train in which he was a passenger derailed in the Staplehurst disaster of 1868. Because each car accident was presented as a small-scale horror, however, rather than a spectacular disaster, their full effect, it appeared, was more likely to be grasped only en masse; thus the search for the first. In 1900, when 400,000 pedestrians a day crossed the broad Place de l'Opéra in Paris, sharing the road with 60,000 vehicles and 70,000 horses, no fewer than 150 people were killed by horses and trams in the French capital. (In that year, two were killed by cars, the same number as by bicycles.)[2] Yet because car accidents have, since those first, become so common and so everyday,

recuperating the specific horror of each has, strangely, been tougher, given what is taken to be their quotidian inevitability.

How, then, to know the crash? The statistics can astound us, the horror of a specific crash move us, but connecting the two has proved difficult. The crash as a small-scale, domestic horror is graspable, but it is then cast less often as part of a mass tragedy than as the individual effect of some chance determination—an accident. Individual crashes, unless they were "pileups" or killed a celebrity, lacked the stupendously mass tragedy of the kind that could be sensationalized in the penny papers. Perhaps the most shocking of all twentieth-century accidents involving a betraying technology and furious speed, for example, occurred in the north Atlantic fog on the night of April 14, 1912, when the *Titanic* sank; 1,552 passengers were drowned. In the following year, 1913, in the United States alone 4,200 people were killed in car accidents. (Now almost 40,000 die annually in car crashes in the United States.) It has been estimated that up to thirty million people have died in car crashes in the twentieth century. Each year of the twenty-first century adds at least a half million more.[3] The cumulative figures are shocking, yet the slow accretion means that the mass media only rarely sensationalize them into a broadly felt scandal. The car accident is an intimate kind of disaster. It touches individuals, a personal tragedy. Newspapers do comment on what is the almost willful refusal, in the name of the car's convenience, to ignore the cumulative tragedy of its accidents. This casts the crash, each time it occurs, as a crisis involving a few people, and car crashes are described in narratives broken and remade on the scale, very much, of the domestic novel. The specific car crash's representation is measured to the scale of individuals; this has made such representations fertile testing grounds for the traumas, neuroses, and crisis rearrangements of individual subjectivity, responses to the accident's arousal of terror, horror, and fear. Taken cumulatively, car crash statistics point to mass slaughter. Yet the two discourses veer off from each other: between the personal and local nature of a given crash and the magnitude of the overall reality, the connection is remarkably seldom made.

Car crashes are a twentieth-century phenomenon. This new occasion of fear soon became, for the commuter listening to the traffic report, an almost quotidian experience. Nevertheless there is a sense in which the crashes remain unspoken, hovering beneath the horizon of the field of vision of public culture. Here I will trace the ways in which narratives and images of the car crash did find their way into public discourse during the century. Each of

these discourses, I suggest, represents a veering off from the actuality of the crash itself, a displacement, to different degrees, of its fearful reality. An avoidance? No doubt. But also a willful refusal to be terrified, and a trusting to chance, even when the odds are heightened in the conjunction of human and technology.

This split originated in descriptions of crashes in the first years of automobilism; these descriptions went through a series of stages. In the first, when cars were bought as indulgences by the rich and were marketed as a technology of adventure, the crash was often treated as comedy, a hilarious "spill" that brought the driver up short against a heifer or a sycamore. Once fatalities began to be reported, this came to be countered by a discourse of social control, of the regulation of car speeds with speed limits, car roadworthiness through inspections, and driver preparedness through licensing. This brought the state to bear relentlessly on its citizens as drivers: the most common scene of the average citizen's encounter with the state's apparatus of law and order soon came to be the traffic stop. This discourse of social and statist control, and the language of its opponents, was soon countered by a less common, yet startling, often self-consciously artistic discourse of the car crash as a version of a violent apocalypse. In Filippo Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto above all, the moment when the Futurist hero crashes his car into the "divine mud" of the ditch marks the climactic conjunction of new technology and cyborg subject in a brutalist apocalypse of modernist energy. These celebrations of the car crash as glorious victories of the new, in turn, found their counterparts in a discourse that might be termed "crash analysis," which only came fully into existence in the mass car and freeway culture of the post–World War II boom, when the terrors, traumas, and necessity for callousness in the face of the ever more common car crash were explored with a bitter but fascinated scrutiny. Examples of this genre include Jean-Luc Godard's anti-Gaullist film *Weekend* (1967), and a line of thinking which culminated in J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973), which Ballard accurately characterized as "the first pornographic novel based on technology."[4] Although these texts take us into the second half of the century, because of their value in comprehending a cultural issue that was developed at least a half century before they were written, I include them here. Ballard's extraordinary, notorious novel is a searing exploration of the nexus of a sadistic sexuality, violence, late-modernist selfhood, and crash culture. These texts come out of the first broad movement, influenced by the rise of environmental and consumer activism and the mass motorization

of the European bourgeoisie, to critique car culture. Their satirical critiques are hedged with a kind of awe before what they have tracked down as the dangerous technology's fascination. Ballard, for example, needs to reassure his readers by means of an introduction that "the ultimate role of *Crash* is cautionary, a warning." One wonders.

This quartet of discursive protocols of the car crash — crash as comedy, crash as arena of state control, crash as apocalypse, and crash as awed critique — has variously processed twentieth-century impressions of automobile accidents as public information. They also annotate the nuances of the accident as intimate trauma and personal experience. As personal, local trauma, the car crash marked a new category of experience that the modern subject needed to absorb, an event where reality, as unexpected and unwelcome phenomenon, violently intruded on the will-to-simulation implied by life in a (relatively) abundant consumer culture. Earlier, we looked at how the new automobile culture of personal access to thrilling new speeds became broadly implanted so quickly in modern life because it offered access to a certain real of physical, thrilling experience, in a new order which more commonly offered the comforts of simulation as the reward for consumption. The car's access to speed for its driver marked it as a new kind of reward in consumer culture, a guarantee that that culture need not be wholly about garish appearances. If the consumer cornucopia was to be sensational, the car implied, then it could be sensational in the fullest sense of inducing sensations of excitement and real participation in natural life for its customer practitioners. Yet the offer of heightened physical sensation and corporeal excitement, promised as the experience of driving a car, was only offered through consumerism — at its simplest, the car, which enabled the experience that appeared to transcend consumerism, was itself a consumer item. Further, the sentient experience it offered — the thrill of personally speeding — was bracketed as a leisure experience: it offered no real new power to the driving subject. This, of course, made for its joyous supplementarity; it was outside the usual run of the simulation-besotted culture, and this was the guarantee of its reality. But this bracketing of the joy of speeding as an end in itself, as a possibly dangerous social act, a leisure activity, and as an activity without value in the sense that it did not contribute in any new way to the subject's empowerment, meant that to drive at speed was, yes, *experience*, but experience (like the tourist's gazing at a sight) that was trapped within consumerism's simulative parameters. The very fact that film (a simulation, inscribed on light) could, as we have seen

in the case of such a prosaic sequence as *A Race for a Kiss*, induce a similar sensation, could make the palms sweat and the neck arch as the viewer participated in a simulation of the speeding experience of the car chase, proves that experience in this physical, bodily sense was increasingly reproducible by the newest technologies that enhanced consumerism's protocols of simulation as its siren call of desire. Yet if to drive at speed is a thrill that, cast merely as leisure, is held hostage to consumer simulation, the moment of the crash, of the traffic accident, becomes a gruesome interruption in this reveling in the happiness of the purchased machine.

The accident becomes a frightening reminder that a reality of the frail body and its capacity for hurt and dismemberment lies behind the salespeople's promises of happiness. As such a jolt, the accident is the punctum, the interruption of the speed experience operating under the sign of simulation, by a physical real that offers itself too as the reality of the desire for speed. The crash is a tragedy involving personal horror, chaos, crushed bodies, and mangled machines; it marks a flash bespeaking the intrusive revenge of the real on a culture whose pleasures are built on the dream of escaping the illusionary world of consumerist simulation while still wishing for its cosseting promised security.

What consumer-based speed culture does so brilliantly is to hint that the terror of the crash is the inevitable counterpoint to the thrill of speed. One reason driving at higher speeds is a greater thrill is because one is putting oneself at greater risk of crashing. The terror of the crash, suppressed while one gathers speed, is the necessary complement to speed's thrill. With the mass sale of cars, people were granted mass access to personally experienced and generated speeds; they were also given a further power, a new potential to inflict damage, hurt, and even kill, on a new scale. They were given a new power to kill—and to do so in the flick of an eye, a moment's inattention, a resolution to go faster in a new direction. If speeding itself was a thrill that was supplementary to the simulation-ridden everyday life of its practitioners, a promise of physical sensation proffered by consumer culture, then its complementary power—to cause a crash and hurt oneself and others—was very much part of a really existing social fabric with specific and grim social effects. This awareness that speeding, itself a self-centered and lonely experience in the standard manner of most consumer activity, could at any moment become social in the grimmest circumstances, at the moment of the real life of the accident, perversely worked to make the speeding experience itself more apparently real. The threat of danger, of the

car accident, ever present while driving, the more present the more speed one gained, meant that the speeder had to be constantly alert, to employ her senses more fully, to play a game of keeping within limits imposed by the warning, cautious authorities of the state, while, by doing all these things, enjoying the apparent reality of the speeding experience even more. Speeding fed its sense of real experience on a good quotient of anxiety, inducing an adrenaline rush in the speeding body that was in considerable part fed on fear. Fear, never inadmissible, makes astringent the thrill, the excitement, of driving at speed. This fear, of the accident, is of an event that is social and real. In consumerism's offer to the masses of a physical experience, it ensures that the social and the real are what are presented as horrific. The fear of the real, which induced its avoidance, is cast as a component of the physical thrill of speeding as experience.

These cultural implications heighten the central fact of any car crash, its wretched and wrenching horror. Apart from the world wars, car accidents, from the early days of the automobile, became by far the most common sites for people in developed countries to witness real scenes of sudden death and destruction. That the accident could happen in a moment, wholly unexpectedly, meant that for many the car crash was (and is) Western culture's prime example of the very idea of accidentality, the very example of fate itself. Once the term "accident" came by and large to mean "car accident," then a new setting where the possibility of violent catastrophe could occur to anyone was accepted as a given. The very possibility of the crash posited intense violence as the corollary of the satisfyingly smooth flow of traffic. The speed thrill got to incorporate the "instinct to kill." The chance of a crash made this violence a potential, even likely, event that would touch everyday lives.

This arrival of a new form of violence—of radically life-altering catastrophe—as a possibility into people's increasingly protected lives, was entwined with a kind of frantic urgency because it came about in vivid relation to the new stress on the human organism as a machinelike generator of energy. If *experience*—a recalibrated complex of sensations of the body's material interrelation with the physical world—was what the car's speed offered the driver, then we might search for a series of new sensory possibilities developed to allow the subject access to this experience (we have already explored this in relation to sight). These sensory possibilities were represented in new narratives, representations of the human-machine interface that were concerned with what it meant *now* to be human and sen-

tient. These accounts centered on new discoveries and debates regarding the resourcefulness, usefulness, and potential of *energetic* human action. Key was the isolating, at this very moment, of adrenaline. These new narratives, couched often in either the prose of scientific journals, the dubious write-ups in the "Motoring" sections of the newspapers and car enthusiast magazines, or the emerging pseudoscience of resource management that became known as Taylorism, all told their tales of this new energy glibly, awkwardly, and enthusiastically. They are part of new ways of thinking, often at the margins of official science, aimed at delineating a new rhythm of speeded-up Western human experience. In these accounts of a poised and efficient (rather than manic) energy, the new Taylorized worker, the "man in the crowd" of Gustave Le Bon, newly freed by the eight-hour day, would find much praise for the possibilities of his or her pleasure. Speed, as Aldous Huxley wrote, is the only new pleasure invented by modernity. When one thinks of new narratives within which human experience came to be couched around 1900, one thinks of Freud. There is a case to be made, however, that Freud's limning of new nuances of human secular experience marks the end of a trajectory rather than a beginning: that his recasting of the Greek myths as prototypes of the agonies of modern life experience, for example, represents another, more profound stage in the expression of the bourgeois family romance narratives that had been perfected, for example, by the Victorian novelists, rather than the commencement of a new episteme of knowledge of the human psyche. (Freud's analyses, however, are also readable in terms of the blockage and encouragement of human energies: see his account of human *drives*.) The upsurge of accounts of human energy, on the other hand, offers alternative, if at first glance less glamorous, versions of the new texture of everyday lives in the milieu of what Jacques Ellul would famously term "the technological system."

With this new attention to human energy, spurred in part by the contact of the human body with newly invented technologies, the speed of the car and the demands placed on the driver were, of course, only one example. In this constellation, however, the car crash functioned as a breakdown with an enormous symbolic as well as actual power. For the car crash did not simply involve the breakdown of the new machinery with which the human body interacted (as is the case, for example, with the "crash"—i.e., the mechanical failure—nowadays of the computer) but was a moment when the machine's splintering also brought its human user face to face with extinction. The crash showed up a number of the crucial rules within which the

interrelation of human being and machine was to be managed in Western democratic modernity. In the edgy rapport improvised as the key protocol of the human-machine interface, the human was to have *choice*—even to the point of having choice to cause his or her death. At the same time as the subject was entrusted with such awe-inspiring choice for simply interacting with the machine, the interdiction of the unspoken rules, the seizing of the experience of pleasure to an excessive degree—by simply driving too fast, too inattentively, too dangerously—carried with it the most extreme penalty imaginable. Choice was granted, but extreme vigilance and attentiveness were demanded. Speed, the new pleasure of the human subject's psycho-physical regime of *energy*, was proffered as choice (which was thus mooted as the basic requirement for the relishing of pleasure); but to practice this choice and to access this pleasure, the subject was called on to exercise continuous attentiveness, alertness, vigilance, and rule keeping. (And this whole nexus of protocols and behaviors, tendered at the level of each individual driver, as with any ideological construct worthy of the name,[5] was always represented as the most natural code of behaviors in the world.) The new activity of car driving and the access to speed—that sole new pleasure invented by modernity—worked as a dramatization in miniature of the tender balance of choice, freedom, and pleasure on the one hand and censure, duties, and penalties on the other that were to characterize the relation of Le Bon's man in the crowd to both his sense of his own agency and his desire for security and acceptance of control.

We can now map the four discourses of the automobile crash I have outlined onto the matrices of freedom-pleasure and control-penalty which arrayed themselves behind the possibility of the crash and offered themselves as a means to prevent it. The car's driver, choosing her own speed, was no longer by necessity a passenger, as had been the case with tram, subway, and train; this matched the ethos of mass consumerism, where the vast array of commodities in the new department stores bespoke not just an abundance not quite within the individual's reach but the need for the shopper to *choose* from the profusion before enjoying the chosen commodity. This commodity was then granted a tincture of aura, a stamp of uniqueness because it had been chosen (from among all the others) by the buying individual. Likewise this act of choosing validated the buyer's own sense of selfhood; she exercised her freedom to enjoy her own version of pleasure. When the user of the car as mass transit accessed the pleasure of speed by herself, making all the decisions herself about how she moved, then this rite of choice was mag-

nified, even if it was employed in what became a mundane activity, because the choice was not simply about possessing a commodity but a series of choices that promised access to a novel physical experience. The discourse of comedy and jollity that surrounded car crash accounts in the early days of automobilism understood this relation of choice and consumer gratification intimately. In this period, when many drivers were rich hobbyists and thus models of the new consumers, a crash or "tumble" was seen as one of the thrills, portrayed mostly with a certain wryness, of a conspicuous display of the extended free choices afforded the rich. The comic discourse of the crash characterized a dream of choosing the novel experience, of choosing to exercise its possibilities in the wildest, most freewheeling ways—and never having to pay a penalty for it. Rather, enduring the spill, and even driving in pursuit of it, made one a "daredevil," an adventurer; it allowed the rich consumer-driver to show himself or herself as still practicing the protocols of an earlier era when humans proved themselves through activities more dangerous than choosing commodities. That the daredevil act was mostly a game (with, for example, elaborate dressing-up rituals of goggles, driving coats, and, for women, veils) also made it, reassuringly, part of consumerism's more constricted and less heroic regimes of freedom of choice. And there was always the possibility of a fatality—though more likely of a pedestrian, not the driver—to prove that in this search for new experience, authentic physicality had not been forgone.

The ensuing and complementary discourse of state control surrounding the crash could provide the reassurance of security that the posing daredevil craved. From its earliest days, this voluminous and repetitive discourse gave rise to a vast supply of new terms, a whole new language:

speed limits
traffic lights
Belisha beacons
highway patrol officers
traffic wardens
speed-calming devices
national crash tests
crash dummies
roadworthiness
impact studies
driver's license tests

"sig.-alert"
speeding tickets
driving offenses
the Department of Motor Vehicles
Breathalyzer tests
swift-response teams
jaws-of-life
penalty points, and so on

In this new jargon, one can trace, first, the state's enthusiasm for the driver's freedom to enjoy speed as a model for the individual's freedom in a consumer-centered democracy and, second, its anxiety that this freedom needed to be rigidly controlled. (For example, since the invention of the automobile, the dream expressed by state-employed traffic engineers for a traffic system has been this: cars would run automatically on tracks, taking away the driver's control and making her a passenger; car manufacturers invented "cruise control" but inevitably are wary of any system which runs counter to the dream of individual control offered by the car.) There is still much to be written of how the modern nation-state superseded concern for the integrity of its territory with concern for the rate of movement of its people, goods, and money (and of "aliens") within and through that territory: the state as traffic policeman. The state's discourse of the car crash, its rhetorical structure that of the cautionary tale, promises the driver citizen a lavish measure of security within the exercise of a limited but satisfying choice. It guarantees that this choice can be practiced with reassurance. This rhetoric of cautionary warnings brings into the open the spectacle of the crash itself; indeed, it glories in its gore and its obscene wreckage of the physical human body. It makes evident the fact, suppressed by the daredevil game player racing toward speed and pleasure, that in a crisis the human body will be mercilessly crushed by the machine. It always frames this grim spectacle within the textual strategies of reassurance, but it stokes fear of the crash to offer the remedy of its own version of security as state control. Flaunting the crash's brutality, the state ensures that the very fear it has fostered and worked up will be reinscribed as the not-quite-suppressed unconscious of the pleasure of choosing speed in the first place. Calling on its citizens to make their own choices as drivers if they wish to access speed's thrills, the state concurrently decrees the constant monitoring of such speed thrills in the name of alertness and vigilance. The good citizen as

driver always exercises agency as choice but forgoes most of the potential pleasure that choice suggests by "driving safely" and also by being vigilant: alert to his own dangerousness, he must also be wary of the threat posed by others. The possibility of pleasure is in this way incited, but this pleasure is at once decreed excessive: defensive alertness, rather, is represented as the proper demeanor. The energy that the human subject, interacting with the machine, is expected to exhibit is channeled away from excessiveness (although the possibility of indulging in such excess is always upheld as a dream deferred, a road mirage) and routed into the more prudent grooves of constant alertness. This subtle and complex balance of control is guaranteed by brandishing before the citizen-driver the gruesome spectacle of the crash scene, where the bloodied victims and wrecked chassis bespeak the dangers of excess.

The victims also offer testimony, however, to the occasional brutality of chance itself, its callous unforgivingness even of the always alert and well-energized human subject. If *energy* (as alertness) is the required value of the human subject as participant in the technological system, and speed's thrill is the reward granted by technology-driven commodity culture for a life of energy alertly dispensed, then it is fully appropriate that, in a society in which most death is hidden and its rituals erased, the shocking, sudden spectacle of death in the car crash should be unveiled randomly, periodically, and publicly as the apotheosis of speed culture. It is Paul Virilio who most comprehensively charts the centrality of energy-driven speed culture to our contemporary concepts of life itself when he discusses the meanings of the word *vif*:

> The French word "vif," "lively," incorporates at least three meanings: swiftness, speed (vitesse), likened to violence—sudden force, abrupt edge (*vive force*, *arete vive*), etc.—and to *life* (*vie*) itself: to be quick means to stay alive (*etre vif*, *c'est etre en* vie!).[6]

When quickness means life, its excessiveness, its misuse, means death. The technology is smashed, but this is nothing compared to the rupture of the speeding body. The crash is the end of speed, the completest stop. This might seem as if it were the point at which all discourse ends, at which, with the pleasure of speed transforming itself into unspeakable pain, the discourse of speed would reach the point of the unsayable. On the contrary: around this fraught degree zero of speed discourse have coalesced a constellation of quasi-mythic, almost-thoughtful texts and image sequences,

portentous and cavalier by turns, which admirably attempt to unveil speed's deepest meanings for the human subject in modernity even as they sound its victims' requiem. These are texts and films that forgo accounts of the traumas and personal feelings that arise from the family romance plots which are the domain of Freudian and post-Freudian accounts of the modern subject's meaningful existence. Instead they concentrate on the surface textures of modern life, its everyday rhythms, its repetitions rather than its anxieties. At the same time, like every new discursive formation, they bear within themselves traces of the older forms and narratives of meaning; these shadows become the measures against which the rhythms of truly modern life come implicitly to be measured and found wanting. Confronting both shadow text and innovative text, they work as modernist critiques, awash with cool irony. Smashing the suave planes of this irony as it smashes the coldly technology-riven lives of the characters described, the crash in these texts arrives as a kind of truth bearer, an inevitable if repeated endgame, a revelation.

Revealing truths, the crash assumes in these works a glamour, a stylized aura: the texts try to treat it with what Theodor Adorno once termed "the jargon of authenticity."[7] In a world controlled by panopticist surveillance, for example, the crash can represent a moment of the serendipity that the state's eye has striven to suppress. The crash might be chance's, or the driver's, victory over conformist security. In the film *Les tricheurs* (The Cheaters, 1958), directed by Marcel Carné, for example, the young heroine, who wants a white Jaguar, declares, "I wouldn't mind dying like Dean: young, and at great speed."[8] At this point, with the lonely death of James Dean in his Porsche near Paso Robles in 1955, the old tropes of adventure, in discovering new worlds, had all been flattened out into speed dreams; only speed now was adventure, and speed was only truly annotatable as adventure at the moment of its impossibility. In this nihilist formulation, the energized subject could still dream of herself as heroic only at the moment of heroism's defeat at excessive speed. In a further irony, this discourse of heroic martyrdom fits cozily in the nexus of consumerist dreams; remember that chance, serendipity, and shock are all the other side of the coin of the serendipitous choice which enlivens the freedom of the consumer. The shock (of the crash) lurks behind the consumer's freedom; it authenticates it, endowing it with an edge, a cultural unconscious of tragic danger. The car crashes that have transformed celebrity figures into chance's martyrs — Jayne Mansfield, Tom Mix, Nathanael West, James Dean, Albert

Camus, Jackson Pollock, Princess Grace, Princess Diana—grant a buzz of nervous tragedy to lives, and drives, dominated by the careful management of energy. These celebrities' shocking deaths in crashes offer the tragedy of their decimation as the triumph of the dream of escape into nothingness, an escape enacted while they each were in the grip of the thrill of energy's expenditure in speed.

To harness this thrill as a means at least to endow modernist Fordist lives with some meaning, if not as the basis for an altogether novel vision of the possibilities of the subject (and her politics), has, post-Dean, become the goal of scattered science fiction writers, outré film directors and a mishmash of utopian artists. That they have seldom escaped from a fascination before the scene of the car crash and the lurid glamour of its wreckage shows the desperation of their limning of the interface between human subject and technology, as well as offering evidence of their unwillingness to let go of that crucial assumption of modernity that technology might yet save us even as it ruins and lays waste. Paul Virilio, preeminent theorist of this tendency and a commentator prone to read the relations of technologies to humans in more or less apocalyptic terms, notes that the crash, the accident, tells us much more about the cultural effects of the technology than the spectacle of its smooth functioning ever could. J. G. Ballard, possibly the most creative thinker on the human-technological interface in the Cold War era, fashions psychic narratives of sadomasochistic behavior (especially sexual behavior) around the story of technology's breakdown, specifically the car crash. These writers fascinate in part because they refuse the older essentializing accounts of technology as merely instrumental,[9] and as rationalizing, abstracting, deadening, as a counter to the warm "dwelling" of a humanity that might somehow shake itself free of the technical. (This latter, for example, is the version of the modern subject's relation to technology expounded by Martin Heidegger in "The Question concerning Technology.") Thinkers such as Virilio and Ballard begin by taking Heidegger's dualism into account and even work to exacerbate the fears of technology on which it is built. Nevertheless their texts are based on a vision, however terrifying, of the breakdown between the realms of human desire and technological instrumentality. For both Virilio and Ballard, speed is the trope whereby they investigate the ways in which humans use machines as clever devices of interpellation and the gaining of power. Speed for Virilio is the primary trope in modernity of assault,[10] while for Ballard it is the fast route toward an uncanny, made-strange world where characters seem

to struggle against the anomie that the technologized milieu they inhabit (Ballard follows Heidegger in his initial assumptions) tends to produce. Speed for both, and driving in particular for Ballard, is a key phenomenon of modernity, the one which shows modernist subjects in their truest relation to the forces of modern power as they are projected in the everyday. These forces, for both Virilio and Ballard, work as a repressed violence. For both, speed is the most vivid force through which this violence is uncovered and made evident. The key implication of the work of both is a shocking one: speed is modernity's violence.

Virilio, in *Speed and Politics*, traces a history of the speed of people and their machines, from the rise of the medieval city state to the post-Hiroshima era of possibly instantaneous nuclear war. He delineates the ways in which relations between velocities, whether human or machinic, effected successive reorganizations of forms of rule. He focuses on the powers exercised by emerging nation-states over velocities. The velocities of arms and armaments, from the slingshot to the cruise missile, underlie for him the history of warfare. Showing how ever faster and deadlier weapons always outpaced the development of faster means of human transport and were each in turn outpaced by the speed of the transmission of information via the media, Virilio arrives at a history of the present in which, for him, the instantaneousness or near instantaneousness of each of the three kinds of movement (the split second of computer communication, the finger on the nuclear button, and supersonic speeds in air transport) has led to a disappearing point where speed itself is more or less superseded and all duration can be canceled out in the zap of an instant. At this moment, he suggests, "penetration and destruction become one"; that is, the speed of transport machines is shown up as part of the tendency toward violent penetrative assault, merely aping the destructive purpose of the superfast new missiles. Speed, in other words, has now revealed itself as violence. He might have dwelt on a vehicle such as the stealth bomber, where the specificity of the space in which it fires its missiles matters nothing, and "all that counts is the speed of the moving body and the undecidability of its path."[11] Such is the state's dream machine of this moment when speed, rather than territoriality, is that which must be controlled in order for the state to keep its power. For Virilio, it is this convergence in destructive mode, to which the history of technology has brought us, that has been foretold by every car accident. The crash for him is a tragically overdetermined moment when

speed shows off its destructive and violent capacities, forces of violence that are in turn taken over by regimes of power.

Virilio, in books such as *Bunker Archeology*, a meditation on Nazi fortifications on the north French coast, and *War and Cinema*, on how the film camera shot was improved in wartime, especially during World War I, is a theorist of warfare. One may object that his texts, which read like implicit jeremiads, rework with a lurid poststructuralism the Heideggerian fear of technology's potential for dehumanization. One need not endorse Virilio's discursive alarmism, however, to accept his insight that it is at the moment of the crash, when speed shows itself as violence, that a politics of speed is possible. I suggest that such a politics can be discerned in the successive discourses that have been developed to describe automobile crashes, that is, in the quartet of discourses I outlined earlier.

In the regime of *energy* as the primary evidence of human life well lived which developed at the beginning of the twentieth century and was now encapsulated in the particular sensory actions and reactions demanded of the stressed subject once he was given the opportunity to drive a speeding car, the crash is a punctum, a denial of energy's delights. It reminds one not to misuse one's energy and shows us that in the gravest instance, this energy is powerless and an illusion. If driving stands as one of the most characteristic new kinds of behavior of the subject in late modernity, in that it teaches her how to deploy her energy in ways appropriate to the forces at work in modern life, then the crash is an avowal of a more severe and greater power that lurks behind the pleasures available to this energized subject. Consider the degree and kind of freedom offered to the subject while driving. First there is the freedom to purchase and ostentatiously consume (as leisure) the car itself as commodity, to show off one's possession of the grandest, shiniest (and, year after year, mostly newly fashionable and ever changeable), bauble of the mass market. This freedom corresponds to the simplest level of commodity culture's satisfactions. With new models, different marques, world production ambitions, and new levels of advertising, car sales represent a most intense example of the consumer carnival. With its stress on social status and snobbery, the market for automobiles shows itself as the first stage of consumerism, still deeply cognizant of the class distinctions which in fact were more wholly meaningful in the pre mass-consumption era. This is the version of driving as freedom which shows us the crash as comic "spills."

A more profound exemplar of modern life, however, is the kind of freedom afforded one as a driver: when you drive, you make constant decisions based on ever-changing scenes, shocks, and stimuli. In the name of forestalling the potential crash, this freedom is hedged in by numerous limitations designed by the state in its role as traffic policeman. The state's discourse, first, flashes before us the spectacle of future disaster and, second, promises us security if we give up the most intense pleasures possible of the experience. The state, in other words, would have us as drivers all behave in the same ways—so that here, even though we appear free and hence each unique, is a classic version of the modernist nightmare of standardized, automaton, and assembly line behavior. Reinforcing the fact that we must conform, the spectacle of the crash comes as a terrible warning, so that every crash reinforces the state's power to control and may be the key necessary component in the state's use of spectacle to control our everyday freedoms. (The crash is an advertisement, then, supporting the repressive tendencies of the state.) On the other hand, we can remain contented in the knowledge that our freedom, within limits, is considerable: not only—as exemplified by the experience of driving—our freedom to make our own minor decisions but our freedom to be shocked by an experience which might be new. This is the freedom, with all its possibilities, that is being tackled by writers like Ballard in their exploration of the meanings of the car crash.

Clearly these restrictions and these freedoms can exist simultaneously: they engage with and accentuate each other, and the tension between them reinforces each. The citizen's fear of the accident, fostered by the state, comes to be recast as a more muted apprehension of the state's control itself, into the sense of compliance which makes one obey the rules. This contrasts with the desire for the potential pleasure, that desire nurtured by commodity culture, which taking fuller advantage of one's proffered freedom might bring. This nexus of apprehension and desire structures the subject's "ideal" deployment of the energy which signifies his very life. Energy is thereby cathected into a specific, and more easily controlled, tension. It is upon the shimmering scene of this tension that the modern political subject is interpellated: on the one hand by the repressive apparatus of the state, allied to the capitalist production aims of Fordist efficiency and conformist compliance, and on the other by the hints of free choice offered by the consumption carnival displayed invitingly by commodity culture. The crash lets us know that we can enjoy our freedom to choose commodities,

but if we try to have the new at the level of actual lived experience, we may well meet disaster or inflict disaster on others. At the moment of the crash, nonetheless, the state arrives to try to save us. It is the tension between these two competing strands of interpellation that is left to us as our everyday pleasure — of driving, and of living as subjects in modernity. It is a tension which, because it is punctured by the crash, can perhaps only be read critically in all its interpellative power through the contemplation of that moment. The crash, therefore, is a deeply political spectacle.

Moreover, the crash's shock effects, unlike the shock tactics ascribed by critics to much modernist art, do not necessarily lead to a jolting into consciousness or a new sense of critical distance and may actively forestall it. This is so because the crash presents itself as a warning of what may happen again in the future: it orients its watchers firmly toward their subsequent behavior. Within a framework of repetition — crashes follow patterns — the crash as phenomenon is always new, for no two crashes are ever the same.[12] For the Victorians, the topic of energy, and of its lack, was often associated with fear — fear of the potential of energy, or its lack, to provoke global and personal disaster. There was, for example, Lord Kelvin's warning in his essay "On the Dissipation of Energy" (1892) that the heat death of the sun would occur sooner than anyone had imagined. (This prediction would furnish the final image for H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* in 1895.) Some years earlier, Jean-Martin Charcot's experiments at the Salpêtrière infirmary in Paris on patients showing symptoms of "hystero-epilepsy" had suggested how prone the overtense body is to breakdown and to exhibiting "perversions of sensibility." From the level of the individual psyche to that of the whole solar system, the discussion of energy and the tension necessary for its proper maintenance was wont to be cast in terms of accompanying fears. And these fears — a new nervousness — were built up by developing images of possible future catastrophes that might envelop the unwary or the overexcitable. In this context, the crash could function as a replica, in everyday life, of these anxieties. And like them, by focusing the mind of the observer on future possibilities, it handily diverted its audience from the kinds of attention to the past which might lead to a political analysis — to a course of action embarked on as a community.

Henri Bergson, in *Matter and Memory*, explored how present sensations were enriched and made something more than humdrum reactions (the kinds of activities referred to as "knee-jerk" or "reflex" reactions) when they are mixed with memories. Walter Benjamin, in turn, saw the potential

for a politicized apprehension in this account of Bergson's, which Benjamin praised for attempting to overcome the flattening out of all experience in modernity, even as he also pointed out that Bergson, in implying that this kind of reification could be overcome by subjective, personal action, refused any historical determination of memory. The crash, in this context, offers a shock which merely explodes memory, while offering itself as a fearful spectacle which works to influence future behavior. The spectacle of horror, offering itself as a local, intimate kind of spectacle, manages to appear subpolitical, offering only a lesson to the driver to be wary and conform. (Almost all general accounts of crash rates and the like in the media are couched in such terms.) Possibly only when the ratio of coercion and free choice, which takes the measure of the crash now and appears to us utterly natural, is radically altered—perhaps by a technological innovation—will we then be able to more adequately understand the significance of the crash in its political dimension.

The Crash as Comedy

Why were the first car accidents seen as comic? Why were the earliest crashes represented as moments in a kind of joking game? Accounts of the first accidents, in, for example, the *Times* of London, assume a dry, factual tone: the accident was the new thing because of the novel vehicle involved, and sometimes merited attention because of the wealth or prominence of the cars' owners. These earliest accounts modeled their reports on notices of accidents involving horse-drawn transport, bicycles, and trains. Possibly the best-known example of this genre from the beginning of the last century familiar today is the fictitious, but typically recalcitrant, account of death beneath a train that Mr. Duffy, in the act of lifting a forkful of dinner to his mouth, reads in James Joyce's short story "A Painful Case." (The title of the story is taken from the headline over the account of the accident.) The bland seemliness of such reports was challenged by the writing in the new mass-circulation papers, especially as the numbers of cars and accidents increased; these launched campaigns against reckless driving, which culminated in Britain with the founding of the Pedestrians Association in 1929, the important Road Traffic Act of 1930, which abolished speed limits altogether, and the Act of 1934, which introduced pedestrian crossings, Belisha beacons,[13] and a speed limit in built-up areas of thirty miles per hour.[14] If we search for published representations of accidents

themselves, however, it is to the stories and cartoons of magazines such as *Punch*, and soon to early film, that we must turn. Here was formulated the strange mixture of class consciousness, the sense of mishap, and outright comedy which mitigate the tragedy of the earliest car crashes.

As one of the pioneers of the mass-market magazine genre, the reading of which was itself a new kind of "leisure activity," *Punch*, aiming like its countless imitators and followers to be snobbish and populist at once, waded enthusiastically into the world of "scorchers," "driving habits," speed traps, chauffeurs, choleric majors at the wheel ("Major Mustard"), "erratic steering," and the whole lingua franca and spectacle of "the Montgomery-Smiths in their motor-car, enjoying the beauties of the country."[15] The new thrill demanded a new language, and magazines such as *Punch*, in on the beginnings of fashion as the mechanism that made lowbrow and mass culture seem endlessly appealing, were eager to jazz up their pages and their circulations by inventing it. *Punch* handled the cycling craze, and then automobilism, as new fashions which (for fashion demands that one must appear blasé about it) it cannot quite take seriously. It pandered to fashion's snobbery by always noting—usually in a shorthand phrase, "Major Mustard"—the social status of each of its characters, all the while appearing to undercut with humor the japes of the fashionable crowd. Along with other "pictorial weeklies," such as *Tidbits*, the French *Illustration* and *Petit Journal*, and car magazines like the U.S. *Motor* (founded in 1903), *Punch* was inventing a new mass-market taste, honing a grammar and a vocabulary nimble enough to excite the consumer-reader's desire.[16] (In 1895 the *Petit Journal* launched a subscription and raised £1,500 to build a monument to Emile Levassor, who died when his car hit a dog during the Paris–Marseilles–Paris race of 1986; the editors described the monument, which still stands at the Porte Maillot in Paris, as "a monument to a victim of automobilism." It is another stone car, even if carved in relief.)[17]

It is striking how often incidents as grisly as car crashes could be mentioned in these magazines. In a signifying code where the protocols of status were being recast from ones based on rigid class distinctions to ones based more simply on the possession of the new accessories of leisure, spills, breakdowns, and crashes of these new accessories were the fodder of *Punch*'s automobile humor. The crash, by being made the butt of jokiness, could be withdrawn from the arena of real alarm and cast instead as the benign, foolish evidence of a kind of mass-market adventure. Nobody dies in these *Punch* cartoon crashes; in the cartoons and illustrations there

is never even black-and-white blood. "Spills," as sites where characters renegotiated their place in the revamped class system, were never allowed to become tragic, could never inflict wounds. Rather, they are starred sites where the protocols of a new class — as leisured consumers — are invented in the course of showing them as preposterous, even deluded, but engaging in a delusion of personal power and knowledge which the cartoon finds funny and of which it ultimately approves.

A standard *Punch* car crash cartoon of the early twentieth century shows a driver and passenger crouched in attitudes of shock and horror as a young cyclist into whom they have crashed goes flying through their windshield. The cartoon is titled "So Inconsiderate" and bears a caption of the driver telling his passenger: "Jove! Might have killed us! I must have a wire screen fixed up" (figure 15). The accent clearly is on consumption: the driver is outfitted in goggles and a driving fur coat, both staples of the haberdashery extensively advertised for drivers in the open-car years. The first thought of the driver in the accident — his need for a stronger screen — reinforces with a laugh the consumerist imperative. This shopper's response and its inappropriateness are, however, the butt of the cartoon's humor; his callous carelessness about the flying cyclist's life is the focus. We are not shown an injury, even as the drawing displays a flying body, projected at speed; instead, our attention is drawn by the caption to the selfish gall of the driver. His self-centeredness is what is in the end celebrated. The driver's self-serving insouciance, his downright carelessness about causing harm to others as he dreams up other accessories to buy is both berated and celebrated. Time and again what the *Punch* cartoons celebrate (even as they laugh at the characters who embody them) is this refusal of the driver to allow reality (especially the gruesome reality of a crash) to stop him from forging on. The cartoon becomes an occasion for celebrating the indomitable quality of the driver who outfoxes the accident and literally refuses to see it because he is willfully deluded by his pursuit of the new consumerist leisure. This comic delusion is posited as a necessity and, in its way, the heart of the pleasure of the experience of driving itself. This is wholly in keeping with a consumerist reading of automobilism: focus on the consumable commodities, and problems are rendered nonexistent. With the apparent naturalness of humor, these cartoons paint the consumer automobilist as a weekend adventurer whose laughable delusion is a kind of brilliance. This delusion, it is implied, is exactly what makes the adventure, and the physicality of the automobile experience, safe for consumer culture.

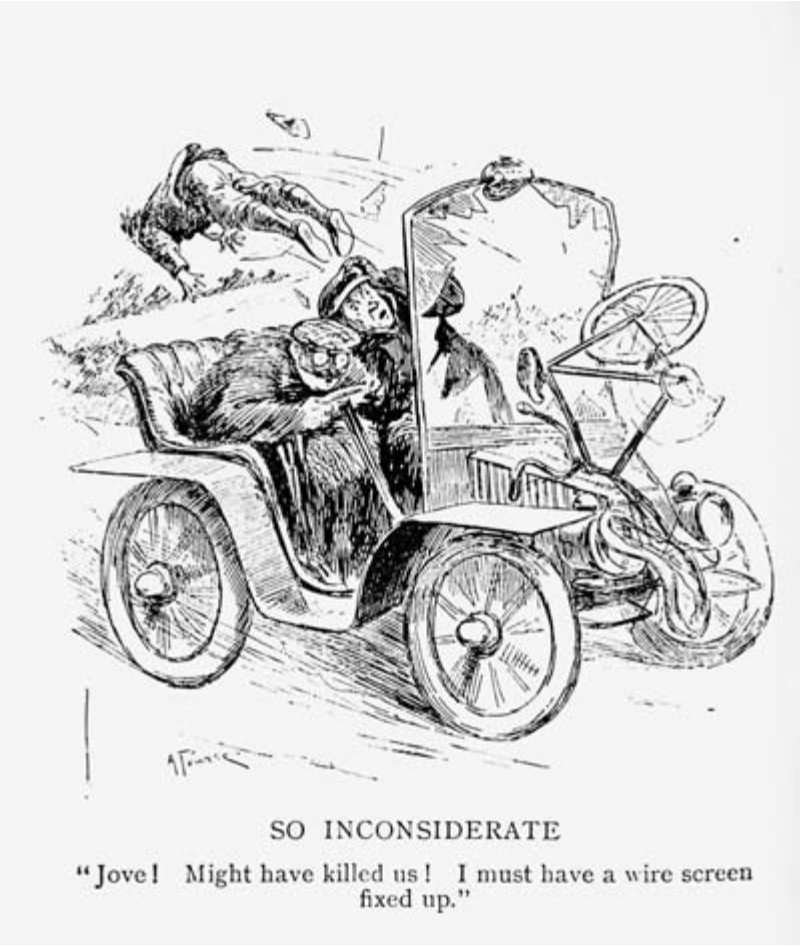

FIGURE 15. "So Inconsiderate: 'Jove! Might have killed us! I must have a wire screen fixed up!'" From J. A. Hammerton, ed., *Mr. Punch Awheel: The Humors of Motoring* (London: Educational Book Company, 1908), 191.

If automobilism is to be fostered, it seems, this is the kind of illusion that must, even as it is being exposed, be sustained.

The delusional imperative was reinforced by the uses to which cars were often put in the other mass-leisure invention of the day—film, especially so in a new, briefly voguish genre of "trick pictures," which specialized in "motor mayhem."[18] These trick pictures are one of the opening salvos of a long history of the car crash in the movies, where film at once brings us up close to the reality of the crash and desensitizes us to it. Most of the trick picture movie reels have been lost and are known only through contempo-

FIGURE 19. "Observing the effects of the disaster, the doctor proceeds to replace the severed legs."

FIGURE 20. "The limbs replaced, the patient and doctor shake hands."

Both from Frederick Talbot, "Trick Pictures and How They Are Produced," in *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* (London: Heinemann, 1912).

rary descriptions; the sequence of stills shown here, along with the accompanying account of how a trick picture can be made in Frederick Talbot's "Trick Pictures and How They Are Produced," from *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* (1912), gives a good idea of the comic delusions of their brand of grotesquerie (figures 16–20).[19] Talbot uses as his demonstration piece a series of stills from a bioscope reel titled *The Automobile Accident*. It told the story of a drunken workman who falls asleep in a roadway:

> While he is sleeping peacefully a taxi-cab comes along at a smart pace, and, not observing the slumbering form of the roisterer, the chauffeur drives over him, cutting off both his legs. The shock awakens the man rudely, and he is surprised to find his lower limbs scattered across the roadway. The chauffeur is horrified by the unfortunate accident, but his fare, on the contrary, a doctor, is not much perturbed. He descends from his carriage, picks up the dismembered limbs, replaces them in position, assists the afflicted man to his feet, and after shaking hands each proceeds on his separate way, the workman resuming his journey as if nothing had happened.

To stage this trick, Talbot explains, one needs simply to substitute, in the scenes showing the crash, the character playing the drunken workman with another, "a cripple who has lost both legs in an accident."[20] It is his fake limbs that are apparently severed, then reattached. Another actor is substituted for the scenes in which the workman walks away. A series of scenes cobbled together in a continuous loop of film (with the casual dexterity with which the crash victim apparently has his legs reunited with his body) sustains the illusion of the worker's magic imperviousness to the injuries of the auto accident. To satisfy "a popular taste [which] demands extreme novelty," as Talbot's guide to making movies puts it, trick pictures such as this one need to show "some scene impossible to picture without sacrifice of life."[21]

Technology, then, presents dying as an art—or rather, film pretends to an expertise that can raise the dead and make the maimed whole. The reaction this film wishes to illicit is the shocked "How did they do that?" and this at the very moment when we might be expected to expend some empathy on the gruesomely wounded man. The technologically manufactured spectacle, in other words, forecloses the necessity of human empathy by bringing to the fore the cleverness of its technical sleight of eye. It allows

FIGURE 16. "The producer giving instructions to the principal actor and his double, the legless cripple. The dummy legs in the foreground." From Frederick Talbot, "Trick Pictures and How They Are Produced," in *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* (London: Heinemann, 1912).

FIGURE 17. "The taxi-cab running over the sleeper and apparently cutting off his legs, but in reality displacing the legless cripple's property limbs."

FIGURE 18. "The roysterer after being run over by the taxi-cab sitting up and brandishing his severed limbs."

Both from Frederick Talbot, "Trick Pictures and How They Are Produced," in *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* (London: Heinemann, 1912).

us to understand that such empathy would have been a waste of feeling, for the technology (of film) has the means to make the (apparently) injured whole. (This is the kind of moment in which simulation becomes spectacle, in the scathing sense of that term used by Guy Debord.) The technology of film, the medium here, offers itself also as the magical analogy for the technology that is portrayed: the automobile. The car's cruelties, the film's magic suggests, are an illusion too. Further, as watchers of the film, we identify here with the user of the technology that the film portrays: in this case, with the car's passenger. Appropriately, he is a doctor; it is he who performs the medical magic in the scene shown. What happens *in the film* is that the technology gets to act as the doctor, making the wounded man's wounds not matter.

This magnificently magical illogic of the trick picture laid down the protocols followed in thousands of car crash depictions in films since, from the classic scene in which the car and its passengers fly (sometimes in slow motion) over a cliff to that in which the wild car chase ends in a fireball. It is all, the medium suggests, an illusion, and we as the spectators, at the head of a taxonomy of the powerful that stretches via the passenger as doctor, the car, and the film, have the magical ability to make the wounded whole. And because we always know that it is an illusion, it's a joke too, inducing a fear-tinged laughter. The humor that imbued so many representations of the first car crashes represents, as such, a sordid conspiracy of the refusal to tell the truth on the part of new technologies—a conspiracy that we can lay at the door of consumerist imperatives. To choose, to buy, to see: all these new powers refused to be tamped down by the sense of danger and, on the contrary, were enhanced by it.

Yet this laughter too has a utopian aspect. What we must remember was that the showing of the crash was a new thing, in that the car crash itself was a novel phenomenon. Just as we can read the fascination, in the eighteenth century, with the insane (as in the fashionable tours of Bedlam hospital) as a complex part of the reaction to the demands of the Age of Reason, and as we might read the Victorian fascination with the colonial "native" as a component of the imperial imaginary, so too the twentieth century film's obsessive portrayal of the crashing car is part of the complex reworking of this century's relation between technology and the human subject. In all three cases—the insane in the age of the Enlightenment, the native in the age of imperialism, and the car crash victim in the era of technology—the image of the victim of the new development was transformed, through

the specific rituals of gazing developed in each case, into a spectacle of grotesque laughter. This laughter cruelly others the victims and, in doing so, works as a secular ritual which affirms the viewer's refusal to be part of that othering. In the case of the car crash victim as spectacle, as in each of the others, that refusal is possibly wishful thinking. To the extent that it is not simply fearful, nervous laughter, however, it is unlike those earlier moments in the history of seeing as scapegoating in that the viewer cannot quite forget that in this case the other might become the self in a moment—"by accident." The semantic shift whereby the disaster in the car came to be called an "accident" until, as is the case now, the very term "accident" is virtually synonymous with "car crash" is telling. It suggests that what is at stake in the laughter before the early movie spectacles of the car wreck was a reappraisal of the very notion of accidentality, now that technology had intervened forcibly in it, that governed the human subject's sense of agency. The car, as commodity, posited itself not only as an object destined never quite to fulfill the subject's desire but as a prosthesis which accentuated, through the sensation of speeding, the buyer's sense of lived experience. Guaranteeing that this machine intensified subjective experience was the end fact that it also offered the subject the possibility to annihilate others—or the power of self-annihilation. All this "by accident": to have intense experience in the era of techno-consumerism, in other words, one had to concede in advance a change in the ratio of the self's agency and outside forces. To feel through oneself the greater power of the machine, one had to gamble. Calling what might happen an "accident" implied that "chance" alone operated as cautionary control of one's lived thrills.

Yet although car culture—as with the Futurists—might have fostered quasi-Nietzschean dreams of a new stage in the subject's heroic battle with fate in pursuit of the will to power, more prosaically, it was in the sphere of the state—in the enforcement of national traffic laws—that the quotient of power, chance, and accidentality was endlessly debated. The second, better-known discourse of the car crash is that of the state's traffic rules. The state's legal apparatus and "rules of the road," determined, you might say, to wipe that laugh at the spectacle of the car crash off the faces of its citizens, nevertheless did not do this necessarily by showing them some more realist or vivid image of the crash. Rather, it showed its astute appraisal of what was really at stake in the new culture of its citizen drivers by inserting its discourse at the level of delineating chance. It showed its capacity, well beyond that of the citizen on her own, to measure rates of

accidentality and then worked to offer its own kinds of reassurance by marshaling notions of liability, blame, and insurance. In making the car crash a concern of the state, it moved it from being a butt of laughter to being a matter of statistics.

Traffic Laws

When Margaret Driscoll, in London in 1896, became the first person to be killed by a car, the coroner concluded the inquest with a commonplace staggering for its lack of foresight. He said he hoped that such an incident would never happen again.[22] (Since then, in Britain alone, it has happened more than half a million times.) Blatantly wrong and blatantly optimistic, the coroner's observation nevertheless turned out to be uncannily characteristic: it set the tone of the state's discourse on automobiles. First, it shows the functionary attending at once to numbers: he is — even if hoping for a negative result — thinking statistically. Second, by asserting its singularity, he shows himself to be thinking of the car crash as an "accident," that is, an event ultimately beyond human and state control, which, when it comes, will always appear aberrant, an event blamed, finally, on chance. These two assumptions, together with the statement's naiveté, offer a template of the state's discourse of speed control and its consequences. In subsequent decades, the idea of the death rate, a concept foretold in the coroner's comments, would come to govern governments' policies on speed.

Paul Virilio, in *Speed and Politics*, has written vividly of how the state must be reconceptualized not primarily as the guardian of the national territory but as the controller of the movement of its citizens and others through that territory: the state as "traffic cop." Clearly it is in the state's role as regulator of traffic speeds and flows that the average bourgeois "law-abiding" citizen most frequently comes face to face with the state's police power, because it is in traveling at speed, on the public roads, that a citizen is most likely to break the state's laws — to speed. In urban studies from the polemics of Jane Jacobs to those of Mike Davis, a consistent theme has been how different urban constituencies have used the diverse public spaces of streets, crossroads, and squares; they can be transformed in a gesture from the route of an army's triumphal parade to the scenes of revolutionary clashes. Less thought has been given to the social and cultural role played by routes through the national territory, although since the novel's beginnings in picaresque tales such as Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771) to

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* in post–World War II America, novelists have consistently celebrated the open road as the site in which to glorify the freedom-hungry individual's desire to test the limits of the liberal, rationalist state. As the democratic nation-states developed their extensive networks of surveillance, control, and interpellation in the second half of the nineteenth century, founding standardized systems of policing, schooling, and tax paying all undergirded by extensive bureaucracies, the roads, as public space that was open to all classes, became sites where the powers of these new state networks came to be actively contested. With the open road as an arena where hegemonies might be contested, the rise of the private motorcar, and the assumption from the start that motorcars would be allowed to use the public roads, played a crucial role.

In 1934, a pamphlet by T. C. Foley, *The Pace That Kills* (price one shilling), published by the Pedestrians Association, the advocacy group which supported the rights of people traveling on foot on British thoroughfares, opened with the following observation:

> In 1830 a distinguished British statesman, William Huskisson, then President of the Board of Trade, was knocked down and killed by a railway engine at the ceremonial opening of a new track between Manchester and Liverpool. This dramatic demonstration of the danger to life and limb of the new form of locomotion shocked the country and the lesson was not lost. Railway trains were compelled by law to run on private tracks from which the public was excluded. . . . It is interesting to speculate what the effect on the evolution of the motor car would have been, if Mr. Gladstone in the Nineties, had been killed at a demonstration of one of the new "horseless carriages." Would the new method of locomotion have been banned from the public highway and motorists forced to build private tracks?[23]

The use of the public way by any kind of vehicle is a right granted implicitly by the state; this is the logic underlying the state's assumption of its role in policing traffic. In Britain as elsewhere, the national legislation on automobiles did mediate between the different interests of road users—the private motorists versus the carriage drivers, whose horses were now likely to be frightened, the private drivers versus the drivers of omnibuses, trams, and trains, hauliers and drivers of wagons, farmers and drivers of livestock, and all of these versus pedestrians.[24] With the Motor Car Act that came into effect in the United Kingdom on the first day of 1904, replacing the

Locomotives on Highways Act of 1896, the state, in a move which would become characteristic, offered private drivers the incentive of speed as it imposed controls and increased regulatory oversight. The speed limit was increased from fourteen to twenty miles per hour, while from now on all cars were required to be registered, for a one-pound fee, and all drivers needed a driver's license, to cost five shillings. The next full-dress piece of motoring legislation did not come until 1930, when, after massive lobbying by the Automobile Association, the minister for transport Herbert Morrison offered to put the nation's trust in "decent motorists" and removed the speed limit for cars altogether. At the same time, third-party insurance was made compulsory; insurance had been demanded in Sweden since 1918.[25] In 1934 a new Traffic Act reintroduced a speed limit of thirty miles per hour in "built-up areas," made mandatory a driving test, and called for pedestrian crossings. Local authorities could criminalize crossing on foot outside selected crossing points. This flurry of legislation in the decade before World War II followed the full-scale national collection of road accident statistics and data on road use in Britain, which began in 1926.

Traffic laws tried to control speeds; bit by bit they also extended the reach of the bureaucratic and panoptic state. The roles and functions of national police forces were profoundly altered by the emergence of mass automobile traffic. In Britain in the years of the twenty-mile-per-hour speed limit, police set up "speed traps." The Automobile Association was founded in 1905 partly to foil the police by employing relays of "road scouts." Police were employed to direct traffic at busy junctions before the invention of reliable traffic lights. It was partly the policemen's dislike of confronting the new masses of middle-class drivers with the news that their speeds were breaking the law which led to the abandonment of the speed limit in Britain in 1930. Between July and December 1928, for example, the British police dealt with 114,541 traffic offenses.[26] After 1937 the government instituted a corps of "courtesy cops" who were to advise rather than arrest motorists. The Department of Transport cooperated with the Automobile Association, the National Safety First Association (a private organization financed by "motoring interests"), the Pedestrians Association, and the BBC to produce educational films to drill users in proper road behavior. All these moves inserted the police more tangibly into the fabric of ordinary citizens' lives. Driving, almost more than any other activity ordinarily engaged in by the citizens of developed nations in the early twentieth century, provided multiple opportunities both for evading and for soliciting the attention of

the police. The road became the arena in which the bourgeois citizen continually enacted a drama of her confrontation with the state's power, as held and exercised by the police. The state as repressive apparatus displayed itself to its bourgeoisie every day in its role as policer of traffic. Virilio, who insists that this had been the state's raison d'être since it evolved from the city-state, sees his vision come true: "the state as traffic cop."

This new visibility of the police in everyday life was lampooned in the Keystone Cops comedies and pored over more ambiguously in the thousands of police chases that punctuate newsstand thrillers and B movies. It was paralleled in all countries by a strong push for the national standardization of traffic rules and nationally mandated systems of road signage. Early in the century, locally produced signs were common, including the "horror signs" which displayed images of skulls or the grim reaper before dangerous curves on American roads. In 1925 a standardized national signage was decreed in the United States, developed by the Joint Board of Interstate Highways and approved by the secretary of agriculture. The federal highway acts of 1916, 1921, and later offered federal support to highway building and demanded in return that a national highway designation system replace the older "Trail Markings" scheme. Soon the six-pointed shield with the letters "U.S." (southern states had objected to "U.S.A.") and a number replaced route names such as Lakes to the Sea Highway, the Keystone Trail, and the White Horse Trail.[27] Throughout Europe too, systems of uniform national signage were imposed, and national codes of road conduct were enforced, often, as in Britain, against the wishes of local councils which had set up their own more stringent rules. This successful push for national uniformity in signs and rules was followed by the first stage of the building of massive concrete freeways. The first was the Autobahn system in Germany, a system of grand modernist behemoths which featured a nationally uniform system of signage, the better to direct the citizen at speed. These roads, wherever built, were unrelenting advertisements for the state's power. In the first thirty years of the motorcar, national road systems were reconfigured into a numbered system of state control where the citizen as speeder, whether as driver approaching a stop sign or as reader of a freeway exit sign, was hailed with a new relentlessness and a new intensity of interdiction, aimed at controlling the smoothness of every citizen's speed. This was a newly streamlined front for the state to display its power. And all of it was put in place in the name of preventing road accidents, curbing speeding, and making the roads and their traffic systems safer for all users.

This system marks a major front for the state's expansion of its power into the everyday lives of its citizens in the twentieth century. It was extraordinarily successful as an ideology, that is, if we take ideology, as Louis Althusser defined it, to mean the exercise of power that is so successful that it is not noticed or, when it is, appears utterly natural. In other words, the state's accession to a huge new network of traffic management has seldom in the fullest sense been considered politically. Between 1910 and 1930, every regime and political system, whether communist Russia, fascist Germany and Italy, or the Western democracies, rapidly developed national and parallel systems of traffic control. True, Mussolini's Italy even went so far as to dictate on which side of the street its citizens could walk in a given direction; yet the British government in 1939 proposed to copy this by teaching children to walk only on the left-hand side of pavement (it was opposed by the British Association of Head Teachers on the grounds that it was an attempt to "Hitlerize the British public"). Hitler's Autobahns were admired everywhere, but especially in the United States; a deputation from the American Bureau of Public Roads, one of a number of national delegations given a tour of the Reichsautobahnen by the German inspector of roads in 1937, praised the German "national public roads" as wonderful examples of the best modern road building and returned with numerous photographs that can still be seen in the U.S. National Archives. Bureaucrats were very aware of the self- and national glorification uses of Hitler's modernist engineering masterpieces, but their use in advanced traffic management was praised and acknowledged as necessary everywhere, regardless of ideology. Traffic, the car, and speed itself were to be kept out of politics.

Kept below the level of the state's politics, but ever more extensively micromanaged by national bureaucracies: this contradiction was made possible because each state could, on the traffic issue, present itself not only as the champion of smooth traffic flow but also as the preventer of "reckless driving" and hence of accidents. The state, through the police, was seen on the roads as the protector of each citizen's everyday well-being. Moreover, the state could represent itself as the assuager of each citizen's everyday fear. In the postwar years and especially since the 1960s, when social historians described the regulation of the motorcar by the state, they read this regulation as political only to the extent that in their account, the state apparatus juggled the demands of multiple competing stakeholders. These were, first, the car manufacturers, dealers, and the like who in Brit-

ain were known as the "motoring interests" and in the United States came to be known in shorthand as "Detroit"; followed by the new mass of their customers, the automobile owners, represented by groups such as the formidable Automobile Association, aided in Britain by the more aristocratic Royal Automobile Club; and last, those without cars, represented in Britain by the hapless but tenacious Pedestrians Association. Although historians differ, most agree that the extraordinary influence of the "motoring interests" in forestalling safety improvements and building more dangerous (because faster) cars effectively tied governments' hands. They take this line because it explains the central phenomenon on which they all concur: the general ineffectiveness of government safety programs. By 1909 over one thousand people had been killed by cars in Britain (by December 1909 the figure had reached 1,070); in the twenties, with many more cars now on the roads, the average death toll *every year* was 4,121; for the thirties, this figure had leaped to 6,640.[28] And hundreds of thousands were annually maimed or injured: 208,801 people were reported killed or injured on the roads of Britain in 1931.[29] Yet the stakeholder model, while accounting for the states' extreme caution in introducing national schemes of traffic management and their consequent inability to prevent or even moderate the mounting toll of death and destruction on the roads, cannot fully come to grips with the reasons why citizens (of all interests) seemed largely to accept — or taught themselves to accept — the huge numbers killed or injured.

Sean O'Connell, writing in 1998, put this problem as follows:

> In 1993 the *Guardian*'s educational supplement featured a story on the history of road safety. Its opening sentence was striking: "More than half a million people have been killed on Britain's roads this century, but that figure would be far worse were it not for the many road-safety measures that have accompanied the history of the motor car." It is difficult to imagine a half a million deaths from any other cause being treated in such a casual manner.[30]

The stakeholder model leads to the benign view of government efforts that is followed in the *Guardian* article: bureaucratic efforts are seen as Fabian reforms effected in the face of entrenched stonewallers and whining pedestrians. Underlining the overwhelming casualness of the reaction to the numbers killed, however, we might see the state's intervention instead as its nuanced response to its citizens' blasé attitude. The state, if not actually inciting people to the dangers of speed, mirrored the blasé attitude of its

citizens to accidents in formulating its discourse on the new car culture. The state's discourse had as its end result, it is true, a series of interdictions relating to drivers and to all road users. To formulate these, it had to develop a sense of the dangers it would prevent. In doing so, the state came to rely on increasingly sophisticated and comprehensive ranges of figures — in short, on statistics. In other words, the state's discursive function in relation to car crashes was to see them collectively, en masse, and, in doing so, to turn them into numbers, to make of them a mass of data that could be tabulated and analyzed. It then used the findings based on this analysis to generate changes and refinements to the highway safety code, passing laws that if followed were supposed to forestall accidents. Or rather, in the language of the statistics on which they were based, their purpose was to lower the accident rates. Next, governments used their statistical findings to launch educational campaigns, aimed especially at children, to encourage road safety and prevent accidents. All of this constituted a chain of related discourses around the car crash — stretching from the policeman's initial report all the way to the road safety propaganda film — that avoided being directly about it. In seeing each accident as one of many, in collectivizing the crash, the state also ruthlessly abstracted it, failed to take into account the specificity of the particular suffering it caused, and rendered it instead as part of a numerical tabulation.

As early as 1859, John Stuart Mill had written: "By virtue of its superior intelligence gathering and information processing capacities, there is a distinct role for the central state acquired in a liberal society over and above both local and individual claims to autonomy."[31] In all the nation-states which were developing their modern form in the nineteenth century, the increasingly sophisticated collection and collation of statistics played an integral role. In Britain in particular, where the Board of Trade, which dealt with economic statistics, and the General Register Office (GRO), which dealt with social statistics, were separate entities, the use of statistical information to generate narratives which could be used for the amelioration of social problems became increasingly commonplace from 1837 onward. The GRO effectively created a national network of the hitherto independent Poor Law Unions, which had dealt with poverty in each county, in the process creating a picture of the health of the whole nation's subjects. Allied to the public health movement, under the direction of a doctor, William Farr, from 1837 to 1880, the GRO determined the national average death rate to be twenty-three per thousand and, through an 1848 public health

law, demanded that districts with a rate above that number publish health tables and plan sanitation reforms. This created among Poor Law districts a national death rate competition. By the 1850s, Farr calculated that the average death rate for the healthiest regions was seventeen per thousand.[32] The GRO health tables in "classified diseases" gave precedence to endemic or epidemic illnesses that could most readily be prevented: this was statistics at the service of epidemiology, and its professed purpose was mitigation and prevention. The national register of births, marriages, and deaths, by assessing all aspects of morbidity, became, in the absence of a national policy on poverty or on health, an effective tool in arousing interest in the scandal of high morbidity rates, and thus in influencing legislation which made the proposals for mitigation into law. It was this particular paradigm of the collection, collation, and public use of national statistics, already entrenched as an essential guarantor of each citizen's identity (this was also the office which issued birth certificates) and a key component of the beneficial work of government, that was adopted once death by car crash began to show up in the morbidity tables after 1896.

This paradigm for the use of statistics, and for the generation of government policy which resulted in legislation, made for a discourse which obliquely referred to the car crash rather than representing it directly, sapping its horrific immediacy to confer on it a sense of general, national significance. "The new form of universal accountancy isolated from the tissue of events just those factors that could be judged on an impersonal, quantitative scale. Counting numbers began here and in the end numbers alone counted," wrote Lewis Mumford in *The Myth of the Machine*.[33] By rendering any given crash as a statistic, it abstracted it, turning it into a number to be tabulated and thus ignoring the particularity of the event itself and of its specific impacts on the victims. By collating the crash as a number into a specific narrative from the Victorian era, which considered morbidity statistics primarily as a tool in reformist national policymaking, it inducted that data into particular narrative assumptions of its own. In that narrative, morbidity figures collated into statistics generated numbers which then might well point up an excessive concentration of a given problem, an excess which, more or less undetectable before the numbers gathering, could now be read as scandalous, the presumption being that reforms could then be put in place to lower the figures.

When car crash morbidity numbers were fed into this system and subjected to this logic, certain strange effects ensued. The logic of the devel-

oping social science of medical epidemiology—which measured the incidence of infectious diseases—might not necessarily be that best suited to collating car crash statistics. For example, in the case of car crashes, the horror is evident, in the first instance, in the very spectacle of the crash itself and needs no numerical tabulation to read it as scandalous. Government policy documents, however, following the reformist statistical model, only read the collated numbers themselves as scandalous, so that the complaint went, for example, in British newspaper campaigns in the 1930s, that the number of deaths—seven thousand per year—was too high. This way of thinking on the part of policymakers appears so prosaic as to be inevitable; the point is not that it is defective but that, as a discourse on the car crash, it works to cover over the specific horror even as it means well, and supposes that plans will be developed to ameliorate the possibility of that horror occurring again.

To talk of car crashes in terms of statistics, to read them epidemiologically, is to fail to see how their specific horror can affect us, and moreover to assume that they can be prevented much as one prevents an infectious disease. In the early twentieth century, both sea and air traffic saw accidents whose specific horror did transfix to the point where policy was changed: consider the awe-struck sensationalism of the newspaper coverage of the *General Slocum* disaster in New York Harbor in 1904 and of the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912. In the case of the new but soon-to-be-prosaic horror of the car crash, the statistical reading on the epidemiological model, abstracting the horror while it tries to register the cumulative force of all accidents considered as one scandal, gives us numbers which can indeed shock, but shock at the level of rational calculation rather than at that of visceral emotion. Key was the presumed impact of the rapidly expanding mass media of the period: it was as if it was assumed that no one crash could be shown as shocking enough. To describe the crash in statistical terms was to collude in this assumption that the citizen was not sensitive enough to be transfixed by a single car crash.

The effect of reading the car crash as a statistic, however, goes beyond this primary stage of abstraction. It implies that the car crash has significance only in relation to other crashes. The phenomenological valence of any single crash is eroded; it regains meaning only when crashes are seen en masse. In other words, it is only as *evidence* that the crash can be granted meaning. And this is evidence of a proposition which invariably, whether implicitly or explicitly, has been theorized in advance. Mary Poovey, in her

astonishingly rich book *A History of the Modern Fact*, which is, as she describes it, a prehistory of statistics, gives much play to statistics' claim to access a pure, untheorized knowledge—after all, statistical hypotheses are ostensibly based not on ideologically tainted theories but on collated "raw" data. She demonstrates the illusory quality of such claims: both the ways in which the information is collected and the means by which it is collated to generate numbers imply the statisticians' assumptions regarding cause, pattern, and outcome.[34] In this light, the figures on car crashes turn out not to be "raw" data at all. They are apparently abstract numbers generated by assumptions implicitly held in advance, assumptions, for example, about the reasons the crash occurred. Such assumptions in turn were used to construct lists which police arriving on the crash scene were expected to tick off. The statistics-based official discourse of the crash not only abstracts the particularity of any given incident but both precedes and follows its official notation with a host of implied and unstated assumptions about the crash's meaning.

If the gift of speed in the world of consumer culture was an offer to the nominally independent democratic consumer-citizen to have access to unmediated experience, to a bodily sensation that went beyond the simulative joys of consumption, and if the crash, as a kind of degree zero and guarantee of the actuality of that experience, was the ultimate proof of its reality, then it might seem remarkable that the state's discourse of the crash is so hedged with assumptions and leavened by abstracting statistical language. Yet if consumer cultures, through the media and especially through cinema, need to teach their audiences to laugh at the crash, then the state could do no less than reassure its citizens that the phenomenon of the crash could be made to disappear through state action carried out on the lines used to tackle endemic social ills. This conveniently shifted responsibility away from drivers; most educational material on the matter of road safety in Britain, for example, was directed at pedestrians, especially at children. It allowed the driver to think of the crash as evidence of a mass phenomenon that would be dealt with at a national level, so that she would herself be free to enjoy the pleasure of the speed that might well have caused the crash, as a personal, private, and intimate thrill.

This division, which rendered speed as a private pleasure but implied that the crash was a public issue (and, in the spirit of its epidemiological reading, an "accident" like a disease one might contact), was thoroughly reinforced by another bureaucratic apparatus which grew up around the

crash — that of car insurance. The earliest motoring legislation had tackled the issue of accident liability; this was soon superseded by the requirement for mandatory insurance — including so-called third-party insurance. Car insurance marked an advance in the history of insurance generally — an extremely interesting form of economic speculation — in that here more than ever what was being insured against was the potentially reckless behavior of the motorist rather than the potential damage to, or loss of, property or even life. All new technologies, especially new technologies of transportation, involve the possibility of new kinds of accidents, and new forms of insurance arise to speculate on them. The imbrication of economic speculation in technology's dangers, the insurers' insistence that a monetary value can be placed on life and limb, and the willingness to tacitly insure reckless behavior reached an intensity with car insurance such that the driver-speeder is implicitly guaranteed that he can relinquish much of a sense of personal liability for his own actions while driving, however grim the consequences. This insurance then works something like credit in the consumption economy: it ensures (if falsely) that the driver, like the consumer, can have gratification without consequences and without more than minimal payment. Insurance against the consequences of personal behavior means that one has to worry all the less as one races into the pleasures of speed. It allows the speeder to be prudent and irresponsible at once, and by placing a monetary value on human life, it offers to cover liability at a level of which consumer culture is cognizant.

The state's statistical discourse of the crash, along with its endorsement and legal requirement of insurance and thus of the mentality that accompanied it, achieved the following: it averted the driver's imagination from the possibility of crashing and assured her that if the worst happened, liability had been taken care of in advance. In effect, this discursive regime mitigated, in advance, the actuality of the crash's horror. More, it showed driving as an activity that could be imagined in the kinds of narrative terms necessary to describe gambling — except that in driving, the crash replaces the prize. Walter Benjamin has written, in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," on the uncanny appropriateness of gambling, and a gambling-based model of existence, for modern life.[35] Benjamin reads gambling, a characteristic behavior of nineteenth-century bourgeois life, as part of a constellation of everyday practices that range from monotonous factory work to flânerie to the reception of random shocks in the metropolis:

> The latter to be sure (factory work) lacks any touch of the adventure of the mirage that lures the gambler. But it certainly does not lack the futility, the emptiness, the inability to complete something which is inherent in the activity of a wage-slave in a factory. Gambling even contains the workman's gesture that is produced by the automatic operation, for there can be no game without the quick movement of the hand by which the stake is put down or the card is picked up. The jolt in the movement of the machine is like the so-called *coup* in a game of chance.[36]

The jolt, the *coup*, the car crash. Benjamin's poignant characterization of modern gambling as a mild utopian gesture on the part of wage slaves, a doomed bid to escape the repetitive tedium of modern life, comes grimly true when the jolt of the machine turns out to be the crash of the automobile. Benjamin dreams that the Baudelairean flâneur, the modernist pedestrian, will infer the truth of the machine's jolt and its effect on the worker. But when the flâneur becomes a driver, and the jolt becomes the car crash, then the modern citizen as machine operator is a gambler without engaging in the leisured gambling of the casino or bar: she gambles through driving in a kind of Russian roulette where she bids against the odds on her own life.

Gambling as escapism gets inducted in modernity into the humdrum grind; it becomes, in Benjamin's phrase, very much the same kind of pleasure that "the worker 'experiences' at his machine."[37] When the citizen, through driving, is granted the possibility of some such experience, in a world where pleasure is more and more removed from experience and repackaged to be sold back to the consumer as simulation, and where the incitement strategies of look-but-don't-touch are increasingly present, the authenticity of fast driving as a real experience is fully guaranteed when the gambling prize becomes one's own death or a license to kill. Yet, as Benjamin explains in his meditation on gambling and machine work, the possibility of truly imagining this prize in its reality is annulled in advance because to work — or better, to drive — the machine offers experience only as a manically alert expenditure of physical energy:

> There is a lithograph by Senefelder which represents a gambling club. Not one of those depicted is pursuing the game in the appropriate fashion. Each man is dominated by an emotion: one shows unrestrained joy, another, distrust of his partner, a third, dull despair, a fourth evidences

> belligerence; another is getting ready to depart from the world. All those modes of conduct share a concealed characteristic: the figures presented show us how the mechanism to which the participants in a game of chance entrust themselves seizes them body and soul, so that even in their private sphere, and no matter how agitated they may be, they are capable only of a reflex action.[38]

Again, one is struck by how readily Benjamin's description of gambling can be applied to fast driving. In driving, where the calibration of the reflex action is precisely what is demanded, the gambling reflex becomes, as it were, the guiding principle of action and reaction. This is machine repetitiveness, as on the assembly line, but with its monotony punctuated by the possibility of the crash, and thus the need for the user's gambling reflex, which "seizes her body and soul." Driving, like gambling, much more than factory work, whose monotony is sustained by the dependability of its repetitiveness, races forward as the characteristic behavior of late modernity. And the protocols for energy management in this behavior are reinforced — and mirrored — in the state's discourse of the car crash. With its focus on accident figures and mandatory insurance to absorb liability, the state oversees this lottery.

At the same time, reading Benjamin on gambling reminds us that the car crash, in a modern world where the driver replaced the flâneur, blew the more sedate world of leisured flânerie, along with Simmel's version of urban shock and modernist anomie, wide open. Once the anomie-ravaged milieu of Prufrock or Kafka's *The Trial* or even Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, with their more or less aimless pedestrian searchers, had been superseded by the ever-alert, energy-dispensing, eye-darting, and life-gambling driver of the automobile, the old shocks that had seemed so new and unexpected to the flâneur — the jostling in the crowd, the love-at-last-sight of unexpected eye contact, the noises of the street — were now as nothing compared to the gruesome jolt of the car crash. The stakes for shock had been raised exponentially. They had now reached the point where the shock was not a jolt of limb or — as in the modernist artwork — of sensory perception but one involving the fate of a life. This shock came of a force of violence very much beyond the possibilities of human power alone. And it was this in the broadest sense to which the state reacted with its emollient discourse of statistics. The death by car crash — the ultimate guarantee that speed really was a new pleasure, that is, a new physical and emotional ex-

perience—did not need to be prevented (for its constant reappearance as horrid shock was necessary to guarantee the true experientiality of speed) but rather needed to be *turned away from* at the final moment, lest its reality prove so overpoweringly fearful that the pleasure of speed itself would be forgone. Incited to thrill to the car chase and laugh at the car crash in film, and trained by the state to think of the crash as having mostly statistical significance, the modernist subject as driver, the energized gambler, could overcome the old languors of anomie as she readied for the reflex actions that speed demanded. Modernist boredom in the face of anomie could become late-modernist adrenaline-fueled excitement as one gambled against the fatal horror of the car crash.

In this way the gambling, super-shocking culture of the crash is symptomatic of a changed logistics of the late-modernist subject. Reading Benjamin on gambling, one notes a curious turn on the matter of class, from the opening attention to the working-class "wage slave" and his experience on the assembly line (itself, note, pioneered by Henry Ford to enable mass automobile production) to the middle class, who, as Benjamin points out, took up in the nineteenth century the gambling habit that had in the eighteenth century been an aristocratic pastime. This attention to the middle class is even more apt when considering car culture. The difference between the working-class assembly line mechanic and the gambler, even when the worker feels the jolt which corresponds to the coup experienced by the gamblers, is that the bourgeois gambler has an illusion at any rate of choice of action and reaction. The gambling game, in valorizing unpredictability, offers a setting in which the behavior of the free citizen, making choices and reacting freely to unpredictable outcomes, is enacted *in parvum*. In the relation between driving and crashing, what in the case of gambling had been enacted in a faintly disreputable backroom game now got introduced into the realm of real, everyday life and the quotidian necessities of human movement. This presumption of individual freedom of action and reaction, fundamental to the human subject's relation to the machine in the case of driving a car, is associated with the growing presumption, in the twentieth century, especially in the United States, that everyone was middle-class. (This idea was often fostered, again, by figures on mass car ownership.) There is a sense, nevertheless, in which this diffident, new middle-class subject could not, in driving, have his presumption of freedom contained either by the utopian spectacle of comedy in the face of the disaster or by the state's emollient discourse of warnings, prohibitions, speed limits, and

mandatory insurance. The reaches of this independence, even in the face of the fear of the crash, the fear of the possibility of dying, or the fear of killing others, begged to be explored. It is this minor, sporadic, and at times almost underground, covert exploration of the car crash, trying not necessarily to confront it directly but rather to understand its possibilities and consequences for the individuals affected by it, that we will now examine.

Crash Temptations

"Which driver is not tempted, merely by the power of his engine, to wipe out the vermin of the street, pedestrians, children and cyclists?," asks Theodor Adorno, with fearful irony, in *Minima Moralia*.[39] It was left to philosophers and novelists, it seems, to confront the ferocious quality of driving laid bare in the crash. Among others, talk of car driving and car crashing as symptomatic of an alteration in assumptions regarding late modernist subjectivity finds voice, again, in Virginia Woolf, who, as we have seen in *Mrs. Dalloway*, showed such an apprehension in the face of the ominous motorcar and its pistol shot snorting. In *Orlando*, a *jeu-d'esprit* of a novel and one of the twentieth century's most flamboyant testimonies to the capacity of the human subject to change character repeatedly, Woolf supplies one of the most vivid accounts of dangerous driving yet written:

> After twenty minutes the body and mind were like scraps of torn paper tumbling from a sack, and indeed, the process of motoring fast out of London so much resembles the chopping up small of body and mind, which precedes unconsciousness and perhaps death itself, that it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment.[40]

An arresting passage: starting from a presumption that driving is unsettling and dangerous, it energizes itself first with a simile of violence done to paper, and then with one of violence done to the body, as a prelude to announcing another dissipation of comprehensible subjecthood. (Notably the first violence here seems close to a violence done to a text—perhaps to the text of *Orlando* itself.) What the passage shows, as it piles on the comparisons to violence before it feels free to mention "death itself," is that the crash is imaginatively inseparable from the experience of driving, and that the violence of the presumptive possible crash imbues in advance the

experience of all driving. If to drive is to gamble against the odds of dying, then this driving will inevitably be violent, and, moreover, experienced as a species of violence to the self. Woolf's wondering if, under the onslaught of this relentless violence, Orlando could be said even to exist is the counterpoint to Walter Benjamin's observation before the Senefelder lithograph of the demented gamblers who, "[seized] body and soul . . . no matter how agitated they may be, . . . are capable only of a reflex action." Capable only of reflexes, with bodies, as it were, chopped small: this driving, this experience of the only new pleasure of modernity, needs too to flirt with a death impulse. Strikingly, this extraordinarily glum anatomy of speed pleasure is couched in a tone overwrought enough that one suspects exaggeration, or at least a cool twenties flippancy about the idea of it all. It is as if here is a highbrow version of the early film comedies that laughed at the spectacle of the car crash; in neither case are the dolors of modernist anomie deemed adequate to elucidate this new and visceral horror. The anomie-laden text lamented the weight of a drab and mass-market existence; the texts of driving and crashing registered the torments and the lightness of a pleasure beyond it. For all the stress registered by a text such as that of Woolf, her driving-writing in the face of the crash is also a dream of getting beyond subjectivity as we know it, if not a dream of extinction.

In texts that drew nearer the crash, therefore, a grim lightness is almost invariably the counterpoint to a nausea-inducing terror. And this apparently involuntary comedy is again and again the symptom of a dream of the disappearance of the subject, at least as she was imagined at the time. Woolf's wondering if, after this violent motoring, Orlando can be said to "exist at all," finds its expression, in turn, in the first photographs of crashes that began to be published occasionally in newspapers. These first journalistic photographs of crashes are extraordinarily uncanny, because while they certainly render the effects of the car crash vivid in ways that, for example, the movies had never allowed, they also almost always insist on showing an empty crushed car. These are photographs of crashes without the victims—who were always, it seems, removed before the published photographs were taken. Characteristic is a photo of a collision between a train and an automobile in Branchville, Maryland, in the early 1930s, taken by a photographer for the *Baltimore Sun* (figure 21).[41] Photographs like this one, which frequently offer a side view of the shattered and crushed car and little more, may be read as the grim counterparts to standard early car advertisements,

FIGURE 21. Collision of a car and train in Branchville, early 1930s, photographed for the *Baltimore Sun*. Reproduced by permission from William Kaszynski, *The American Highway: The History and Culture of Roads in the United States* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 2.

which similarly feature only the car itself from the same angle, but with all parts shining and intact. The crash photo, echoing the advertisement for the car, thus functions in the first place as a lament for the crushed technological wonder. (These photos appeared in papers that also solicited automobile advertising.) At the same time, the side view, usually with the door falling away, meant that the photo's focus, the point most welcoming of the light of the cameraman's flashbulb, was the empty driver's seat of the car. The empty front seat, eloquent witness to the removed dead or wounded, gives us a glimpse of (possible) death as an absence of the (troublesome) human subject. The effect of this journalistic censorship, justified by concerns for victims' or readers' sensibilities, was to make one wonder whether, as in Woolf's formulation, the driver "exist[ed] at all." It is not that human subjects are refused entry to the photograph: more often than not they stand, staring at the camera, from each side of the car, framing the view. And it is these witnesses, standing inside the photo, voyeurs on our behalf, staring, however, not at the empty seat but back at us, who introduce the comedy, for often they are either awkwardly self-conscious or, as here, grotesquely eager merely to be included in the photograph. Testament to the ineffectuality of the human subject before the violent impact of the machine, their peripheral presence prevents us from reading the wrecked metal wholly tragically. Again, even in these throwaway images, the dream of the absent body and the off-key comic note are the signatures of the apparently close-up spectacle of the car crash.

If we read the most famous depiction of a crash in the fiction of the twenties, the crash which kills Myrtle Wilson in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), against the uncanny absence which bedevils these photographs, we see that what the novel achieves is to turn attention away from an absent victim and bring it around to the absent perpetrator. The moral tone of the novel, and of its representation of the crash as a significant illustration of the behavior it finds wanting, suggests that any dream of the absence of the victim is merely the inverse of the impulse to disavow the liability (and hence, by inference, the full subjectivity) of the perpetrator. In this crash it is the perpetrator, not the victim, who is absent. The extensive account of the crash is told from the point of view of the novel's narrator, who happens on the scene: it is as if one of the onlookers who so strangely frame the newspaper crash photographs described what happened. The narrator then occupies a place akin to that of the policeman who has also arrived, which

reminds us that the account of this incident resembles in its narrative trajectory the police procedural, working (like much of the novel) as an apparently haphazard collation of fragments of information which it processes as circumstantial evidence. At the center of these circumstantial shards of the story of the accident there is unequivocally the body of a human subject with a name — Myrtle Wilson — and a list of telling, intimate details:

> Michaelis and this man reached her first, but when they had torn open her shirtwaist, still damp with perspiration, they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long.[42]

Here the lurid note evokes the sentimental pulp thriller. Compounded on a prior mention of "her thick dark blood [mingled] with the dust," it hits its stride in the anomalous details about breast and mouth: a hint of crash pornography. These details insist on the vividness of a female subjectivity now extinguished. The novel flashes them before us with a whiff of yellow-journalism prurience: it relishes their luridness. The flapping breast — signifying what, the reader may ask? — is exposed pornographically, as if the transgressive display of Myrtle's womanhood is needed to deny the reader the impulse to hide or erase the reality of her dead, crash-smashed body. Only Gatsby himself, at that point presumably the driver of the car that hit her, shows the kind of squeamishness evidenced in contemporary crash photographs when he refuses, later, to hear the narrator's account of her injuries: "'Don't tell me, old sport.' He winced." His wince, his refusal to see the truth of the crash victim's wounds, is implicitly read as part and parcel of the overall duplicity that has led to his downfall. Detailing the particulars of Myrtle's dead body with a few nine-penny-thriller-influenced details, at a time when newspaper photographs turned away, wincing, from the horror of crash wounds, the novel effectively employs this crash as trope of the foolhardy willful deception that brings Gatsby to his end.

Further, the intense focus on the specific materiality of the victim through the pornographic eye on body parts serves as contrast to the ghostly nonpresence of the perpetrator. This figure exists as something to be grasped only at the end of a series of investigations, all lurking one beyond the other, with the "death car," implicitly driverless, in the foreground:

> The "death car" as the newspapers called it, didn't stop; it came out of the gathering darkness, wavered tragically for a moment, and then disappeared around the next bend. Michaelis wasn't even sure of its color—he told the first policeman that it was light green.[43]

This "death car"—evocative of that urban myth of the driverless car that speeds around on a killing spree and even haunts Woolf's pistol shot limousine, with its ghostly passenger at the gray curtain, in *Mrs. Dalloway*—encapsulates the other dream of the crash: that it is always an accident, an incident for which no one is liable. Hidden by the "death car" is, first, the "witness" car, which stops, its driver rushing to the scene, then (after the policeman questions the narrator-sleuths) Gatsby, and then (after the narrator confronts Gatsby), none other than Daisy, who apparently was really driving the car. This all serves to fix blame, but only in a desultory and uncertain manner; for a start, Gatsby may be lying. Once we accept this possibility, then a blame game that fans out over all involved suggests itself. Gatsby, after all, is to blame too, as he and Daisy were driving drunk after their day in the city, and he certainly did not insist that they stop at the scene. Or Myrtle's husband may be to blame, as he had fought with her and locked her in a room; in rushing to escape, she had run on to the road. Or the crowded state of the road itself might be to blame, or the fact that the repair shop was so close to the roadside. The point of this ever wider distribution of possible blame is that it increasingly robs one person—Daisy, for example—of liability. Instead it vacillates to the point where the sense of responsibility for the crash remains unspoken; it will indeed be taken by all involved as an accident. What is the effect of this on the reader's sense of Daisy? Implicitly what is presented is one woman snuffing out, without any apparent concern, the life of another. The lurid particularity with which the novel displays the victim before us contrasts with the grim and funereal uncertainty that frames Daisy as she is seen after the crash. Nick Carraway, the narrator, discusses her with Gatsby, sees her through a curtained window sitting opposite Tom, her attitude unclear ("They weren't happy . . . and yet they weren't unhappy either") and a strange affectlessness hovering over it all. This is reiterated when Gatsby is described meeting Daisy again: "She had vanished into her rich house, into her rich full life, leaving Gatsby—nothing." Her refusal of her role as the perpetrator of the crash corresponds to her refusal of an interesting life with Gatsby. It marks her refusal, in the terms set by the novel, of a heroic or authentic subjecthood.

Throughout *The Great Gatsby*, as in a number of other of Fitzgerald's fictions, driving is equated with the progress of a possibly valid and authentic life. Here is the equivalence of *vif-vitesse* strewn across the framework of a novel's plotline. The road between West Egg and New York, between the glamour of the resort and the secrets and license of the city, becomes the space in the novel where truths might be expected to emerge. The yellow car becomes an extension of Gatsby, his flamboyant signature: it bespeaks the grandiloquence and vulgarity of his existence. In this glittery milieu, the hit-and-run moment, the refusal of Gatsby and Daisy to accept that they have killed another, marks a chilling denouement: a high mark of the implied code through which the novel would have us judge the characters' actions. In the murkiness of the "hit and run" may be discerned final evidence of the characters' callousness, especially that of Daisy. Nevertheless, if for Fitzgerald, *vif* equals *vitesse*, then the crash (even if it does not halt the speed at that very moment) matters less as a death (of Myrtle) than in its signification of the disintegration of the Gatsbian subjectivity that the text has taught us to love. Remember that *Gatsby*, quite as much as Woolf's *Orlando*, which was published three years later, is a novel about a succession of assumed roles and the possibility of performing them. In the case of *The Great Gatsby* the novel in fact derealizes that crash in order to subsume it to a symbolic order set up to implicitly critique a too-impudent, because too flamboyant, role-play. The crash, like the wild driving in *Orlando*, is given little meaning in itself; rather, the novel subsumes the crash's horror within an ultimately moral—say, Nietzschean—tale of the heroic endeavor of one person's will to subjectivity. Woolf approached the violence of driving; Fitzgerald gets up close to the fatal violence of the car crash. "I felt the bump," says Gatsby, of the collision. The car crash in *Gatsby* gets derealized, to be symbolic, symbolizing a kind of obliteration of subjecthood—but the subjecthood in question is that of the motorist-perpetrators. It is apt, therefore, that the perpetrator should be nebulous; the brutal body-part images of the victim, her torn, flapping breast and bloody mouth, remain gratuitous.

Closing in on speed's force and on the crash, then drawing back, both of these texts go far beyond the statistical concision generated by official government crash discourse, and both operate above (but not far above) the humor that had characterized crash depictions in the first years of motoring. It is difficult today, however, not to laugh at the vehemence of the most close-

up and Nietzschean confrontation with the crash from the early days of the automobile, the famous crash wish that opens Filippo Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto. Marinetti too is in the business of subject making, but instead of reading the crash, close-up, as "the bump" of a disintegrating subjectivity, he grasps its violence as a sacramental opportunity for subjective renewal. Marinetti, like Woolf, knows the car's violence: "I stretched out in my car as a corpse on a bier, but revived under the steering wheel, a guillotine blade that threatened my stomach."[44] This revival is re-performed in his account of the inevitable crash:

> Their stupid dilemma was blocking my way—damn! Ouch! . . . . I stopped short and to my disgust rolled over into a ditch with my wheels in the air. . . . Oh maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water! Fair factory drain! I gulped down the nourishing sludge; and I remembered the blessed black breast of my Sudanese nurse. . . . When I came up—torn, filthy and stinking—from under the capsized car, I felt the white hot iron of joy pass through my heart.

Here too, twenty years before *Gatsby*, at the point of the car crash attention turns to a woman's breast. Here it spools up from the driver's memory, invoking race (the African), class (the nurse of the bourgeois household), and colonialism (Italy's interest in the Horn of Africa), as well as the psychoanalytically charged dream of an alternative motherhood (an other mother who stands for him in contrast to his own). This whole complex, as Maurizia Boscagli points out, might be expected to be the very memories that the thrusting male subject would repress to validate a narrative in Nietzschean terms. That, instead, he presents the crash as the precipitative event in an act of recovery from his unconscious shows us that Marinetti is willing to grant the crash powers of subject making not quite dreamed of by the novelists writing in English two decades later. Yet this crash, as a shock which, at the very moment it occurred, induces the kind of recollections on which Freud might have pounced, is starred in the manifesto as a whole as the key generator of public-political (even geopolitical) insight rather than private psychological revelation. The nurse and all she represents are set off against the "fair factory"—that is, the technologized West is set in contradistinction to the primitive colony. Marinetti, with his sleight of bombast over memory, wants to revive the politics which scapegoated the colonial as other. This politics, already beginning to lose its sting in much of Europe

as Western imperial self-glorification declined, enjoyed a belated upswing in Italy in the period of Marinetti's notoriety. In the end, his bravura will to enjoy the car crash, his spectacular refusal to be injured by it, is an attempt to juggle the contraries of heterotopic consciousness (Western factory versus colonial "nature") together in his mind as a necessary precondition to enjoying the "hot iron of joy" (of speed, presumably) in a wholly imperial, technological-mechanical world. Marinetti's polemic intensifies the early-twentieth-century display of the crash as comedy; achieving this, he brings into the open the kinds of representational logics unspoken within that grisly comedy. It hardly needs pointing out, however, that surviving the car crash cannot be willed, so that Marinetti builds the fascinations of his manifesto on a fantasy of the crash where victims and perpetrators all emerge unscathed. This is a fantasy so foolish that it reads as comedy, and comedy can hardly sustain such grandiloquence as his. His crash account, with his survival to fight another day, has the burlesque-derived sadism of the Keystone Cops films: "speed gone mad, fandangos of disintegrating flivvers, spraying Keystone Cops to left and right, . . . a ballistic nightmare."[45]

Speed Kills

It was not until a half century later that the crash received a more intense scrutiny. From a new awareness of the carnage on the roads which followed the post–World War II automobile boom, three texts stand out. The first is Ralph Nader's famous, forceful jeremiad *Unsafe at Any Speed*, a sensation in 1965. The second: Godard's stinging, rambling film *Weekend* (1967); here I will speak only of the grandest moment of its satire on car crash culture, the famous eight-minute tracking shot of the cars on a roadway held up by a car crash. Third: J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973). All are products of the cultural moment that the poet Philip Larkin characterized as following the lifting of the "Chatterley ban," that is, the decade in which all that had shocked the readers of the earlier waves of modernism, from Baudelaire to Djuna Barnes, came to lose its sting. The sixties texts raised the barrier of shock to achieve their effects; each still persists in what had come to be seen as the modernist project. They are also complicit in the new savoir-faire, which implied that nothing shocked any longer. Still, their shock value has clung to the reputation of each, and it is the memory of this shock that we must overcome to read cogently their actual accounts of crash culture. This

can be done by exploring how they deploy or overcome the predominant discourses of the car crash developed throughout the century. Coming close to the crash through comedy, through an officialese couched in statistical terms, or through an analysis of the violence of speed—through each of the crash discourses I've so far read—these texts twist earlier strategies of showing to shock us out of our speed fatigue, our apathy to speed's danger. They revamp the original, recalcitrant discourses of the car crash to thrust its reality before us. They unlock the implicit preoccupations of those discourses to unearth new anxieties and dreams about accidentality, liability, the enjoyment of violence, consumption and its relation to violence, and the subject-shattering and remaking possibilities of the crash.

In 1990 J. G. Ballard, writing annotations to his montage novel of 1969, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, notices the repeated references to Ralph Nader in his original text and decides: "His assault on the automobile clearly had me worried. . . . Looking back, one can see that Nader was the first of the eco-puritans, who proliferate now, convinced that everything is bad for us. In fact, too few things are bad for us, and one fears an uncertain future of pious bourgeois certitudes."[46] Earlier, noting that Nader, in the sixties, had "sent a seismic tremor through the mind of the U.S. consumer," Ballard suggested that "every car crash seemed a prayer to Ralph Nader."[47] Ballard's "like a prayer" here is eloquent. What Nader does in *Unsafe at Any Speed* is foster worry and then allay it by showing that it can be transformed into productive outrage. His book is a fascinating intervention in the twentieth-century discussion of the car crash partly because it interweaves the two key discursive modes that had been used up to that point to characterize the crash. In the first place, the book periodically interrupts its argument to offer direct and vivid narratives of crashes. These fit in the genre of direct crash representation, which, as we have seen, in early-twentieth-century versions often turned comic or, in the hands of the more serious modernists, could become the site for a rethinking of subjectivity. In Nader these narratives are delivered with a deadpan factuality intended to induce anxiety and a muted shock. This discursive strand is complemented by the principal, lawyerlike argumentative strand. Here the full apparatus of statistical, official discourse is deployed to generate our outrage. This outrage, predictably, is imagined not as that of the victims of the accidents described but as that of the consumer whose object of consumption—the purchased automobile—has been built with obvious defects. Nader thus hews unceasingly to the logic that, as I've shown, meant that car crashes would

invariably be comic rather than tragic in the early films: that is, he sees the car crash as a betrayal of good consumerism. The effect of pitching his discourse of outrage at this level is a kind of chilly realism: it is as if the modern subject would only effectively be addressed as a buyer, not as a potential victim of shocking violence. It means, however, that the discourse which hopes to put before us the reality of a series of car crashes is always a thesis discourse rather than an attempt at a new realism: the crashes described in the text were always really test crashes to prove the ineffectiveness of the victims' automobiles. The victims are the victims of bad commodities, the perpetrators, the purveyors of those commodities and the enemy, a badly calibrated consumer culture. Nader's vision of an ideal consumerist polis, where the commodity would be optimally safe, all anxiety allayed and all outrage unnecessary, again derealizes the gruesome nature of the crash by rendering its significance in such consumerist terms. But he goes further: he also places the civic discourse of car crashes—the statistical record of crashes, reasons for them, and liabilities, which is centered on the "death rate" or deaths per thousands of miles driven—under the aegis of a consumer imperative. Appropriately, his book's title mimics, and inverts, the sort of phrase that might have been used as an advertising slogan; by paying consumer culture the compliment of blaming it for car crashes, he makes safety marketable; that is, he implies that we can buy our way out of the reality of the car crash. Nader's focus on safety as a commodity attribute is completely justifiable in pragmatic and tactical terms: if the pleasure of speed has been from the start sold, through the sale of the most characteristic of twentieth-century commodities, the automobile, then it is only by articulating a simple ethics of consumer rights that the complacency of the consumer could be punctured and a more demanding kind of buying advocated. Yet this pragmatism succeeds precisely by never allowing the crash to speak for itself. The crashes of *Unsafe at Any Speed* echo the crashes of early Hollywood, and their narratives teeter on the brink of comedy because they still work as quasi advertisements for automobiles and so still comply with the discursive conventions of such advertisements.

It is to shock us out of the assumptions and consumerist dreams underlying these conventions that Godard stages his famous tracking shot in the film *Weekend*. In a movie whose title promises an anatomy of the vaunted "free time" of the bourgeois consumer class, this famous drawn-out shot employs every protocol that film had used to that point to showcase car culture. Instead of the still camera straining to catch the moving car, or

racing to represent the thrilling pleasure of the speeded-up car chase, here a moving camera pans an endless line of stopped cars on a highway. This is repetitive, and boring, even if the occupants of each car behave differently in their common activity: waiting. With this shot, we have returned, with a difference, to *Heart of Darkness* and the relentless dreariness, in a speeded-up daily life, of the wait. This time around, however, impatience is denuded of misty phenomenological distinction; in a speed world where to move pleasurably fast is equated even with life itself, the waiting is merely sordid, an aggravation which generates not even the semblance of insight or contemplation but rather a dull petulance. Inevitably, Godard's trolling camera invites us to read this petulance as comedy. The comedy, however, is now satirical, for we laugh at these complaining stalled characters while we, who see through the tracking camera's eye, move smoothly on. (In fact, we are seeing from the perspective of a sports car driver who has insolently taken to the road's verge.)

Then Godard, without warning, shocks us with the sight of the cause of the stoppage: a horrific car crash. Suddenly (although, of course, we guessed all along) our satirical laughter freezes, and we adjust from jeering at the impatience of the stopped cars' occupants to realizing that we are ourselves now participating in the callous gaze of the sports car occupants as they slide by and then pick up speed again on the open road. The futility of the waiting is brought up against the wrecked bodies of the crash, both part of a failed dream of leisured ease and consumerist plenty. As the sports car speeds on into this antipastoral, we are left to remember those bodies and scorched chrome shards as a moment when a conventional sense of detachment from consumer dreams, based on some presumed sense of our own privileged viewpoint, is horribly insufficient to face the horror of the car crash itself. This crash remains a represented but unreadable moment in the film, casting a long shadow over the rest. In showing all the stopped cars, Godard has stalled the old movie comedy of the car chase, freezing it into satire. In the repetition, showing car after car, he touches on the state's discourse of the car accident as a statistical matter. By placing the mangled automobiles of victims and perpetrators of the crash before us, and leaving us to coldly look, and by showing the crash as an interruption of speed culture, he lays down an uncompromising challenge. Still, our eyes as viewers move onward along with those of the sports car's occupants, and we are only made somewhat aware of our own rubbernecking callousness.

A decade later, Ballard's *Crash*, taking such callousness as a given, sets

out to investigate the precise sentiments generated by the sight and sensation of the car crash, and decides, in the manner of much early-seventies moralizing, that they involve a perverse sexuality. Much of the argument that has arisen about this willfully and mischievously shocking text has concerned the issue of whether the versions of perverse sexuality at the interface of libido and crushed mechanics are so interesting that Ballard is in fact sadistically celebrating the car crash, or whether he is more properly offering us a horror story which makes us attend to the crash's peculiar terror. In the responses to a celebrated commentary by Jean Baudrillard on the novel, for example, published in English in 1991, N. Katherine Hayles takes Baudrillard to task for "arguing that there is no moral point to *Crash*,"[48] while Vivian Sobchack decides that Baudrillard reads *Crash* "obscenely . . . [because] where Ballard is cautionary and his prose (as Baudrillard recognizes) is technical, Baudrillard is celebratory and his own prose impassioned."[49] Ballard himself may be said to have carefully orchestrated this order of response, even from the period before he wrote the novel, for his interest in car crashes and people's responses to them dates at least to the exhibition of crashed cars which he staged in London in 1973. Even then, he focused carefully on inciting and manipulating his audience's reaction:

> Scouring the wrecker's yard around London, I was unable to find a crashed Lincoln, perhaps fortunately. As it was, the audience reaction to the telescoped Pontiac, Mini and Austin Cambridge verged on nervous hysteria, though had the cars been parked in the street outside the gallery no one would have given them a glance or devoted a moment's thought to the injured occupants. In a calculated test of the spectators, I hired a topless girl to interview the guests.[50]

This calculated conditioning of the audience continued in the subsequent novel and particularly in his introduction to the French edition of 1974. Treat with caution also, therefore, the apparent openness of his annotations to the revised edition of *The Atrocity Exhibition* in 1990, from which his reflections just cited were taken. Note that they direct our attention toward the degree to which the audience might be shocked by Ballard's forthrightness in his representation of car crashes. To effectively read the novel decades after its publication, however, we need to go beyond debates over matters that are now moot. Rather, we should ask if Ballard has recast the older discourses of the crash in ways that generate genuinely new insights. If, as the novel's critics to date agree, *Crash* is a perverse novel, it needs

to be read perversely: that is, thoroughly against the grain of the reading toward which the author has successfully steered critics up to now.

Crash is an extremely literary novel, even pretentious in its literary claims. By this I do not mean that it must be lodged, in one critical leap of faith, in some *soi-disant* literary pantheon, but rather that it works to transport into high writerly art an area of contemporary experience—driving, and the car crash—that had previously been, with a few exceptions, largely outside it. (The exceptions include the texts we have considered already and some we have not: Huxley's thoughts on driving as a new modus of tourism in *Along the Road* [1925], some works by E. M. Forster and by William Faulkner, the road novels of Kerouac, Thompson, and others.)[51] The first tip-off the reader gets to the novel's self-conscious literary quality is the constant stream of similes. "The crashed bodies of package tourists, like a hemorrhage of the sun," begins the novel's fourth sentence, announcing boldly what will be a sustained grandiloquence of literary flourishes as a signature of *Crash*'s textual feel.[52] Reiterated similification, however, brings a gaudy and overdressed look to the text: the mechanics of the high literary are almost willfully on show. This is so, I suggest, because the author's task is to transfer to the literary—with a considerable twist—material that has previously flown only through more mundane discursive channels. *Crash*, along with all of Ballard's science fiction work, might best be compared to the novels two centuries earlier of Daniel Defoe, who, in *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, similarly employs a slightly mannered, all-too-technical prose to bring into the emerging literary genre of the fictitious memoir realms of existence known to bourgeois business and colonist fantasy heretofore below the horizon of literary discourse. Ballard, however, does not simply transform the technical vocabulary of the automobile assembly line worker, the traffic engineer, and the tow truck operator into serviceable literary prose. More comprehensively, his novel, so openly laying down from the start its literary claims, may be said to engage in transforming all previous discourses on cars and especially car crashes into novel idioms. *Transformation* is key here: the novel's achievement as literature, and also as shock text in the most compelling sense, is to take the earlier discourses and hand them over to other registers altogether, as a defamiliarizing ploy.

As we have seen, two main strands of discourse had developed to represent the car crash, that of the state and quasi-statist officialdom, which was based on statistical knowledge and tended toward concepts like accident rates and the necessity for insurance, and the more concrete discourse that

attempted to get closer to the crash itself, which often emerged as comedy or, in more ambitious instances, devolved into meditations on the disintegration of the modernist human subject. What occurs in *Crash* is that, first, the generalized statist discourse on the crash gets transmuted into a more particularized description (which is nevertheless pervasive throughout the novel) of the lonely, alienating, featureless non-place world of freeways, airports, overpasses, junkyards, office buildings, multistory parking garages, and apartment complexes. Ballard here refashions the state's discourse on the crash, which provides an ambient, cautionary noise behind the punctum of the accident, into a matter of setting. This is not Augé's "non-place": it is much too glamorous for that. Out of its sensibility, Ballard brilliantly fashions a late modern antipastoral. The novel's constant monotonal hymn to the cool precision of traffic engineering in concrete becomes its base note. It is entirely familiar to the reader of high literature: this is a postwar reworking, to describe an infinitely more alienating terrain, of the anomie-inflected urban landscapes of Kafka, Eliot, and Musil. By introducing this antipastoral of cruel months and unreal cities into car discourse, Ballard carries Godard's critique in *Weekend* much further. He gives us, in the lurid colors made possible by his literariness, a series of tropes for representing freeways and traffic management that, watered down, would, in the following decades, become the lingua franca of urban planners as they discussed the horrors of commuting. Despite *Crash*'s evocation of the slick glamour and the freedom conferred by anonymity that such a blank landscape evokes, the point, constantly emphasized, is that here is a world — the crash's context — where alienation is so mind-bogglingly pervasive as to be, for those who use these concrete routeways, a psychological imperative. Ballard's achievement is to evoke a new imagination of lived space, neither "place" nor "non-place," and certainly neither home nor heterotopia, but one whose anonymity reaches a feverish intensity. How does this evocation of a new kind of blank terrain rewrite the statist statistical version of the car crash? By actualizing (an appropriately seventies term) its abstractions as landscape, it seems to transform the notion of accidentality into inevitability: Ballard's is not a *civitas* where one can by chance fall into an accident but rather a concrete-scape where the crash becomes, by authorial fiat, the truth of the landscape itself.

In reworking the second discursive strand that has up to this point been used to characterize the car crash and in various ways aimed to get a close-

up view of the actuality of the crash itself, Ballard overrides the earlier discursive protocols of humor or discussions on the degeneration of subjecthood and instead allows his literary eye to discern one element only: sex. This is what has shocked his (puritan) critics, mainly because they are used to literature treating sex and the erotic in pastoral terms, terms to which the world of technology (which has been treated in literature mostly as clinical, mechanical, and so on) seems opposed. *Crash* enjoys itself being a literary text that probes the foolishness of this old cultural dichotomy: it sets up a rigorous metaphoric scheme which opposes the rigidity of technological metal (heavy metal) to the liquidity of the body and its fluids, and then proceeds to shuffle and destabilize this distinction. On the techno side, his key word is "chromium," a word sounding a note of sour chemical modernity that echoes like a bell on every few pages of the text. On the soft, fleshy side the key word is "semen," emerging and oozing on page after page. Pitting human corporeal liquidity against the brittle hardness of shiny modern metals leaves the bodies seeming pathetic, even when the text merrily confuses the terms of the dichotomy in presenting Vaughan's body as a hard, heavy metal one and Catherine's scheming as tough and hard likewise. What we need to keep in mind to read this novel against the grain, however, to counter it with a criticism that is as tough as the text itself, is that like the "topless girl" (Ballard's term) whom the author employed as an interviewer during the exhibition of crashed cars which gave rise to the subsequent novel, the sex in *Crash* is to a large extent an afterthought, a striking and baroque decorative detail that allures us as voyeurs into the text but is not integral to its central concern, which is the phenomenon of the car crash.

The great enabling idea around which the plot of *Crash* develops is that the car crash unleashes in the individual involved an extraordinary preoccupation with sex. The narrator, after his first crash described in the novel, is surprised with how thoroughly sex has come to obsess him—until he encounters, first, Stella Remington, the survivor of the crash in which he, the narrator, killed her husband, and finds that she too is sex obsessed, and, second, until he begins to know and understand Vaughan, for whom an obsession with sex that needs car crashes to be unleashed has reached truly manic proportions. Now if, following multiple authorial pointers in the text, we get diverted to thinking that perverse and rabid sexuality is what matters here, we can indeed be led into numerous post-Freudian speculations on

the relations between sadomasochism, sex, violence, and our awareness of our impending deaths. As the narrator works to explain in the opening pages of the novel what Vaughan meant to him, this is where the novel would have us go, noting sententiously that "for him these wounds were the keys to a new sexuality, born from a perverse technology." I submit that it is a mistake born of utopian dreams to imagine that Ballard is articulating the parameters of a new sexuality here; this sadomasochistic, fatalist discourse of sexuality has a long history, the matter of an extensive tradition that in the era of modernity stretches from Sade to Georges Bataille. (The other successor to this tradition from the era of *Crash* itself is Pier Paolo Pasolini's revision of Sade in *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* [1975].) If anything, what Ballard (like Pasolini) might be marking with his avid representation of the sex-torture matrix is the beginning of the end of this tradition as a *sexuality* in Foucault's terms, that is, as a way of conceptualizing and articulating the relation of sex to various forms of power. Rather, what is new here is that the novel attends to sex *alone* once it faces up to the reality of the car crash. This strategy resembles *Robinson Crusoe*'s having its hero attend only to the careful husbanding of possessions at the moment when he finds himself marooned on his island. The question, then, is what the function and effect are of this monological and monotonous attention in the crash representation to this single area of subjective experience.

Rather in the spirit in which, as Ballard admits in 1990, he had hired the "topless girl" to pose questions at the 1969 crashed-cars exhibition ("she had originally agreed to appear naked but on seeing the cars informed me that she would only appear topless"),[53] this concentration on sex seems a calculated test of his readers. By now, it is this constant return to exotically perverse sex that seems most dated about the novel. Yet it is also a means by which the author reminds us of the comedy and the strange jollity that had attended the first popular representations of the car crash, especially in film. What Ballard manages to do in his novel is to turn the long and varied association of sex and cars in popular culture into a veritable orgy. The whole panoply of texts and images that have associated cars and sex, from the days when car advertisers showed buxom suffragette drivers in their advertisements as a means to attract the attention of male buyers, to the lovers' lane and drive-in fantasies of back-seat sexual license, to the starlet displays of mechanics shop calendars and car shows (from which Ballard no doubt took the idea for the topless girl at his exhibition), offered the author a pop-cultural carnival which showed off the car as site and symbol of

male heterosexual desire. The relentless sex fixation of *Crash* gives him an opportunity both to festively celebrate this phenomenon and to send it up.

In addition, the focus in *Crash* on sexuality gives the author the opportunity to string out his novel as a narrative of a love triangle; in the characteristic deceit-and-desire shuttling of such plots, it professes to focus on the desire of the hero-narrator for the heroine while foregrounding the more urgent matter of the relationship between the men. The narrator, Catherine, and Vaughan form the triangle, while the sole developed human relation in the novel is that between the narrator and Vaughan. Here, certainly, the author is simply repeating, not quite wholeheartedly, thoroughly tested formulas: we might, tracing the conventionality of this plot, take *Crash* as a rewriting even of *The Great Gatsby*, where the triangle of Gatsby, Daisy, and the narrator, Nick Carraway, follows the same formula. Again, we might sense that this strand of pop-cultural desire (the avid attention to sex) and the use of a plot formula from high fiction (the love triangle) are being iterated in *Crash* to better celebrate their demise: by turning both into a tumult of semen, chrome, and wounded bodies, *Crash* seems to be strikingly open about its derision for each. In *Crash*'s morass of alien—and, by now, dated—porn (it is "the first pornographic novel based on technology," the author claims with a wicked pride [6]), we are being tested to see, rather, how we might imagine not a new perversity of an old pleasure (sexuality) but rather the perversity of the only new pleasure (speed).

This is to say that sex in *Crash* is a simulation, a gigantic con game, in which the perverse variations of the oldest pleasure, sexuality, are manipulated to proffer a test case for the possible perversions of the newest pleasure, speed—perversions that have only been hinted at, up to now, in the violent and unanswerable punctum of the crash. Ballard incites us to read the sex in *Crash* as an allegorical discourse. Our culture possesses a massive vocabulary for describing sexuality in its multifarious variations, but we have almost no vocabulary yet for the various pleasures of speed: why not confront these two pleasures with each other in the moment of crisis in the latter to see if one can discern on the template of the extensively developed vocabulary of sex a cartography of the potential pleasures of speed?

There is something to be said for reading Ballard as the last Futurist, or as a post-Futurist elaborator of science fiction dystopias. That is, we might see *Crash* as beginning where the hyperbolic account of the car crash at the opening of Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto leaves off, and imagine that Ballard is giving us in Vaughan, and by extension in Vaughan's acolyte the

narrator, a blueprint of a new subjectivity, a properly outfitted subjectivity for the era of technology. In this vein, we can see the novel's obsession with sexuality as a means of showing its characters' responses to the car crash as an attempt to constitute a new model of the human subject's desire. As sexuality might seem the most raw and elemental of human desires, then the coming cyborg subject must have that desire elaborated before all else, and *Crash*, in the brutal honesty of its sexual technics, begins this construction of a new logics of affect. Such a reading is plausible, yet, as one reads on, unconvincing: all that is achieved in these terms in the novel is a breaching of the heterosexist norms of the so-called sexual revolution of the 1970s, when the narrator and Vaughan, in a few paragraphs that are remarkably tender by the text's standards (200–203), finally make love. Since, predictably, Vaughan is killed in a car crash soon afterward (trying to make contact with the camp icon Elizabeth Taylor by crashing into her limousine), we need not think that even the slightest turn from the norms of heterosexist sexualities is really being championed here. No, *Crash*'s sex is all experimental, all a matter of slumming variations on an old story (that of the possibilities of juggling sex and power) to discern the pattern of a new narrative. And this pattern has not per se to do with further variations on the pleasures of sexuality (stories too often told already elsewhere) or, worse, with the possible pleasures of crashing cars (the novel is, pace Ballard, a cautionary tale), but, much more ambitiously, with the possible pleasures of speed.

Here is a typical paragraph from *Crash*, its slightly straining poetry rising in a fine peroration. It is also, I want to claim, the passage which marks the very heart of the novel, offering in a beautifully maintained balance the forces which mostly get offset in the text:

> We had entered an immense traffic jam. From the junction of the motorway and Western Avenue to the ascent ramp of the flyover the traffic lanes were packed with vehicles, windshields leaching out the colors of the sun setting over the western suburbs of London. Brake-lights flared in the evening air, glowing in the huge pool of cellulosed bodies. Vaughan sat with one arm out of the passenger window. He slapped the door impatiently, pounding the panel with his fist. To the right the high wall of a double-decker airline coach formed a cliff of faces. The passengers at the windows resembled rows of the dead looking down at us from the galleries of a columbarium. The enormous energy of the

twentieth century, enough to drive the planet into a new orbit around a happier star, was being expended to maintain this immense motionless pause. (151)

In this extraordinary, moving paragraph, Ballard's full panoply of poetic effects is all on show: the evening setting, the sententious, classical image of the columbarium, the exponential opening of the field of vision from the immense traffic jam to the cold, touching immensity of the universe which holds "a happier star." Such grandiloquence is in proportion, however, because it is here, in the grand sweep of the final sentence, that the forces that menace the novel and all within it are put on show: "the enormous energy of the twentieth century" versus the traffic jam's enforcement of "this immense motionless pause." This is Godard's panning shot of the stopped cars once more, but now orchestrated on an epic scale. It attends to those who wait, the impatient—that is, those (through their cars) used to movement, to flow, for whom, therefore, the wait is the exceptional and unacceptable interruption. We have returned to Conrad and the unbearable heaviness of the wait in *Heart of Darkness*, except that whereas Conrad's story, told to while away the wait, was a tale that marked the end of the heterotopic imagination, *Crash*, three-quarters of a century later, marks a stop in the ceaseless flow of speed that is the chief pleasure to be enjoyed in coming to terms with the featureless postheterotopic world displayed in this text. The most valued entity in this new order of pleasure is celebrated here: "energy." Yet at times all this energy—"the enormous energy of the twentieth century"—can be orchestrated to coalesce into a pause. What has caused the particular pause described in this passage is, as we can guess, a horrific car accident; we learn this as the sirens wail through the next paragraph. What Ballard has given us here, however, is a definition of the traffic accident in the terms that matter: immense energy contorted into a pause.

As the sirens wail and the rubberneckers gather, the novel swivels its thoughts to sexuality: "Clearly the most vivid erotic fantasies would be moving through our minds, of imagining acts of intercourse performed with enormous decorum and solicitude upon the blood-stained loins of this young woman as she lay within her car. . . ." (156). And the novel's incessant and relentless sexual turn at the moment of the crash is again enacted. For the critic to claim that this sex is merely allegorical might seem to offer a reading of the novel's joys based merely on puritanism; one appears to deny in advance the validity of the pleasure in its own terms. But this would

mean underrating the possibilities of the allegory involved: that is, how the pleasure of rampant sexuality and the pleasure of excessive speed might fit one upon the other, replicate one another's patterns, and share, or not, the same signifiers of what might in the first place come under the rubric of pleasure. What I've suggested is that the sexual pleasure suggested here is only a secondary concern of the text, and that, granted textual attention at the moment of the crash, it really substitutes for the pleasure which preoccupies the text, that of speed.

Thus on the one hand we can say that the older pleasure, sexuality, has a rich and varied vocabulary to describe it, and that this vocabulary might be useful in understanding any other pleasure. The two pleasures may also, it is worth speculating, have much in common, and one may fade into and intermingle with the other, in the sense that all pleasurable sensations experienced by the human subject get registered in ways that are scarcely separable into wholly different experiential realms. On the other hand, notice that the discourse of sexuality in the book takes off at the moment of the crash: that is, the moment, in Ballard's own terms, when all the world's energy is orchestrated into a pause. As such, sex is a pleasure practiced now as an alternative to speed's pleasure; it is the pleasure practiced while one, frustrated, waits; it is *Crash*'s alternative to the storytelling practiced by the slightly less impatient Marlow in Conrad's novel. In this light, sex gets to be speed's other, what is practiced as a compensation when speed stops. Worse, both of these contesting relations between sexuality and speed can be true at once, so that if sex is the baroque decoration in *Crash* as postmodern text, then the complexity of the sex-speed allegory renders that aesthetic symbiosis baroque too. Probing among the complex interstices of this baroque allegorical relation, what can Ballard teach us about the new pleasures of speed? Clinically carrying his elaboration of the old pleasure, sexuality, to its limits, does he get to offer any kind of taxonomy of the pleasures of the new? What I've suggested is that the turn to sexuality in itself gives Ballard the opportunity to retread some of the oldest narratives of sexual desire (the love triangle, love between acolyte and teacher) in a new and hence exotic setting. What we need to look for, then, as we begin to elaborate a language for speed's pleasure, is what in Ballard's account of sex might be novel if it were applied to speed.

Reading the novel's pleasure textuality in this way, one is led firmly away from any presumed glamour that may be thought to inhere in the mechanistic. Instead one is guided to concentrate on decidedly humanistic values:

community attachment, the nucleus and origin of a kind of politics. By choosing the most ancient of pleasures, sex, to work as allegory for the new one, speed, Ballard is performing an aesthetic of willful archaism. He is truly looking backward to intuit the future. In doing so, he articulates a jeremiad in advance on speed's pleasure: speed as pleasure must not try to break away from all that is valuable in the older forms of human satisfaction. When it does so, he warns, speed will turn on us and kill us.