Research Article

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"Categorically Grotesque: Ballard, Bodies and Genre in Crash"

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Abstract: Crash's philosophical and aesthetic focus on the wounded body has led to it being described by many of its readers as repulsive, disgusting, nauseating, and in other similarly visceral vocabulary. It has also, however, been praised in the highest terms for its perceived exploration and criticism of postmodernity, technofetishism, and the advertising industry, along with its estrangement of society's acceptance of the automobile age and its mutilation of our landscape, psyche and bodies. Critics of Crash who wish to portray the novel positively frequently appear under pressure to defang this aspect of it, attempting to domesticate Crash's troubling 'low' matter by the aforementioned 'higher' aesthetic or moral cause. Crash, however, eludes this manner of simplification; the novel cannot be adequately analysed by shirking from its embodied effects. A chimaeric fusion of opposing experiential and interpretive catalysts, Crash refuses to be statically categorised.

Keywords: Reader Response; Grotesque; Ballard

Introduction

Crash is a novel of outrageous and perverted sexual appetites, wherein pain, mutilation, adrenaline, and degradation are greedily consumed in unabashed pleasure. It is a novel terraformed and traversed by grotesques: monstrous concrete and steel motorways scar and reknit the land, through which hundreds of thousands hurtle as the act of commuting transforms into Boschian freneticism; mutilants and their mutilations are fetishised and worshipped; car-crash victims and future accident intendeds, primarily the actress Elizabeth Taylor, are obsessively photographed, then resized, macromised, cut, collaged and recombined; their wounds, and potential wound-sites, are invaginated and apotheosised; everything is transformed, made monstrously beautiful, through the focalising gaze of its fetishist narrator-protagonist, James Ballard. Sexual excitement is raised by sights as mundane as the "engine nacelles of giant aircraft," or "the conjunction of an air hostess's fawn gaberdine skirt" (29), descriptions which move seamlessly into *Crash*'s greater meditation, being on the actually wounded and dismembered – the descriptively dissected victims of car crashes, whose scars become "units in a new currency of pain and desire" (109).

Crash's philosophical, aesthetic and fetishising focus on wounds and wounding has led to it being described by many of its readers in a strongly visceral vocabulary: repulsive, disgusting, nauseating, sickening, and so on. It has also, however, been praised in the highest terms for its perceived exploration and criticism of postmodernity, technofetishism and the advertising industry, along with its estrangement of society's acceptance of the automobile age and its mutilation of our landscape, psyche and bodies. This critical bifurcation arises from a hybridity which, this article will argue, defines the novel. In *Crash*, Ballard

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combines literatures orientated towards discordant embodied effects, principally erotica and gore, with the sterile vocabulary of a medical textbook and the so-called 'high' concerns of postmodernism. The novel is thereby irradiated with an interpretive and experiential ambiguity that resists categorisation.

While critical analyses of *Crash* tend to prioritise a perceived message over the novel's more visceral qualities, many readers' responses, especially negative ones, instead emphasise its repulsing or stomach-churning effects. *Crash* very clearly contains the catalysts to sustain such a reading. In fact, positive readings of *Crash* do not necessarily dismiss this aspect of the novel, but append to it a belief that *Crash* uses such effects to fulfil a 'greater' aesthetic or moral good. Perhaps pressured by the controversy that has dogged the novel since its release, and which redoubled following David Cronenberg's 1996 film adaptation, critics who portray *Crash* positively appear under pressure to abstractify its embodied effects, attempting to neutralise or justify its troubling 'low' matter by the aforementioned 'higher' aesthetic or moral cause, and side-lining the novel's eroticism by casting it as parody, drollery or, hinging on Ballard's introduction to the French edition, "cautionary, a warning against that brutal, erotic overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of technological landscapes" ("Introduction to *Crash*" 98).[1] Despite its unconventional subject matter, and its significant capacity to disgust, *Crash* is nevertheless erotica, and must be analysed with an eye to such; the novel cannot be adequately assessed by shirking from its embodied effects.

The hybridity which characterises not only Ballard's individual works, but the entire span of his oeuvre, does not, of course, find its first commentator here. Roger Luckhurst, borrowing from Derrida's concept of *la brisure* [the hinge], describes Ballard himself as "in the place of *the hinge*, the device which at once joins together and separates two planes or surfaces" (emphasis in original, xiii). Luckhurst, while mostly concentrating on Ballard's generic trespassing and the questions he raises as to the avant-garde, categorises the author as an a-categorical category disruptor. Elizabeth Stainforth similarly comments on the importance of the liminal and marginal in Ballard's work, highlighting the incorporation into his fiction of what he termed 'invisible literature': market research reports, clinical studies, government pamphlets, and so on. Stainforth draws into this discussion both physical liminalities, such as the underpass in *Concrete Island*, and more conceptual border-zones (echoing Luckhurst), such as "the neural intervals and angles between walls that pervade his experimental fiction" (99). Robert Caserio, meanwhile, describes *Crash's* discordant prosaic collage, via Christine Brooke-Rose's concept of *xorandoric fiction*, as "a wholly ambiguous or wholly indeterminate text," in which gaps in the story and plot are "prevented from being filled in by two mutually exclusive systems of gap-filling clues" (292). No one, then, is particularly ambiguous about Ballard's ambiguity.

There is a sense, however, that the various means by which critics and readers attempt to either contain or further complicate Ballard are of the endless repetitions which tend to characterise his novels. Why term Ballard's fiction xorandoric when it has already been described as radically ambiguous, as liminally interstitial, functioning as a hinge, and so on? Luckhurst, though describing Ballard's oeuvre, also hits on the essential nature of Ballard criticism: "nothing other than a prolonged meditation on the question of protocols, boundaries, frames and the evaluations they set in train" (xiii). Even if we, as in Luckhurst's case, acknowledge the essential 'a-' of Ballard – a-thetic, a-categorical, a-generic – does not such an acknowledgement yet attempt to categorise? Each of these critics are responding, as readers, to the indigestible indeterminacy in Ballard's work. Each, in their own manner, even when protesting the action, is making some effort to chew this lump of Ballard-meat, to make sense of it, even when protesting the idea of 'sense' itself. Perhaps this is unavoidable in literary criticism; in the tradition of Adam, to name is to categorise, which, perhaps inevitably, is to domesticate.

It is this need to domesticate, and the means by which it is attempted, that forms the core focus of this article. Ballard's resistance to interpretation has been characterised elsewhere as 'uncanny', with Luckhurst specifically describing the 'hinge' effect of Ballard on genre and literary convention as *unheimlich* (xiv – xv). This article will also analyse Ballard along affective lines; however, its focus is on the experiencing

1 A description Ballard later partially withdrew. In conversation with Will Self, Ballard claims that "*Crash* is not a cautionary tale. *Crash* is what it appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn. But it is a psychopathic hymn which has a point" (Self 348).

reader, specifically the reader of *Crash*, and, more specifically again, the reading body. As a visceral novel, combining two literatures whose primary goals are distinct, and distinctly different, bodily effects – gore and erotica – *Crash* is defined by interpretive and experiential ambiguity. Considering the classificatory difficulty that Ballard's unwholesome assemblage presents, I shift slightly away from the uncanny and set my critical lens to its close relative, the grotesque.

In *Crash*'s formal and generic hybridity, Ballard stitches together a hermeneutic monster, a Frankensteinian creation provocatively incorporating its creator, a *monstrum* that may warn against the steel and concrete excesses of modernity or merely the primordial bodily excesses of man. While we are more accustomed to speaking of the remaking and repurposing enacted by Ballard's characters, this making is here in mimicry of that of their maker's; Ballard's cast-off creations are his novels, assembled from the aesthetic and prosaic debris of the marginal, the liminal and of an uncannily visible invisible literature. A chimeric fusion of opposing experiential and interpretive catalysts, *Crash* refuses static categorisation. This article thereby analyses *Crash* through an adapted theory of the grotesque, focusing specifically on the grotesque experience engendered by the novel's strange amalgam of subjects and styles, and arguing that the novel is primarily oriented around the necessity of managing, justifying, categorising, or otherwise neutering its embodied effects. This article primarily explores the making of these embodied effects and their method of arousal, and then moves to explore the means by which they can be unmade by the reader, being the processes of abstractification, play, and interpretation.

Categorising the A-Categorical: The Grotesque

While the category of the grotesque has descriptive roots, relating to the bizarre animal/human/plant hybrids discovered in the decorative art of Nero's unfinished Domus Aurea (1560s; *grottesco* [grotto-esque]), critical extrapolation has argued that the grotesque has an embodied aspect, which is to say that definitions of the category incorporate its proclivity to arouse sensory reaction. Michael Steig's survey of critical engagement with the grotesque argues that an affective definition is "unavoidable" (253), though his survey likewise illustrates the difficulty of deciding on such a definition. John Ruskin, for example, posits two kinds of grotesque, the sportive and the terrible, which, he further argues, are found more often in some type of combination than they are in isolation (Steig 254). Wolfgang Kayser argues that the grotesque's power is to evoke in its audience a sense of the world's radical alienness and essential absurdity, to present an image of reality as partially under the sway of demonic forces (Steig 253). L.B. Jennings similarly treats the grotesque along lines of humour and horror, theorising that it must contain some combination of the fearsome and ludicrous, the result of which is a disarming mechanism which allows the mind to play with the terrible – a play, however, that is always in danger of collapsing back into fear (Steig 255). Steig himself, synthesising a number of theories, offers his own theory of the grotesque as "the managing of the uncanny by the comic" (259). Bakhtin, from whom modern theories of the grotesque descend, contends that "exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style" (Bakhtin 303), adding that "the grotesque is orientated around the limits of the body, the violation of the body's physical seal, its interaction with the outside world" (317). Noël Carroll posits that "[Horror, comic amusement and awe] are undeniably the recurring effects that most grotesqueries aim fundamentally to produce" (Carroll 309), further describing horror as a compound of fear and disgust (311).

While there is great variety in theories of the grotesque, the idea of a precarious balance between some type of humour and awe/horror, a balance which either allows for or is maintained by play, is common to almost all.[2] While this article will not attempt to pull the entire gamut of grotesque studies together, it will argue and exercise a conception of the grotesque along these lines, but one in which disgust is elevated to a primary emotional effect. Disgust as a core concept in the grotesque is latent, and sometimes explicit,

2 While horror or terror have been the larger focus of critics of the grotesque, awe, bearing the possibility to be both negative and positive, is perhaps a more correct 'umbrella' term. Carroll recognises this through his separation of horror and awe, and his distinguishing of horror as a disgust/fear compound, though this works better as a discursive separation rather than an attempt to delimit the actual emotions from one another.

in the descriptions of many theorists. Carroll, for example, includes disgust in horror, describing disgust as "an emotion that has been adapted to guard the intimate borders of the human body – mouths, nasal passages, genitals, and so forth" (98), bearing similarities to Bakhtin's above description of the grotesque as being concerned with the limits and violations of the body's physical seal, which "ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon" (318). Disgust, therefore, arises from core grotesque features, being the impure, the contradictory and the cross-contaminated, which, Carroll notes, extends to those which combine contradictory cultural categories, giving as example the once common featuring of bearded ladies in circus grotesqueries (312).

As the defining embodied effect catalysed by *Crash*, it is worth spending some time here to establish the exact triggers and phenomenology of disgust (awe and humour will be elaborated on further down). Concerned with the seals and purity of the body, the disgust emotional system is primarily rejectional: its unique action tendencies aim to put a distance between the self and the offending object, a distance which might be spatial, sensory, or even ideological; turning away, blocking one's mouth, closing one's eyes or covering one's nose, changing the subject of conversation, redirecting thoughts, and more, are all characteristic actions associated with both sensory *and* sociomoral disgust (Haidt 857). Ian Miller interestingly notes, however, that the desire to reject and turn away is conflated with a certain voyeuristic allure: "[disgust] exerts a fascination which manifests itself in the difficulty of averting our eyes at a gory accident, of not checking out the quantity and quality of our excretions; or in the attraction of horror films, and indeed of sex itself" (22), a conflation of opposites which *Crash* embodies in more ways than one.

While *Crash* is certainly disgusting, it does not bind its readers to a disgust reaction throughout the entire novel. Or, at least, disgust is never the sole possible or likely effect. The characteristic reaction to the grotesque arises from its hybrid nature, specifically from its inherent multivalency. Being categorically a-categorical, the 'appropriate' reaction to a grotesque is rarely clear, engendering a hesitation similar to that associated with the uncanny. What is crucial to the grotesque, then, is not necessarily which of these emotions are aroused, or which combination of them, but the *possibility* of each, the hesitation prior to the reaction, and the tentative or uncertain nature of the decided reaction. Carroll figures the relationship between the manifold forms and oppositions of the grotesque (high/low, humour/horror/, monster/human, beauty/disgust) as one of play: "The grotesque is able to support these seemingly disparate functions because structurally it is rooted in the violation, transgression, or jamming of our standing concepts and categories. With horror, categorical anomaly takes the form of impurity; with comic amusement, the form of incongruity; and with awe, that of the miraculous" (320).

In its subject matter and aesthetic, *Crash* combines features from both erotic literature and the splatter film. In description, it borrows from the anatomist's textbook, or, perhaps, the morgue's cause-of-death report. In generic terms, this collage of styles will not be familiar to most; there are few generic codes which might 'streamline' or defang such reading experiences (though they do exist), and many of the generic codes suggested may oppose each other, such as the conflict between the erotic subject matter and its sterile reporting. For most readers, this will render *Crash* a-generic and a-categorical, and, due to the specific nature of its collage, grotesque. Interpretation, however, always seeks to *domesticate*: to bring the strange into the familiar and thereby make the strange and new also familiar. To name or to explain means to categorise, to incorporate, to find precedence for. The truly alien can never be encountered, as it must always appear as alien 'to' or deviant 'from'. While *Crash* contains strong catalysts for a grotesque reaction, the ambiguity which allows for this also poses a challenge; *Crash* is a puzzle to solve, a transgression to explain, a threat to quash. A deviance shifting the borders of the norm is yet a domesticating act. Likewise, that a text resists easy or automatized interpretation does not mean it is uninterpretable; interpretation is the domain of the reader, not the text. The aesthetic category of 'grotesque', with aesthetic being understood in the realm of play, is itself the beginning of a neutering interpretation.

The grotesque, then, is quintessentially hybrid: border crossing, boundary challenging, transgressive. Distinguished from the classical body, which is still, individual and elevated, the grotesque body is multiple, busy, mobile, with an emphasis on the gaping, the protruding, the expulsing, and always geared towards pleasure, exchange, and consumption (Stallybrass and White 22), a description as applicable to Bosch as to Ballard. The physically grotesque may rouse fear or laughter or disgust, or, most likely, some combination

of each; however, it maintains a difference between the solely horrifying or solely comedic as it cannot be divorced from the hesitation it engenders, nor the constant threat of shifting from one category to the other. The grotesque, then, when a categorical hybrid (man/monster, high/low, sacred/profane), inculcates a corresponding interpretive bifurcation. Do we treat Frankenstein's monster as a human or a monster, or perhaps a monstrous human, or a human monster? Can we divorce Ballard's fictional avatar from the physical author or is he, inescapably, hybrid? Do we thereby interpret *Crash* as a daring transgression of sexual norms, as the work of a sick fetishist, as pure satire, or as a grotesque hybrid of all and more? This essay is not quite an attempt to answer any of these questions; its focus is on the means by which these ambiguities arise and are sustained, and the various interpretive codes which readers might turn to in order to disambiguate and domesticate them.

Unwholesome Assemblage: Writing the Grotesque

To understand *Crash*'s grotesque collage, it is necessary to understand its individual components, the reactions which the use of these elements arouse and, furthermore, the reactions which their appropriation and combination may likewise result in. As a critical exercise, this article does not attempt a Sisyphean catalogue of all possible readers and their reactions, but, rather, an examination of the means by which the novel dislocates its reader, and how the dislocated might find their bearings. Before reaching these larger conclusions, however, I want to begin here with *Crash*'s most basic units: words.

Baudrillard, in his controversial essay "Ballard's *Crash*," notes the discordance in the functional nature of Crash's erotic vocabulary: "not ass, prick, or cunt, but anus, rectum, penis, vulva. No slang, no intimacy in the sexual violence, only functional language" (316). Vocabulary of any type contains the germ of an interpretation: it asks of its readers to treat the information it conveys in a particular way. Ballard's vocabulary, more at ease in medical textbooks and the doctor's office, ask that we interpret it in a manner that is at odds with other interpretive codes concurrently offered. In the macrocosm of interpretation, this vocabulary has provided critics with a number of cues as to how to interpret Ballard's commentary on sex, the automobile, and modernity; however, in relation to the microcosm, the line-by-line reading experience, the ambiguating effect of this precise vocabulary is overlooked.

With regards to vulgarity, its usage can be seen to bear three distinct reactions that a professional, such as a doctor, may want to avoid: offense, humour and arousal. There is a reason that we have such distinctly different means to describe the sexual features and functions of the human body; it would be as strange for a sexual partner to ask permission to inspect your penis as it would be for your doctor to request that you 'whip out your cock'. As praxis, the latter term, even sanitised here by scare-quotes and contextualised by several thousand words on scenes far more explicit, yet appears as an offensive fly in the formal ointment of this essay. Even representations of breaches of convention can, therefore, appear discordant. A.W. McHoul suggests that "the clinical and the dirty are at least relatively exclusive in that sentences that contain mixtures of the terms can be heard as 'ungrammatical'" (126).

Clinical terminology may be broadly described as existing to obscure the images and emotions typically tied to the body and bodily processes. Words are more, of course, than connotation; as linguistic signs, 'pussy' and 'vulva', though obviously different in use, may spur the imagining of the same image. Additionally, our reactions to these vocabularies are governed by expectation and convention, and clinical vocabulary may likewise provide humour or offense if used in unusual situations, for example, during intercourse. Any terminology may be 'recontextualised' if continuously used outside of its conventional context; the dislocation caused by *Crash*'s vocabularic deviance should, then, lessen as the reader progresses through the text, though the derangement of action tends to likewise increase with this progression, reaching its climax in Ballard and Vaughan's acid trip. Despite these caveats, however, we can generally say that different vocabularies act as different contextualising and interpretive keys.

We must also be aware that it is far easier to append new connotations to a word than it is to scrub a word of offensive ones. Each of the examples given by Baudrillard (ass, prick and cunt), and perhaps every other vulgarity, began with innocence, or perhaps simply without an opposing clinical term to thereby

render it vulgar. The clinical is in constant threat of being consumed by the vulgar, and must be held in quarantine from its polluting influence. *Crash* does not only, therefore, appropriate this vocabulary, but actively pejorates it. On the other side of this coin, it should be noted that this vocabulary, being sterile and distant from both image and flavour, can bear another significant effect on the novel: it can bore. Describing Ballard's style as "half-mad monotonous repetitions," David Keith Mano declares that he "intends to create a rite in metal, effacing humanness. The liturgy exasperates when, by reiteration, it no longer sickens."

Apart from its capacity to bore, Ballard's use of clinical language has the opposite effect of that vocabulary's more general deployment; the subject which it describes is far too obscene and spread over far too many pages for it to exert any type of civilising influence. Instead, *Crash* is in fact rendered more obscene, turning the precise gaze of the doctor, the specificity of the anatomist, into microphilia. This language, in turn, is polluted by Ballard's use. The doctor's vocabulary is eroticised while sex is clinicalised and mechanised.

Having addressed this dialectic in general, I want to turn here to the specifics of what Ballard termed 'invisible literature', and how his pastiching or parodying of the clinical language therein found works. In a 1970 interview for *Books and Bookmen,* Ballard states, "I have always been a voracious reader of what I term 'invisible literature' – market research reports, pharmaceutical company house magazines, . . . sex manuals, U.S. government reports, and medical textbooks such as the extraordinary *Crash Injuries*" (qtd. in Stainforth 100). Stainforth's research into Ballard's collection of such reading materials goes beyond analysis; along with Mike Bonsall and David Pringle, she has made a large amount of Ballard's 'invisible reading' available online via *The Invisible Library*.[3] What concerns us here is not necessarily Ballard's inspiration or reading materials, however, but the effect of their regurgitation in his own writing.

Jeannette Baxter notes a distinct disparity between Ballard's formal writing in his role as a writer and editor of *Chemistry and Industry* and his contemporaneous fictional writing, yet an uncanny similarity to his later writing, seeing "evidence of the assimilation of the technical language and scientific terminology which would become a Ballardian aesthetic" (52). This technical and scientific style of writing is not, of course, strange in its own right; it will be, in fact, very familiar to most readers, from its appearance in academic and industry journals, to pharmaceutical adverts or road-safety pamphlets. It is only rendered jarring by its appearance in a place we don't expect, a discordance which Baxter, like Luckhurst, connects to the uncanny. As in Victor Frankenstein's grisly assemblage, what Ballard pilfers from the graves of the forgotten remains dimly visible in his patchwork creation.

Take, for example, John Swearingen's 1965 report "Tolerances of the Human Face to Crash Impact", a real study which appears on page 99 of *Crash* in a bundle of papers taken by Vaughan from the Road Research Laboratory. While only the paper's title appears in the novel, it seems clear that Ballard would have had a greater familiarity with it. Note the similarity here between Swearingen's almost-excitement as to the cadaver's state of preservation and the prose typical of *Crash*:

> A force of over 300g, the highest attainable with our catapult, caused no lacerations or injuries. Response during impact of facial tissue of cadaver heads would necessarily be different than for living tissue. The heads used in this study, however, were in an excellent state of preservation with facial tissues pliable and moist, and the author feels the effects of tissue differences on facial tolerances were negligible. (2)

There is, perhaps, an obscenity in this language as well: its formality works to obscure the contained image, being a catapult launching a severed human head into a model dashboard, an image which *Crash* would delight over and which is almost suspiciously missing from the novel. In fact, the scene wherein Swearingen's report is mentioned features a somewhat similar experiment but done with crash-test dummies rather than corpses. There is a suggestion, here, that Ballard's horrific vision of the world is somehow more civilised than actual reality.

In relation to the means by which Ballard plays with the expectations and conventions of clinical language, compare the above to the following scene, wherein Ballard (as character) loses control of his car

3 http://fentonville.co.uk/invisible-library/

and kills Helen Remington's husband:

> The man, a chemical engineer with an American foodstuffs company, was killed instantly, propelled through his windshield like a mattress from the barrel of a circus cannon. He died on the bonnet of my car, his blood sprayed through the fractured windshield across my face and chest. The firemen who later cut me from the crushed cabin of my car assumed that I was bleeding to death from a massive open-heart wound. (11)

Whereas Swearingen utilises clinical language in order to conceal the inherent grotesqueness of a catapult-launched cadaver head, curtailing the potential horror, disgust and even humour of the scene, Ballard's language, while maintaining a specificity of detail, celebrates and aestheticises the same, releasing this trio of emotions, increasing focus on the disgusting (blood, mixing of blood), the humorous ("mattress from the barrel of a circus canon"), and the horrific (blood, death, characterisation of the killed, later fetishisation of the incident).

Medical textbooks and practitioners use clinical terminology to both signal that the matters at hand are serious and that the functions discussed are neither meant to arouse nor offend, that the author or utterer's mind was dwelling only on the clinical. If Swearingen's language lapsed into the vulgar or comedic then doubts may be raised as to his professionalism, his respect for the deceased, and even his motivations. Clinical terminology may, then, be understood, in its insistence on the correct intentions, as being defined purely by its opposition to the vulgar, and thereby, paradoxically, containing or dependant on the vulgar. Ballard's subversion of clinical language forms a significant contribution to *Crash*'s grotesque experience, injecting ambiguity into the interpretive codes arising from his terminology and muddying the idea of authorial intention. Given the extremity of the subject matter and Ballard's own appearance within the novel, doubt as to his intention may be a significant factor in arresting a reader at the borders of disgust, horror and humour: a paralysis which might not last the entire novel, but may certainly define a large portion of the reading experience. Ballard's use of clinical terminology may signal that *Crash* is meant to be taken seriously, a warning as to society's relationship with the automobile, and the contemporaneous ever-increasing number of road deaths.[4] It could, contrarily, be treated as a celebration of a new culture of the transhuman and techno-body, which is how many have read Baudrillard's response to the novel, a point to which I will return. And, of course, the juxtaposition of antitheses, or the 'category mistake' of combining the pornographic with the clinical, may likewise catalyse humour, and suggest that we read and react to *Crash* as a grotesque parody of reports such as Swearingen's.

Body Shock: The Porn Problem

The grotesque experience in *Crash* largely emanates from the polysemism which arises from the novel's disturbingly presented pornographic content. The erotic in *Crash* is by no means taboo simply because of the incorporation of the automobile, which for some may be quite a harmless fetish; *Crash*'s core discomfort is in its violation and eroticisation of a much more visceral taboo – that concerning wounds, injuries and orifices, and the blood, mucous, scarring and inmixing by which the novel characterises them. Both Carroll and Bakhtin, among others, point to the sanctity of the bodily seal in their discussion of disgust and the grotesque. Bakhtin, in his description of the grotesque body, focuses on its primary disgust facilitators: the excessive, the disproportionate, the leaking, the flowing, the protruding, the transgressive, and the orificial, most important of which is the mouth, which he characterises as a "wide-open bodily abyss" (317). With Bakhtin's description in mind, examine the following scene from Ballard's first sexual encounter with Gabrielle, an associate of Vaughan who was badly scarred and crippled by a previous car-crash:

> My first orgasm, within the deep wound in her thigh, jolted my semen along this channel, irrigating its corrugated ditch. Holding the semen in her hand, she wiped it against the silver controls of the clutch treadle. My mouth was fastened on the scar below her left breast, exploring its sickle-shaped trough. Gabrielle turned in her seat, revolving her body around

4 A paper from The World Health Organisation released the same year as Crash described the car "as having become the most dangerous illness for people under 35 years of age" (qtd. in Naatanen and Summala 13).

> me, so that I could explore the wounds of her right hip. For the first time I felt no trace of pity for this crippled woman, but celebrated with her the excitements of these abstract vents let into her body by sections of her own automobile. (148)

Ballard, in his role as both character and author, fulfils the entirety of Bakhtin's grotesque conventions. Gabrielle's scars and wounds are here treated as new orifices and protuberances, and become the focus of Ballard's ministrations. His first orgasm (leaking, flowing) is spent not only in a wound, but one described as a "corrugated ditch," connoting both jaggedness and dirtiness. This semen, a potential disease vector, is smeared around the car. Another scar of Gabrielle's is described as a "sickle-shaped trough," invoking the dining table of the animal, and explored by Ballard's tongue. Gabrielle's wounds together become "abstract vents", her body now associated with the exhalation of hot (foul) air.

Scenes such as this are by no means rare in the novel. The experience of reading *Crash* is to make a palimpsest of the human body, to layer image and metaphor upon it until its original form is near unrecognisable. Stripped of the organic, the body becomes a grotesque semi-machine: Ballard's scars replicate "the protruding switches of the windshield wipers and parking lights" (33); Catherine is regarded as "inert and emotionless as a sexual exercise doll fitted with a neoprene vagina" (38); Helen's cervical cap is described as a "dead machine" (62), while the car in which she and Ballard copulate is organicised, becoming a womb "generating from our sexual act an homunculus of blood, semen and engine coolant" (63); in an acid trip, Vaughan's skin appears to be covered in golden metallic scales, his groin illuminated by a "zodiac of unforgotten collisions," his anus a "hot vent" (165-6). Disgust vectors peak here in Ballard's drug-induced hallucination, as Vaughan's body is variously coated in, composed of, and fed on by insects: "The flies crawled in thick clumps across his blood-smeared chest, festering on his pallid stomach. They formed an apron of pubic hair that reached from his limp testicles to the scars along his diaphragm. The flies covered Vaughan's face, hovering around his mouth and nostrils as if waiting for the rancid liquors distilled from the body of a corpse" (168).

The boundaries of the human body are continuously breached, bared, and broken down over the course of *Crash*. Its active functioning is always in sight; its secretions, smells and sounds, however, are more signs of a leaking, whirring, imperfect machine than an organic subjectivity. It is an object not born, but made, and made wrongly. The body is always unstable, a grotesque, hybrid creature, between organic and inorganic, living and dead, only consisting of hard lines when mechanised, otherwise its boundaries are always porous, blurred. This manner of portrayal emphasises the body's every disgust vector, violating taboos of impurity and inmixing as they pertain to both the physical body and cultural mores. Horror, too, emerges from this vision of humanity: horror at witnessing these depraved acts, and the potential harm their agents pose; and an existential horror (or awe) at seeing both human body and human society so exposed. The strength of the horror/disgust reaction which this treatment has the potential to catalyse bears the greatest potential to sweep away the comic, and to 'resolve' the grotesque; however, these catalysts are, as noted by Mano, significantly weakened due to the great repetition, a dulling which may allow for play and humour, a transformation to be analysed in greater detail below.

It is in the actualising and interpreting of *Crash*'s pornographic images that readers might find themselves most inept as there is little outside of Ballard's own oeuvre that forms an easy comparison, and perhaps only *The Atrocity Exhibition* within it. *Crash* is by no means directly comparable to mainstream erotica or potboiler pornography. Even so-called 'literary' pornography, such as Réage's *The Story of O* or Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, are more different from than similar to *Crash*. *The Story of O* certainly shares with *Crash* an interest in the giving and receiving of pain, as well as the marking and mutilation of bodies; however, its actual sadistic and masochistic activity is barely narrated, appearing predominantly in summary, thereby distancing the reader from painful or uncomfortable embodied effects. The depravity of Sade, meanwhile, is of a far different kind than Ballard's, particularly as regards issues of rape and paedophilia. Sade, however, is obviously pornographic in that pornography's generic codes are asserted constantly, distancing the action from reality: young boys and girls are therefore eager to be led astray; breasts, buttocks and male sexual organs are universally enormous; and the latter of which are always accommodated with a paradoxical painful ease. Details as to the particular sights, sound, textures, tastes and scents of sex are jovially, rather than clinically, given. All of these details communicate to the reader that this is pornography, taking place

in a pornographic ontology, and that it is meant, therefore, to arouse. Sade's intention is thereby quite clear to the reader. *Crash* is (differently) troubling because Ballard's intention is not.

The need to negotiate Ballard's intention in *Crash* is near inescapable, specifically as regards resolving its generic identity. Claims to his intention came quite dramatically to a head in the pages of *Science Fiction Studies* following Baudrillard's analysis of *Crash*, wherein he appeared, to some, to celebrate not just the novel, but the world it projects. Claiming that *Crash* transcends the old world, Baudrillard argues that it is thereby immune to moral judgement, protected, even, from the warnings and opinions of its own author (319). Vivian Sobchak, recovering at the time from serious surgery, responded with accusations that Baudrillard obscenely celebrated what Ballard purposefully rendered disgusting, "getting all the description right," she says, "[Baudrillard] gets the tone all wrong and thus, where Ballard is cautionary and his prose (as Baudrillard recognizes) technical, Baudrillard is celebratory and his own prose impassioned" (327). Sobchak, like so many others, reaches for Ballard's introduction to the French edition in order to clear the author himself of any unseemly intentions. She, in fact, rebukes Baudrillard for rejecting Ballard's glossing of the novel as a "cautionary tale", going as far as to label Baudrillard as "really dangerous," wishing him "a car crash or two," and claiming that he is in need of "a little pain (perhaps a lot) to bring him back to his senses" (329). Interestingly, Ballard's later complication of his 'cautionary tale' warning possibly puts him more in line with Baudrillard's reading than Sobchak's.

Sontag, in "The Pornographic Imagination", wherein she analyses both Sade and Réage, describes pornography as that which aims to arouse (208), a definition that may seem off-handedly simple but importantly links the generic coding to the intention of the author, or, at least, to the intention visible in the text and its paratexts. The reader has conflicting evidence, in *Crash* and elsewhere, as to whether arousal is Ballard's intention; the generic and even moral questions which the reader feels they should ask of the book are, therefore, unclear. *Crash*'s immediate and unapologetic fetishisation of its subject matter, for example, may initially appear to assume an audience which, like its narrator, and perhaps its author, sees the divine rather than the abyssal in its post-human vision. This may spur some into a resistant reading, wherein an attempt is made to actively ignore or annul the effects of the novel, and the reader assumes themselves to be outside of the novel's target audience. *Crash* is similar, in this manner, to the tradition of Sade and Réage in that it initially appears to assume a reader receptive to the generic conventions of pornography. Its tone suggests that the novel's contained fantasies are of and endorsed by its author, perhaps, even, informed by experience; however, *Crash* does not pair the eagerness of its narrator's tone with pornography's other generic markers. In pornography, the erotic vision is actualised, ontologically fusing sexual fantasy with the reality of the textual world. *Crash* does not do this. While its vision of the world is certainly infused with its narrator's fetish, it is clear that this does not actually alter reality. Breasts and penises are not, therefore, universally large, airport prostitutes do not enjoy the brutalities inflicted on them, and the sex scenes do not steadily increase in participants as the novel progresses. Again, as Baudrillard specifies, *Crash* never uses the words cunt or cock, only the humble vulva and penis. In fact, such terms are almost noticeable in their absence, as there are cocktail parties, a Hitchcock retrospective, and many cockpits, cocked elbows and cocked hips. None of these facts, of course, erase the sex from the novel, they merely complicate our access to pornographic interpretive codes that might disambiguate it. Sex thereby becomes estranged and mechanised.

There are, of course, readers of *Crash* that will settle on a reading wherein *Crash is* pornography and *is* meant to arouse, a reading which likely ends in confusion as to how the author managed to fail so miserably at writing pornography, and horror at its popularity and critical standing. However, as Sontag notes, pornography is generally considered as relatively focused or singular in its aims to arouse the reader (208), and, by both this metric and the aforementioned absence of generic markers, most readers should be relatively quick to realise that this is not the sole aim of *Crash*. *Crash* as pornography is, specifically, an interpretation that most editions of the novel tend to guard against through their accompanying paratexts. The Fourth Estate edition cited here, for example, features an introduction from the far safer Zadie Smith, who specifically addresses the issue of "horrified readers [condemning the novel] as fantastical pornography" (ix). It also features Will Self's description of Ballard as "the last great English avatar of the avant-garde" on the front cover, a sanitising adornment in itself. Ballard's frequently reproduced introduction to the novel,

originally featured in the French translation, likewise works to block this interpretive route by labelling *Crash* as a warning. Readers, then, who do not notice that the book is absent of pornographic generic markers, have many other codes available which might reassure them that Ballard did not intend for *Crash* to be read as pure pornography.

This insistence on blocking such a reading expresses, perhaps, a fear of it. *Crash*'s erotic content can never, of course, be erased, and if the reader looks further into Ballard's commentary on it they can also find his description of *Crash* as "the first pornographic novel based on technology" ("Some Words About *Crash!*"49), along with the aforementioned complicating of his 'warning' claim. Even the points argued here in relation to generic markers could be seen as attempts to quarantine *Crash*'s inherently pornographic nature. These arguments are, after all, composed largely in retrospective analysis rather than in the reading experience. In the latter, there will always be a limit as to how successfully a reader can so contain this aspect of the novel, if that even is their goal. This is evident in the fact that returning to or rereading *Crash* by no means robs the novel of its ability to shock, nor its more disquieting embodied effects.

A principal source of these effects is the power of Ballard's writing to imbue even the abjectly disgusting with a type of beauty which falls between an eroticisation and an aestheticisation. The latter, however, gives readers the 'safer' option to invest their creative energy in an appreciation for Ballard's artistry, thereby sanitising his intention through poetic licence ('avant-garde', 'daring', and so on). This does not, of course, remove the erotic, nor the troublingly erotic, from *Crash*. Even if one is satisfied that Ballard did not intend for *Crash* to be read and enjoyed in the manner of *120 Days of Sodom*, it is yet composed of almost two hundred pages of constant fixation, fetish, fantasising and sex. Transforming *Crash*'s disgust into beauty may, therefore, be double-edged, as *Crash*'s ability to excite may fill the vacuum left by the ostensible departure of disgust, which may inculcate a shocking return of disgust and horror. While *Crash* is by no means traditional erotica, it may yet arouse, the bodily effects of which are unlikely to go unnoticed by the reader. Horror may be the end point of this experience, as *Crash* demonstrates the ease with which we become accustomed to, and even titillated by, the grotesquery of the motorway. Though most readers will resist recognising themselves in the main characters, it is easy to see ourselves elsewhere in the novel: in those that gape at accidents, or that idly flick through images of war and famine, that nightly relax in front of televised scenes of horror and disaster. The estranging of our numbness to this new normal leads to the grotesque horror of the kind described by Kayser, being a vision of the radical alienness and absurdity of our world. This horror is also expressed in Zadie Smith's introduction to the novel: "To read Ballard's descriptions of 'flyovers overla[ying] one another like copulating giants, immense legs straddling each other's legs' was to find the sentimental architecture of my childhood revealed as a monstrosity" (vi).

From Disgusting to Droll

Moving, then, to the grotesque's final reaction, which my descriptions thus far, particularly around disgust, may have illustrated as increasingly unlikely in *Crash*: humour. Humour researchers Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, however, far from seeing disgust as a barrier to laughter, characterise it as a gateway to comedy. Drawing on benign-violation theory, they argue that humour requires that two incongruous ideas be held about a situation simultaneously: "The benign-violation hypothesis suggests that anything that is threatening to one's sense of how the world 'ought to be' will be humorous, as long as the threatening situation also seems benign" (1142). There are several routes by which a reader may, therefore, find *Crash* humorous, or at least humorous at times, once, that is, they are able to figure the novel as some variation of benign (for example, aesthetic or symbolic), though this will be difficult for the reader who does not find a way to sanitise Ballard's intention.

McGraw and Warren found that a common way in which transgressive humour is rendered benign is through the creation of psychological distance. They contextualise this with a joke from Mel Brooks: "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die" (qtd. on 1147). Individuals, they show, are more likely to be amused by humour that is more exaggerated, and, therefore, of either greater hypotheticality or at a greater psychological distance (1147). Construal theory maintains

that the more distant an object is from an individual, the less likely they are to think about it, and the more likely their thinking on it will be in abstract terms rather than concrete. Exaggeration, therefore, is not funny because it is simply disgust or horror multiplied, but because it has thereby changed genre, meaning that the codes by which it is interpreted have less concern with concrete danger and more with abstract intention. Both humour and analysis, then, are orientated around the bridging of incongruities. Furthermore, extending McGraw and Warren's conception of humour into ideas of play illustrates the same tendency in wider treatments of the grotesque: by casting a figure or text as grotesque, it becomes an object for aesthetic attention (benign), which is, itself, a form of play.

To illustrate the comedic effect of exaggeration, consider John Crace's review of the novel, which takes the form of a parodic rewriting of *Crash* wherein Ballard's style is exaggerated:

> once Catherine had left for the airport to have sex with 93 masked BOAC pilots, I took Renata, an assistant with whom I had been having an affair at the advertising agency where I worked, for a drive. . . . As we reached the roundabout where I nearly died, I placed Renata's hand on my scarred thighs, while forcing my fist into her natal cleft, both juddering with excitement as we orgasmed simultaneously as the car sideswiped a cyclist.

Crace's adaptation of Crash, while exaggerating the elements of horror and disgust, pushes the embodied effect not further toward physical disgust or horror, but towards laughter. Crace's exaggerating of Crash's language and plot creates a psychological distance as it is immediately clear in Crace's narrative that the sex acts are intended as parody and therefore completely unreal; once Catherine, at the beginning of the review, begins 'idly' giving Ballard's penis a Chinese burn, our interpretive focus shifts toward the comic. This does not, however, extinguish the image from the text. Investing creative energy into forming the image may yet result in a strong embodied effect (grimace, recoil, sympathy pain); however, Crace's authorial intent is, at this point, far clearer to us than Ballard's is in *Crash*, making it easy to abstractify and therefore disembody the contained images.

Progression through *Crash* demands that decisions, interim or otherwise, be made as to matters such as genre, intention and interpretation. The elephant in the room, here, is still the Ballard in the book. The manner in which Ballard's intention is figured, and *Crash*'s genre is thereby coded, is imperative in allowing us to neutralise or transform the embodied effects of the novel into something benign, something that can be played with. If we can code Ballard as droll then it likewise allows us to gravitate toward the comedic aspect of the grotesque. The excesses of Ballard's prose are thereby coded as humorous exaggerations, and *Crash* becomes an automotive-themed Aristocrats joke.[5] Ballard's ethos can likewise, of course, code *Crash* far more seriously, as, either, an avant-garde work of postmodernism, or as the work of a potentially dangerous fetishist. The former of these is not incongruous with a coding of Ballard as humorous, nor, even, is the latter. Readers who make quite a significant creative investment into *Crash*'s imagery, meanwhile, may find it difficult to move from disgust to humour; however, readers with some experience in transgressive literature or postmodernism will have access to contextual codes which may both counteract the embodied effects of the novel, and, furthermore, dissolve the concrete heft of the images into lighter abstraction. This juxtaposition of the very serious alongside the intellectually abstract, paired with diverging moral perspectives on the novel, is likewise ripe (according to McGraw and Warren) for comedy.

Conclusion

The reader has many possibly competing, and possibly complementary, interpretive paths to choose from. They may choose interpretive codes very early, and enter the novel with a relatively closed set of expectations. Knowing that *Crash* is related to a certain artistic movement, that it is widely appreciated as

5 The Aristocrats is a famously taboo-defying joke format in which a family, typically in front of a talent agent, perform outrageous and generally illegal sex acts upon each other, sometimes involving the family dog. Typically, the comedian ad-libs the particulars of the act, however the punch line almost always follows the agent's eventual question as to the name of their act: 'The Aristocrats!'

a cultural touchstone, and having some experience with its type of writing, is far more likely to engender a neutral or positive reading experience. This will not, however, necessarily 'protect' the reader from the embodied potential of Ballard's prose, nor will it necessarily banish suspicions about the author's moral disposition, erotic preferences or artistic intention. What this article hopes to make clear is that any such disambiguating of *Crash* can only be partial or temporary, and is bound to be more successful at a distance from the novel – say, in a critical essay – than in its actual reading. Like the gargoyles which Carroll cites as examples of core grotesques (308), any decision the individual reader makes as to *Crash*'s nature – humorous, horrific, disgusting – can, under different light, in a different mood, or at a different time, all too easily change.

We employ the term grotesque to lend shape and substance to something which is, by definition, without classification. There is something paradoxical in this type of labelling – the categorically uncategorizable. Experience, however, marches us toward automatization (cf. Shklovksy). We have, then, quasi-sensically, stable grotesques, safe grotesques, or prescriptive grotesques. Including *Crash* under the label of grotesque does not quite carry the safety of these appellations. *Crash*'s grotesque nature is, however, with some teasing out, quite familiar to any traditional definition. *Crash*, like the physical grotesque, is primarily a visual phenomenon; the characteristic experience engendered by the novel arises from its imagery. It has, of course, qualities which are particular to its medium; *Crash* is imagistic, but it is not an image. It cannot, however, be reduced to its purely literary aspects. *Crash*'s plot is not its experience. It is not what causes, to borrow Brooks Landon's descriptions, one's knees to hurt, teeth to ache, skin to crawl, stomach to churn, or balls to shrivel (326).

Critically, the desire to interpret frequently finds it necessary to erase an aspect of *Crash*; like Frankenstein's monster, who/which poses the question as to whether it/he should be interpreted as monster or man, or monstrous man, or human monster, the *Crash* reading experience pushes the reader to contain its grotesque nature through, typically, generic and critical contextualisation. This interpretive movement is inherently reductive – as, perhaps, all interpretive movements are. Interpretation is a categorising activity, and categories, even when defined by their 'anti' nature (such as the grotesque) are inherently domesticating. Our analytical operations frequently rely, therefore, on a critical focus, a lens under which the portions of the novel can be isolated and anatomised, aping the core activity of the novel itself; but, can this new sense survive the corresponding zoom-out, wherein the rest of *Crash*'s anarchic amalgam is again visible?

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