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## Fractured Bodies & Social Wounds: The Simulation of Trauma in J.G. Ballard's *Crash*

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"In the future, bodies will become increasingly insignificant – nothing more than a "costume," a "vehicle," something to be changed in our search "to become who we are."  
(Orlan, *My Body Is My Art* 458)

J.G. Ballard's sci-fi novel *Crash* is a powerful – albeit highly controversial – depiction of man's destiny in late industrial culture, "the destiny of [his] human body in a world of automotive disaster" and proliferating technology (Youngquist). It traumatically "crashes" the boundaries between bodies and machines, interior states of subjectivity and the external world, even the boundaries between fiction and reality, and depicts a ghastly marriage between sex and technology through the mediation of the metallic car-body – which, as Ballard points out in his "Introduction" to the French edition of the text, is portrayed in *Crash* "not only as a sexual image, but as a total metaphor for man's life in today's society" (Ballard 6).

Thus the car in *Crash* functions as both sexual signifier – "the sexual act's greatest and only true locus" (Ballard 171) – and as the centre point of consumerist desire in a materialistic, bourgeois society which is "ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography" (Ballard 4), a world, that is, in which values have crumbled and where all that is solid simply melts into air.<sup>1</sup> In this world, everything becomes abstraction and surface, even the body. As Paul Youngquist points out, the body in *Crash* becomes surface upon its contact with the automobile, "a surface which, like that of the photographic image, lacks opposable interior and exterior." For the body functions less as organic entity in the world of *Crash* than as abstract, conceptualized sign. Substance gives way to semiotics, "the vital, active organism gives way to the conceptual, abstract image". According to Youngquist, once the body enters the interior of a car, it loses substance and "becomes the prosthesis of a speed machine," a speed machine which transforms the body into "semiotic function,"

an abstract sign in what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the “external, mechanical, symbolic order” which structures the text (qtd. in Seltzer 267).

Along similar lines, Jean Baudrillard, in his compelling reading of *Crash*, remarks that “the entire body becomes a sign which offers itself in the exchange of body language.” There is nowhere any sense of the body’s organicity in this symbolic “exchange of body language” (that is, the exchange of signs which occurs between the body of the car and the body of the subject), not even when the body is impacted on, and thus transformed, by the automobile. As Baudrillard makes clear:

It is all identical: all shocks, all collisions, all impacts, all the metallurgy of accidents is inscribed in a semiurgy of the body – *not in anatomy or physiology*, but in a semiurgy of contusions, scars, mutilations, and wounds which are like new sexual organs opened in the body.

(*Two Essays*, emphasis mine)

Divorced from any anatomico-physiological setting, the body is here grounded in a “semiurgy” or abstract system of signs. And, as the wound is part of the body, it too is subsumed into this system, becoming what Baudrillard calls a “symbolic” wound, one which is deinvested of libidinal cathexis and functions merely as abstract sign.

It is certainly the case that there are multiple instances in *Crash* which would seem to corroborate Baudrillard’s claims of a “symbolic” wound, or what I would like to call a “wound-as-sign”. The text is richly strewn with wound imagery, the wound as planned, simulated, imaginary or real. From its very first chapter, it documents the principal character Vaughan’s fascination “with the *mysterious eroticism* (italics mine) of wounds” formed out of “the perverse logic of blood-soaked instrument panels, seat-belts smeared with excrement, sun-visors lined with brain tissue” (Ballard 12). The wounds themselves are “mysterious” and have their own internal, linguistic code. Formed on the body by its impact with the metallic, interior surface of the car –

“by shattering instrument dials, fractured gear levels and parking-light switches” – they are new signs waiting to be “read” and demystified, “a cuneiform of the flesh” (90) which is ready to unlock (once it is decoded) a new, affectless, even meaningless, sexuality borne out of the perverse union of flesh and metal.

All the cuts, excisions and technical scars on the body are thus “templates for new genital organs,” exposed orifices in which are encoded multiple, sexual possibilities (Ballard 177).<sup>2</sup> As the narrator Ballard points out in a moment when he is enacting wound sex with the young, crippled woman Gabrielle, their sexual act is devoid of all feeling or sexual pleasure. Like mechanical automatons, each explores the wounds of the other, both “deciphering together these codes of a sexuality made possible by our two car-crashes” (178-9). And it is the same with almost all sexual acts in *Crash* generally – they are “divorced from any possible physical expression” and intimacy (35), formal, mechanistic acts “abstracted from all feeling” (129).

Thus the wound functions as an abstract, disembodied sign. As such, it is disseminated along the semiotic system like a signature, infinitely reproducible and infinitely prone to simulation. In Ballard’s emotionless encounter with Gabrielle, the “wound-scars on [his] chest and abdomen” which Gabrielle probes with her tongue are simply “*signatures* (italics mine), inscribed on [his] body by the dashboard and control surfaces of [the] car” (178).<sup>3</sup> And, as Jacques Derrida aptly points out in *Margins of Philosophy*, signatures function only in so far as they are repeatable or “iterable”, and thus able to be repeated in several different contexts (that is, the very fact of the signature’s grounded repeatability ensures precisely that it can be repeated *elsewhere*). “In order to function, that is, in order to be legible, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to detach itself from the present and singular intention of its production” (328). Hence a signature, like a wound, can be endlessly counterfeited, imitated and simulated. This is nowhere more powerfully depicted in *Crash* than in Vaughan’s constant reproductive simulation of injuries through the mediation of photographic images.<sup>4</sup> In all his sexual acts he simulates the postures of wounded bodies as they are captured by his camera, “calculat[ing] the

most elegant parameters of their injuries” and “mimic[king] these injuries in his own driving postures” (Ballard 145).

Vaughan’s compulsive and incessant mimetizing of others’ wounds is particularly striking, if not ambivalent; it becomes uncertain whether, or rather to what extent, Vaughan is simply “mimicking” or has finally achieved what Seltzer identifies as that “mimetic coalescence of self and other: a mimetic identification intensified to the point of reproduction” (257). This ambivalence in *Crash* suggests that the boundaries between self and other no longer matter; they have been “coalesced” in the image of Vaughan (amongst others). Vaughan is his own photographic image, “both product and producer of other images. [He] is defined by the technologies of photography that condition his perception” (Youngquist). In so far as Vaughan’s self is subsumed within this technological other, the photographic image which conditions and defines his field of perception, he becomes a mere object caught up in a virulent reproduction or mimesis. As Seltzer aptly puts it: “To the extent that the mimetic compulsion resembles a photography at the level of the object, the boundaries come down between technical processes of reproduction and the life process” (184). And in Vaughan these boundaries have certainly come down. He is constantly rehearsing and *mimetizing* his own death, always preparing himself through mimicry for that ultimate moment in which life steps back and the flesh is brutally married to the car’s cold, metallic surface. Indeed, this is evidenced from the very first few lines of *Crash*, in which the narrator comments: “Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash. During our friendship he had *rehearsed his death in many crashes* (italics mine), but this was his only true accident” (7).

Yet while Vaughan is rehearsing his own death, he is also rehearsing the deaths of others, “dream[ing] endlessly of the deaths of the famous, inventing imaginary crashes for them” (Ballard 15). His obsession with his own death is inextricably linked to his frenzied desire to sexually collide in a car crash with the film actress Elizabeth Taylor, to “[die] at the moment of her orgasm” (9). An elaborate and fetishistic fantasy is thus woven around the images of famous celebrities, and the

desire to unite with them in sexual death marks the complete process of identification with them. The celebrity functions as the idealized ego ideal in consumerist society. And, what is more, “the dead celebrity stands for the surrogate propitiatory victim, the “mirror image” whose failed sacrifice serves only to highlight the miserable charade of commodity culture” (Brottman and Sharrett).

Thus as Mikita Brottman and Christopher Sharrett point out, there is an extreme investment of “violent eroticism, voyeurism, and obsessive curiosity” surrounding the body of a dead celebrity. In one of the narrator’s own visions, he imagines “the injuries of film actresses and television personalities, whose bodies would flower into dozens of auxiliary orifices, points of sexual conjunction with their *audiences* (emphasis mine) formed by the swerving technology of the automobile” (Ballard 180). It is as if only through the celebrity’s death, both symbolically and literally, can there be a sought-for union between the celebrity and his/her audience.

In effect, every car crash in the text – both real and imagined – becomes a shared event. The collision-site is like a proscenium, drawing crowds and crowds of spectators to witness its “bloody eucharist” (Ballard 157). The world of *Crash* is a stage, and on this stage are only cars infinitely involved in potential and actual collisions with each other. As the narrator points out, Vaughan envisions “the whole world dying in a simultaneous automobile disaster, millions of vehicles hurled together in a terminal congress of spurting loins and engine coolant” (16). In a similar, apocalyptic moment, the narrator watches the traffic going by from his veranda, “determined to spot the first signs of this end of the world by automobile” (50).

“All the world’s a stage,” says the pessimist Jaques in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, “And all the men and women merely players” (2.7.139-40). When early on in the text the narrator Ballard crashes into another car carrying a young doctor with her husband, the collision kills the husband and Ballard feels that he and Helen Remington, the surviving wife, “[are] the principal actors at the climax of some grim drama in an unrehearsed theatre of technology, involving these crushed machines, the dead man destroyed in their collision” (Ballard 22). While the accident involves only

“two” principle actors, the notion of a theatre, in which many spectators can gather to watch the effects of the collision, makes the accident appear more like a collective spectacle than a private ordeal. As Ballard points out, many spectators gather round the scene of the accident to watch this crash-event.

As Seltzer documents in *Serial Killers*, there has come to be an increasing fascination with car accidents as forms of public display, a fascination which has led to the creation of what he calls a “wound culture”:

The convening of the public around scenes of violence – the rushing to the scene of the accident, the milling around the point of impact – has come to make up a *wound culture*: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound.

(Seltzer 1)<sup>5</sup>

And *Crash* is certainly a case in point. There, as we have already seen, the wound is not merely private but social, a public exhibit which is opened out for others to see and explore. It is not just a focal point highly invested with erotic desire, religiously admired to the point of mystic idealization,<sup>6</sup> but a contact-point or switch-point between inner and outer worlds. “The switch-point, or crash-point, between inside and outside is, above all, the wound” (Seltzer 264). And this is powerfully evidenced in *Crash*, where “the shock of contact between bodies and machines (eroticized accidents: real, planned, simulated) is also the traumatic reversal between private fantasy and the public sphere” (Seltzer 264-5).

In other words, this collapsing between private and public boundaries is in itself traumatic, and this is borne out by the trauma of the wound itself, which serves as an ambivalent marker on the cusp between the private and the public, perception and representation. Yet, to begin with, “trauma” (taken from the Greek and meaning “wound”), the very notion of trauma itself, curiously wavers between the

intrapsychical and the social, the physiological and the psychical. Thus while medicine had, in the main, recognized trauma as purely physical, Freud's psychoanalytic framework brought psychical trauma onto the scene also, in the form of an "internal foreign body", a shock to the system, which originates primarily from without and attacks – secondarily – from within. As he points out in *Studies on Hysteria*, the psychical trauma "acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must be continued to be regarded as an agent that is still at work" (qtd. in Laplanche 42). Thus there is an internal-external bind or double logic here – what Laplanche cites as "a kind of *internal-external* instance" – in which trauma curiously wavers between inner and outer worlds (42). Thus while the shock of a car crash is an external event, the trauma (or rather the *memory* of the trauma) which it produces in the subject is at once physical and – although belatedly – psychical.

I would like to hold on to this idea of trauma as wavering between the internal and external, since it is precisely this wavering or oscillation of trauma which, in my view, lends the wounds in *Crash* such an ambivalent status, making them appear at once psychical and social, virtual and real, a matter of both representation and perception at the same time. For while Youngquist and Baudrillard see the wounds in the text as primarily "symbolic" and semiotic, as disembodied artefacts or signs which circulate in "a semiotics without meaning" (Youngquist), the gaping wounds of the text seem to specify otherwise. For they may be abstract signs, but they are *also* embodied, "real" events. "They [describe] an exact language of *pain* (emphasis mine) and sensation, eroticism and desire" (Ballard 90).

The body feels, even *lives*, pain. It is not so easy to abstract it from its materiality and root it in some conceptual or even pre-ontological discourse of semiotics. Indeed, the very question of semiotics, of language itself, presupposes the existence of the body, even if only as referential, material sign. As Jacques Lacan points out in *Écrits*, "language is not immaterial. It is a subtle body, but body it is" (95). After Ballard's crash, he is left with "the reality of the wounds on [his] chest and legs," which serve as very real and unforgettable markers of the collision between his

own body and the car's interior (Ballard 37). As Ballard the narrator points out: "The crash was the only real experience I had been through for years. For the first time I was *in physical confrontation* with my own body, an inexhaustible encyclopedia of *pains* and discharges" (39, emphasis added).

Wounds are "an inexhaustible encyclopedia of pains," both part of a conceptual system of signs but also concrete markers of pain. And, as Vivian Sobchack points out in her criticism of Baudrillard's reading of *Crash*, "there's nothing like a little pain to bring us (back) to our senses, nothing like a real (not imagined) mark or wound or artificial orifice to counter Baudrillard's postmodern romanticism." The body is as much a subject as it is an object; it is all too easy to forget our lived and imagined sense "of the human body not merely as a material object among others, but as a material subject that bleeds and suffers and hurts for others because it can bleed and suffer and hurt for oneself" (Sobchack). While Sobchack's argument may read like a nostalgic desire to recoup once more the body's subjectivity, which (one may argue) has *always already* been disseminated and fragmented via artifice and technological practices, it is significant that she brings the notion of the material body to the fore once more. For Ballard's *Crash* ultimately negotiates what happens to this material body in its constant mediation with the machine. As such, it is neither chillingly ironic nor even celebratory in its tone, only "cautionary" in its exploration of the limitless possibilities, many of them sexual, which are opened up by the body's endless mediation with a constantly expanding world of technology: "Needless to say, the ultimate role of *Crash* is cautionary, a warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape" (Ballard 6).

There is certainly an urgent (even inevitable) immediacy here: the technological landscape is constantly trying to impinge on the boundaries of the subject's body, the boundaries of his consciousness and agency – and with much success. Yet to what extent the boundaries break down – and the consequences of this "breaking in" – is precisely what preoccupies Ballard. What happens when boundaries come down,

when “the borderzones of identity” (Ballard 49) are blurred by the surrounding technoscape, and when flesh is violently married to chrome and metal? What possibilities will techno-sex, the ghastly union of sex with technology, ultimately unlock? There is simply no concrete answer to these questions – only an infinite number of possibilities.

The body’s mediation with technology both transforms (even cancels) it and prosthetically extends its possibilities *ad infinitum*. When Ballard has sex with the crippled Gabrielle, whose body is fitted in with a spinal brace and straps – she is, of course, the perfect image of the prosthetic other, her body completely mutilated and transformed by the metallic technology of the car – he feels her wounds not only as “templates for new genital organs,” but as “the moulds of sexual possibilities yet to be created in a hundred experimental car-crashes” (Ballard 177). Gabrielle’s wounds, formed by technology, open out an infinite plenitude of future possibilities; they are inexhaustibly iterable; erotic signifiers which are constantly circulating in the symbolic, technical economy of the text.

And, as we have already seen, wounds are the switch-point between the inner and outer world, the public and private registers. They are as much social as they are private. As such, they do not meaninglessly circulate in this symbolic economy; they mark an event, a crash-event which in itself has made possible this endless circulation of erotic signifiers. And, what is more, it is precisely in this endless circulation that trauma is to be located. Hence the logic of trauma mimesis is played out. It is not simply that the wound-signs evidence the trauma; trauma comes back; it recurs in the circulation of wound-signs. More precisely, the recurrence of the trauma *itself* is traumatic in this endless circulation of signifiers.

The erotic signifier is both transmitted and received, always reaching its “destination”, which is the unconscious. If, as Manuel Camblor illustrates, sexuality for Lacan is “the reality of the unconscious,” then “the eroticized emission and reception of a signifier [...] effectively establishes an area of contact with the unconscious.” Camblor is, of course, referring specifically to David Cronenberg’s

film *Crash*, and how the characters' signifying wounds within the film could become traumatic if they are visually perceived and "received" by the spectator as erotic, if they succeed, that is, in reaching their destination and broaching the spectator's unconscious. Yet while the spectators of the film may be in a potentially dangerous situation, in so far as they recognize these wounds as highly erotic and painful markers which can activate their own unconscious fantasies and desires, this is not to say that the protagonists in Ballard's *Crash* are not confronted with the same dilemma.

As we have already seen, the wounds in *Crash* are highly charged with erotic energy. And, not only do they function as erotic signifiers, but they also have the potential to broach the subject's consciousness in unexpected ways. When Ballard has sex with Gabrielle, he ejaculates on her wounds, and through "these sexual apertures" once more consciously relives (even reconfigures) the accident, "marrying through [his] own penis the car in which [he] had crashed and the car in which Gabrielle had met her near-death" (Ballard 179).

Thus while the pain of the car crash is consciously real, there is a (conscious and unconscious) reactivation of the traumatic pain later on, the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action). When Ballard has a sexual encounter with Helen Remington he unzips her dress, and the "razor-like links" of the zip against his flesh trigger off the memory of the trauma of the crash: "As these razor-like links cut my knuckles I felt her teeth across my ear. The sharpness of these pains reminded me of the bite of the windshield glass during my crash" (79). Quite clearly, this particular passage maps out the after-effects of the traumatic experience triggered by the crash itself, even if the pain evidenced here is physical rather than psychical. Trauma returns, violently reconfigured in the sexual act which takes place – significantly enough – in Ballard's car, the new car he buys after the accident being an exact replica of the one destroyed in the crash. He remarks that "Catherine regarded with profound suspicion my choice of the same make and model as the car in which I had crashed. I had even selected the same make of wing mirror and mudguard spat"

(Ballard 65-6). There is a repetition compulsion at work here, a kind of mimetic reduplication of the initial trauma – albeit in reconfigured form. As Ballard points out, he and Helen constantly replay the accident through their sexual acts:

In each sexual act together we recapitulated her husband's death, re-seeding the image of his body in her vagina in terms of the hundred perspectives of our mouths and thighs, nipples and tongues within the metal and vinyl compartment of the car.

(Ballard 83)

Once again there is a mediation between the body and the machine, a splaying out of private desires onto “the metal and vinyl compartment of the car.” Yet there is also a reference to the initial trauma, which phantasmatically returns at the same time as it has made these sexual acts possible. Through the image of the husband's dead body we are once more reminded of the fated accident which has brought these two key players of a gruesome drama, Helen and Ballard, together. Frenetically and repeatedly Ballard returns to the scene of the accident, rehearsing the route over and over again in a number of cars until his sexual act with Helen: “Was [Helen] aware [...] of the route I had rehearsed so many times in so many different vehicles, and that I had celebrated in her husband's death the unity of our injuries and my orgasm?” (Ballard 75).

Trauma effectively becomes both repetition and mimesis here. Ballard becomes what Seltzer refers to as “a duplicating machine” (258) that is “not merely subject to recurrence but to the recurrence of recurrence itself” (265). In other words, trauma is compulsive mimesis, and mimesis itself is always already mimetized. Ballard constantly reproduces the external event (that is, the car crash) which has initiated the trauma – if not in fact at least in fantasy. As such, his constant reproduction of this trauma marks the “traumatic “failure of his psyche to accept the fact of his own consciousness” – a failure which in fact J.G. Ballard registers as trauma mimesis:

“Our traumas [are] mimetized” (in effect, the mimetic compulsion [is] mimetized) in the transfers between what is inside us and the machine” (265).

Thus, simply because trauma is mimetized or simulated does not mean that it is any less poignant; in fact, it is its very mimetization which reproduces the trauma once more, “a trauma within a trauma”, trauma mimetized. Yet, on another level, this very mimetization of trauma has the curious effect of also dispelling, even obliterating, the trauma (an effacement which serves once more to reawaken the trauma in an endless, repetitive cycle). As Derrida has occasion to remark in one of his interviews, to date a work of art such as a poem is to inscribe it with a wound which is straightaway effaced, since the date itself marks the poem’s singularity as an event at the same time as that singularity is necessarily lost in the date’s very iterability. And this is the same for all experiences in general:

Given that all experience is the experience of a singularity and thus is the desire to keep this singularity as such, the “as such” of the singularity, that is, what permits one to keep it as what it is, this is what effaces it right away.

(Derrida, *From Traumatism to Promise* 378)<sup>7</sup>

Thus, at the same time as the crash marks a singular event, this is precisely what constantly puts it under erasure. And, after all, car crashes are never quite singular events: they are iterable, repeatable, reproducible. The world of *Crash* is saturated in them (the crash as simulated, real, planned or virtual). They are infinitely desirable because of their ability to merge with the flesh and to create a new techno-body full of promise, opening itself out to a plenitude of techno-sexual possibilities. Thus, while the collapse of boundaries between the body and the machine registers a trauma, it also (paradoxically) breeds exciting, future possibilities. As Ballard points out in relation to wounds formed out of crashes, they are “contact points” which open out “all the sexual possibilities of [the survivors’] futures” (156). They are never entirely exhausted as (traumatic?) signifiers, constantly linking themselves onto other chains

of imaginary, future signifiers. The narrator Ballard's all-embracing vision of the "repertory of orifices" also encapsulates imaginary wounds which are yet to come in the distant future by way of "unimagined technologies": "I visualized [...] the wounds upon which erotic fantasies might be erected, the extraordinary sexual acts celebrating the possibilities of unimagined technologies" (179).

The future is uncertain. The "nightmare marriage between sex and technology" breeds monsters (Ballard 6); indeed, the future *is* the monster. As Derrida points out, "the future is necessarily monstrous: the figure of the future, that is, that which can only be surprising, that for which we are not prepared [...] is heralded by species of monsters" (*From Traumatism to Promise* 386-7). Yet this monster is somehow made "legible": it is inevitably accommodated, acculturated, even normalized.

As we have seen, the future opens out infinite possibilities, many horrific, others more promising. As Chris Gray points out in *Cyborg Citizen*, "the proliferation of cyborgs is the promise of monsters, the promise of possibilities. Horror is possible, perhaps inevitable. But resistance, even joy, should be just as possible" (195). Blurring and transgressing boundaries between machinic and life processes, the body and the machine, is both dangerous and exciting. Yet it can also be liberating, particularly if we are able (ideally) to "choose the borders we inhabit and transgress" (195-6).

As Richard Sclove points out in *Democracy and Technology*, the political choices we make can lead to "a more democratic technological order" which enhances, even multiplies, our individual freedoms:

It is possible to evolve societies in which people live in greater freedom, exert greater influence on their circumstances, and experience greater dignity, self-esteem, purpose, and well-being. The route to such a society must include struggles toward democratic institutions for evolving a more democratic technological order. Is it realistic to envision a democratic politics of technology? Isn't it unrealistic not to?

(Richard Sclove, qtd. in Gray 198)

Certainly Sclove's vision is idyllic, even nostalgic, but not impossible. While in his "Introduction" to *Crash* Ballard advises caution in sublating the boundaries of sex and technology, body and machine, he does not exclude the possibility that in the future modern technology may actually benefit us, "provid[ing] us with hitherto undreamed-of means for tapping our own psychopathologies" (6).

Thus this is the ultimate, visionary role of *Crash* – to explore the new technological possibilities which loom in the near-future horizons of the technological landscape. As Baudrillard points out, "*Crash* is our world" (*Two Essays*). And, as *our* world, it explores *our* possibilities, showing that they are endless and positively limitless. Who knows what the future holds, what monsters and angels lurk within its unfathomable realm? We can only dream. And Ballard sums it up better than I can: "Over the profiles of [our bodies] now preside the metallized excitements of our shared dreams of technology" (41).

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This is taken from Marshall Berman's book entitled *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988). As Mikita Brottman and Christopher Sharrett point out in their article 'The end of the road: David Cronenberg's *Crash* and the fading of the West,' in *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30:2 (2002):126-132, Ballard's *Crash* is intensely preoccupied with the "commercial relationship between human and machine." It maps out the *decadence* of late capitalism and consumerist culture, effectively portraying "a society obsessed with violence, brand names, destruction, machines, time, boredom, and repetitive sex, a society on the cusp of collapse into nihilistic dereliction and disaster." This article is available in *Literature Online* <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 11<sup>th</sup> June 2004].

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, this linkage between the wound and genital orifices is also attested to by Freud (who linked the wound to sexual difference) and clinical experience in general. As Armando Favazza points out in his *Bodies Under Siege: Self-mutilation and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), skin-cutting is seen as "represent[ing] the creation of multiple little female genitalia on the skin," which the subject can then fondle at will and touch unrestrainedly in order to gain sexual stimulation (163). While Favazza's scope of reference is obviously very different, it is particularly interesting – perhaps even illuminating – to read the wounds or "cuts" in *Crash* as gendered in this way. There is certainly a sexual politics in the text which has often been missed, yet an examination of it is clearly beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Baudrillard in *Two Essays*: "And the copulations and semen which fill this book [*Crash*] have no more sensual value than the outlines of wounds have the value of violence, even metaphorical. They are only signatures."

<sup>4</sup> I use the term 'mediation' of the photographic image here rather deliberately. While for Baudrillard "the photo is no more a medium than is the technology or the body – all are simultaneous in this

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universe where the anticipation of an event coincides with its reproduction, and even with its “real” occurrence” (*Two Essays*), I read the photographic image as a medium which does not lack “depth” of affectivity simply because it is reproducible, but has the ability, through its mediation with the body, to “wound” or puncture it. As Roland Barthes points out in *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), there are certain photographs which have a *punctum*, a Latin word which “refers to the notion of punctuation” and serves to designate the mark or wound made by this sharp “element which rises from the scene [of the photograph], shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (26). Cf. Walter Benjamin in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), where the camera is seen as “penetrating” into the unconscious, and drawing forth an “unconscious optics” which would otherwise have remained invisible to the naked eye: “Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man” (230).

<sup>5</sup> As Seltzer points out, this public fascination with wounds and violence has led to “a radical mutation and relocation of the public sphere, now centered on the shared and reproducible spectacles of pathological violence” (254). Yet, while there has been a growing “pathological violence” in the public sphere, this is not to say that public displays of violence did not exist before, only that perhaps there has been an increasing assimilation or pathologization of the violence itself. Note, for instance, Michel Foucault’s fascinating documentation in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991) of how in the early modern period pillory, scaffolding, and other forms of torture or execution had to be public events in order for the juridical system to work: “And, from the point of view of the law that imposes it, public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph” (34). While Foucault is obviously tracing a very different era, in which power was centralized around the sovereign state, this does not necessarily imply that the spectators constantly gathering around the scaffold to witness the spectacles of violent torture are in any way fundamentally different from the spectators gathering around the violent spectacle of the car crash. Who is to say, for instance, that the former did not find the public execution of the condemned man as fascinating? As liable to trigger within them a violent desire to simulate the torture in some form or other? Whatever the case, it must not be forgotten that in both instances the violence becomes a communal event in the (pathological) public sphere. All this is opposed, of course, to Jürgen Habermas’ notions of the public sphere as freely democratic and “the alternative to the sphere of public violence (the domain of the state and of the police)” (Seltzer 253).

<sup>6</sup> The image of the wound itself obviously resonates with religious undertones. There are constant references in the text to the mysterious, mystic quality which the wounds exude. For instance, Ballard compares the wounds to “paradisial creatures” (198). Yet this mysticism is not specifically grounded in Christian doctrine. The wounds themselves have been begotten from the perverse union of the body with metal, sex with technology. As such, they are part of what Youngquist calls “a new semio-gnosis,” of which Vaughan is the messiah. Wounds are simply signs which circulate in this “new semio-gnosis.” There is no question of transcendence, that is, the wounds on the body are not transcendental signifiers, or even signs in a play of signification for that matter. “Where once the rotting body of the crucifixion contained the play of signs, now the ruptured body of a crash multiples it.”

<sup>7</sup> While there is certainly more to be said about Derrida’s notions of wounding and iterability, it is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to fully engage in Derrida’s philosophy of difference and deconstruction. Suffice it to say that for Derrida experience in general is always already marked (paradoxically) by both iterability and erasure, repetition and loss.

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