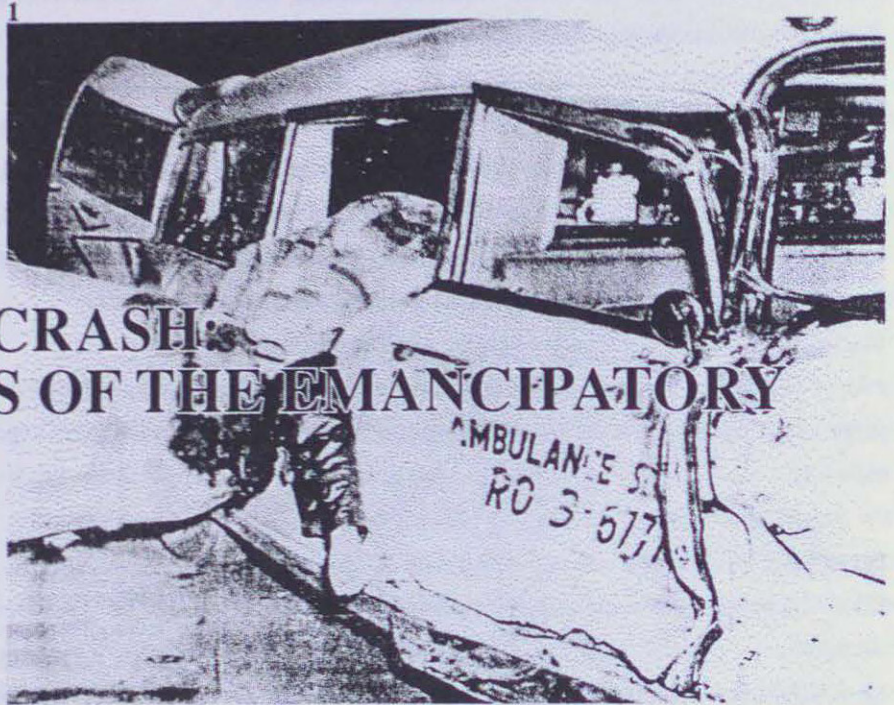


Crash!, roman de J.G. Ballard, humanise, à travers les fantômes de son protagoniste, Vaughin, le paysage anonyme des autoroutes en y projetant la destruction des véhicules et la mutilation des personnages qui les occupent. Crash! réapproprie le monde de choses que nous habitons, lui trouvant une dimension érotique et mythique jusque là ignorée.

J.G. BALLARD'S CRASH: THE MECHANICS OF THE EMANCIPATORY MACHINE

1.
Andy Warhol, Ambulance Disaster.

2.
J.G. Ballard, Re/Search No. 8/9(SF: Re/Search
Publ., 1984), p. 15.



*Jean Tinguely on a heap of broken bicycles,
Paris 1960, from Jean Tinguely - A Magic
Stronger Than Death.*

3.
Robert McCarter, Escape from the Revolving
Door: Architecture and the Machine in R.
McCarter, ed., Pamphlet Architecture No.12(NY:
Princeton, 1987).

2
[...] one's almost got to get up in the morning and make a resolution to perform some sort of deviant or anti-social act, even if its just sort of kicking the dog, in order to establish one's freedom.

3
The mechano-positivist paradigm has such a stranglehold on the practice of building, that most people take it for granted. Within some architectural circles, the possibility of a meaningful architecture is seen as completely divorced from the business of building as it's practised today. Departures from this paradigm, whether on aesthetic, social, cultural, or environmental grounds, have too easily been absorbed back into the machinations of production and consumption. The imperatives of utility and economy are seen as rational and self-evident, reducing most of these other issues into secondary concerns, as packaging to be added on later. Their credibility as ideas, as germs for alternative paradigms, is destroyed.

4
Under our noses there is a tradition of dissent that is as old as the first machine, science fiction. The poets of the machine understand its logic and language intimately enough to use them as instruments for exposing this paradigm's failings.

5
Labelling J.G. Ballard the machine's conscience would probably make him cringe; loyal saboteur or gadfly might be more apt. Along with William S. Burroughs, he is considered part of science fiction's old New Wave, characterised by a deliberate, almost formal experimentation in style and themes. Trying to link him to mainstream social criticism is a mistake. He is first and foremost a science fiction writer, and as such he

has been cited as inspiration by the Cyberpunks, science fiction's technically hip, nihilistic, new generation of radicals.

6

Crash is one of Ballard's most extreme and provocative books. He calls it the first pornographic novel based on technology. The main character, an advertising producer named Ballard (coincidentally, we hope), is involved in a car crash, injuring one person and killing another. His own injuries are minor, but as he puts it: "the sexual possibilities of everything around me has been jerked loose from my mind by the crash."

With Vaughan, a "hoodlum scientist", he goes on a crazed spin across a landscape of exit ramps, cloverleaves, multi-level parking garages and LSD fuelled explorations of the possibilities of sex and violence in an automobile, as rehearsals for Vaughan's fantasy, a car crash with Elizabeth Taylor.

7

In his vision of a car crash with the actress Vaughan was obsessed by many wounds and impacts - by the dying chromium and collapsing bulkheads of their two cars meeting head-on in complex collisions endlessly repeated in slow-motion films, by the identical wounds inflicted on their bodies, by the image of windshield glass frosting around her face as she broke its tinted surface like a death-born Aphrodite, by the compound fractures of their thighs impacted against their handbrake mountings and above all by the wounds to their genitalia, her uterus pierced by the heraldic beak of the manufacturer's medallion, his semen emptying across the luminescent dials that registered for ever the last temperature and fuel levels of the engine.

8

The connection with pornography is much more profound than what at first glance, seems to be some bizarre machine fetish. As Ballard sees it, what links science and pornography is their quality of isolating objects or events from their contexts in time and space. It is the characteristic shared by Newton's First Law of Motion and the extreme close-ups of a porn-flick. The Law ("Every body left to itself moves uniformly in a straight line") takes the ideal abstract state as a norm or building block for further relations. In a similar way, the close-up's high degree of abstraction isolates the act of copulation from reality.

9

This ability to abstract, atomise and recombine is the very basis of our rational episteme. Yet, we often ignore what gives meaning and direction to this methodology. I feel that there is still an implicit ideal of approaching a state of physical and psychological satisfaction. An illusory Eden, that as it is realized for more and more people, proves to be a velvet cage.

10

Our architecture, our media are products/projections of this thought. While most of us block out the airfields, multistory car parks, drained swimming pools, medical laboratories, high-rise blocks, clover-leaf junctions that are the infrastructure of our existence, Ballard amplifies them, revealing them as monuments of our paradigm's landscape. Clinically described, their barren forms reveal their underlying utility as extensions of someone's profit margin, yet also expose their capacity as projections of the psyche, creating the suffocating, overwhelming quality of the urban landscape.

5.

Bruce Stirling, Mirrorshades (The Cyberpunk Anthology)(NY: Ace,1986), introduction.
R. Rucker & P. Lamborn Wilson, Semiotext(e)SF (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1989), introduction.



Detail of Dissecting Machine, from Jean Tinguely - Méta.

6.

J.G. Ballard, Crash(NY: Vintage, 1973), p. 29.

7.

Ibid., p. 8.

8.

J.G. Ballard, The Atrocity Exhibition(SF: Re/Search Publ.,1990), p. 36.
Martin Heidegger, Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics in Basic Writings(NY: Harper & Row,1977), pp. 262-5.

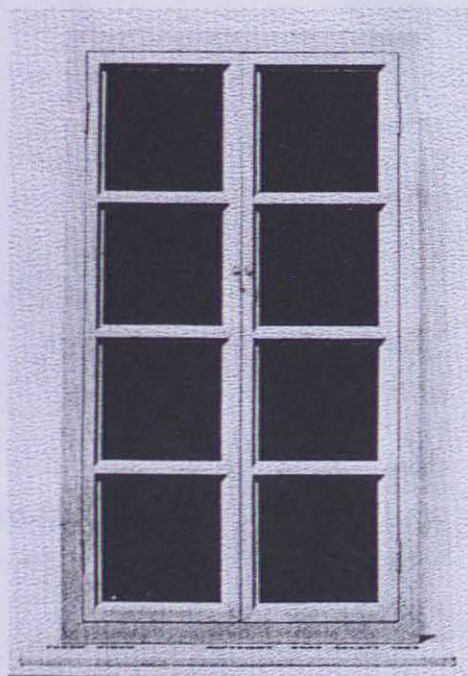
9.

Michel Foucault, The Order of Things(NY: Vintage, 1970), p. 53.

10.
David Pringle, The Fourfold Symbolism of J.G. Ballard in *Re/Search* No. 8/9, p. 132.
Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge: MIT, 1982), pp. 57-61 on Monuments and the Theory of Permanences.

11.
G. Ballard, *Crash*, p. 53.

13.
Ibid., p. 12.



Marcel Duchamp, *Fresh Widow*, 1920, The title is a play on words on the english name for a porte-fenetre, french window. Duchamp specified that the leather panes should be polished every morning like a pair of shoes: "so that they may shine like real window panes."

14.
McCarter, p. 9.
Lars Lerup, *Planned Assaults* (Mtl: CCA, 1987), pp. 32-56.

11
A tailback carried three lines of vehicles up the ramp of the flyover, and beyond this on to the new southward extension of the motorway. During my weeks in the hospital the highway engineers had pushed its huge decks more than half a mile further south. Looking closely at this silent terrain, I realized that the entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon, formed by the raised parapets and embankments of the motorways and access roads and interchanges.

12
Ballard elevates these locations, mere markers to most of us, into monuments for the present day. Through their tragic deaths his victims sanctify these places, linking the geometries of man, machine and place in the residues of concrete, metal, plastic and flesh.

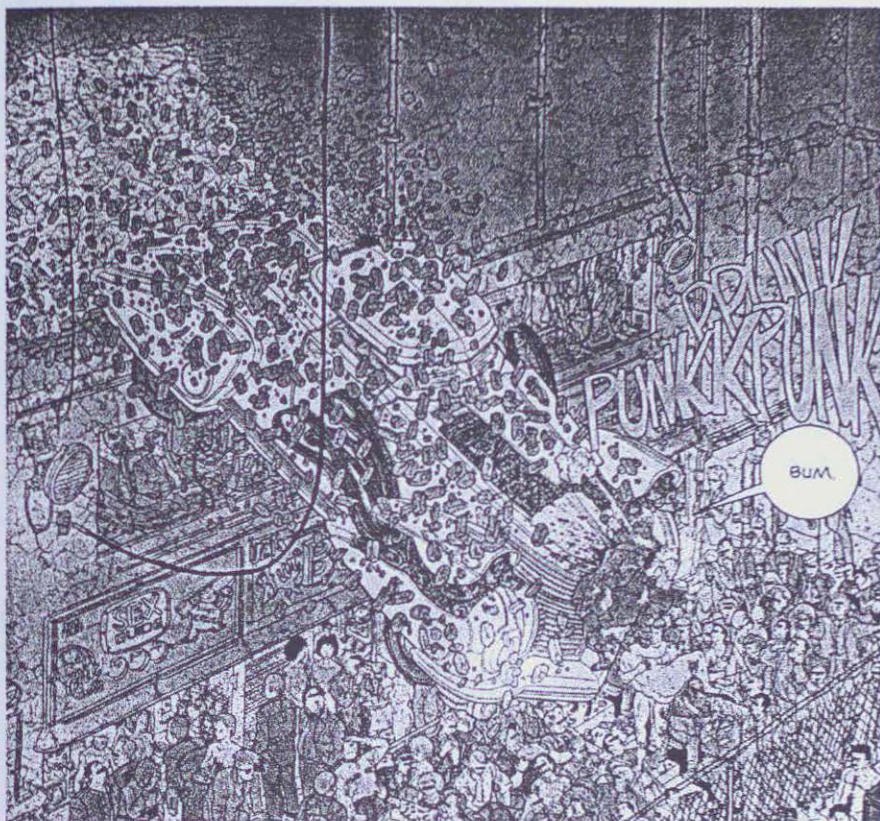
13
For Vaughan each crashed car set off a tremor of excitement, in the complex geometries of a dented fender, in the unexpected variations of crushed radiator grilles, in the grotesque overhang of an instrument panel forced onto a driver's crotch as if in some bizarre act of machine fellatio.

14
This strange union opens up some interesting ways of looking at the machine. The car is obviously transformed from being a purely pragmatic vehicle. It even transcends being an extension of its driver's ego. By participating in a *mytho-poetic* act of destruction it approaches Robert McCarter's notion of the useless machine and thus architecture. By being useless and permanent, the machine can become architecture, overcoming its own logic of utility, obsolescence and placelessness. Like Marcel Duchamp's *Fresh Widow*, the useless machine displaces a convention in our thinking by throwing a monkey-wrench into its own logic.

15
Ballard's architecture is more transitory. The symbolism can be consumed in a few seconds of screaming rubber, smoke and burning flesh. And then its traces are quietly wiped away. Its value lies in being a symbolic event, the irrational union of man, machine and place providing a catharsis for "people who, if at an enormous price, have nonetheless broken through the skin of reality and convention around us ... and who have in a sense achieved - become - mythological beings in a way only attainable through these brutal and violent acts"

16
The underlying logic and rationality behind the stage sets around us make the only rational forms of dissent; irrationality, madness, and violence. Not the mindless brawls the fascists glamourise, but a contemplative, methodical violence directed towards the tools and thoughts that might imprison us. In *Crash* the logic of utility is perverted, the methodology is redirected towards strange new goals ... experimentation, a process of trial and error, of setting parameters, of assessing the variables that would create a meaningful crash/event:

"Vaughan devised a terrifying almanac of imaginary automobile disasters and insane wounds - variations on these collisions, thinking first of a repetition of head-on collisions..."



17

Crash is not a recipe, but for anyone familiar with the actual act of designing it presents fascinating possibilities out of the morass of stultifying logic, reason and good intentions that create our velvet cages. The course of action could range from the "nonsensical" works of Jean Tinguely to the passion of some of Coop Himmelbau's writings 'Architecture Must Blaze'. The novel's imagery might reek of this decade's fin-de-siècle, fashionably-weird, nihilistic zeitgeist but the possibilities it opens up show a real optimism in the liberative potential of the human imagination. For like any good science fiction writer, Ballard does show the alternative:

18

It suddenly struck me that if I had to put my finger on what the future was going to be like, it wasn't going to be like New York or Tokyo or Los Angeles or Rio De Janeiro.

The future was going to be like a suburb of Dusseldorf that is, one of those ultra-modern suburbs with the BMW and the boat in every drive, and the ideal sort of middle-management house and garden. Immaculate suites - not a cigarette end anywhere, with an immaculate modern school and a shopping precinct; a consumer-goods paradise with not a leaf out of place - even a drifting leaf looks as if it has too much freedom.

19

where (...continued at no. .2..)

From Hard Boiled #1.

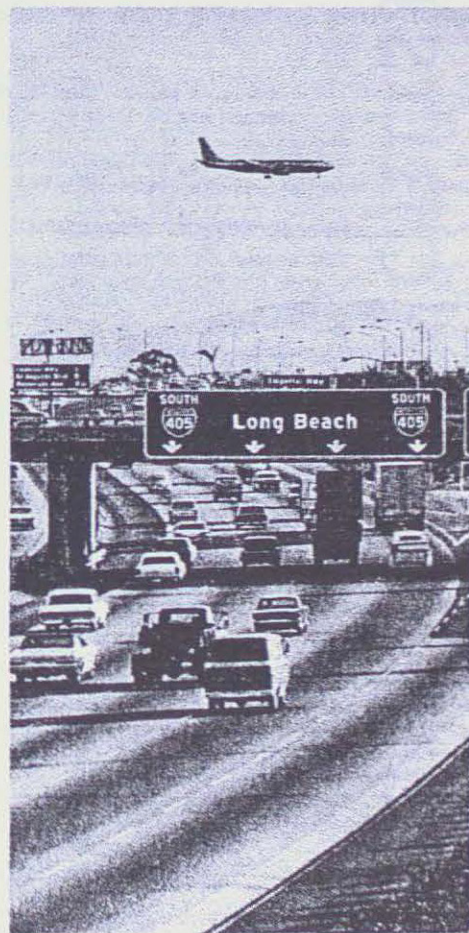
15.

J.G. Ballard, *Re/Search No. 8/9*, p. 47.

Peter Blundell Jones, *The Sustaining Ritual in The Architectural Review* Nov. 1990 (London: MBC, 1990), pp. 93-5 on architecture without building.

16.

J.G. Ballard, *Crash*, pp. 13-4.



Freeway signs from Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies, Reyner Banham.

18.

J.G. Ballard, *Re/Search No. 8/9*, pp. 14-5.

Thomas Pushpathadam is expected to graduate from McGill's B. Arch programme in May 1992 whereupon he will be looking for a job. Prospective employers are requested to send inquiries or offers to Thomas Pushpathadam c/o The Fifth Column, 815 Sherbrooke St. West, H3A-2K6.