Refiguring Reader-Response: Experience and Interpretation in J.G. Ballard's *Crash*

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Extract 1

I remember my first minor collision in a deserted hotel car-park. Disturbed by a police patrol, we had forced ourselves through a hurried sex-act. Reversing out of the park, I struck an unmarked tree. Catherine vomited over my seat. This pool of vomit with its clots of blood like liquid rubies, as viscous and discreet as everything produced by Catherine, still contains for me the essence of the erotic delirium of the car-crash, more exciting than her own rectal and vaginal mucus, as refined as the excrement of a fairy queen, or the minuscule globes of liquid that formed beside the bubbles of her contact lenses. In this magic pool, lifting from her throat like a rare discharge of fluid from the mouth of a remote and mysterious shrine, I saw my own reflection, a mirror of blood, semen and vomit, distilled from a mouth whose contours only a few minutes before had drawn steadily against my penis.

(Ballard 2014: 8–9)

Extract 2

Gabrielle placed a drop of spit on my right nipple and stroked it mechanically, keeping up the small pretence of this nominal sexual link. In return, I stroked her pubis, feeling for the inert nub of her clitoris. Around us the silver controls of the car seemed a tour de force of technology and kinaesthetic systems. Gabrielle's hand moved across my chest. Her fingers found the small scars below my left collar bone, the imprint of the outer quadrant of the instrument binnacle. As she began to explore this circular crevice with

her lips I for the first time felt my penis thickening. She took it from my trousers, then began to explore the other wound-scars on my chest and abdomen, running the tip of her tongue into each one. [. . .] 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 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.

(Ballard 2014: 147–148)[1]

1. Introduction: Reconsidering Reader-Response

Reader-oriented criticism can take a multitude of diverse forms. Common to its focus, however, is a defining ideology which underscores the text as an *experience*: an event partaken in by individuals. Reader-oriented criticism thereby highlights the variability of this textual experience, shifting attention away from a unifying or 'correct' reading of a text to one which explores the text as a used, lived object, and the reader as the principal agent of interpretation. The analysing of these interpretive experiences sends critics to different theoretical and methodological corners, seeking answers to questions around the shape of such experiences, where and how they diverge or converge, or how these experiences affect their experiencer. Recent years have seen a renaissance in reader studies powered by developments in fields such as psychology and the cognitive sciences, which have provided invaluable new perspectives on old problems. As such, there has been a distinct, and distinctly new, quantitative turn in reader-oriented criticism. Stylisticians, in particular, have blazed promising new trails by exploring the wider claims of stylistics through quantitative, reader-focused methodologies (for a survey of these efforts, see Whiteley and Canning 2017).

However, the current renaissance of reader-oriented criticism owes much to the largely qualitative, literary focus of the reader-response founded by

1 In the following, all quotations without any reference specified are taken from these literary excerpts.

scholars such as Louise Rosenblatt,[2] Judith Fetterley, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser and Norman Holland. This iteration of reader-response waxed in influence in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, and eventually waned in the early 1980s. The waning influence of reader-response has been interpreted in several ways. In retrospect, scholars have generally understood this not as the death of the field, but rather as the wide scale assimilation of reader-response's philosophies. In Jennifer Riddle Harding's words, reader-response was "folded into so many disparate and interesting approaches that now the emphasis on readers' interpretation is no longer a defining feature of a unified theoretical school, but a common praxis among many schools of criticism" (Harding 2014: 74). Patricia Harkin, however, while similarly seeing apotheosis, rather than death, in reader-response's disappearance, warns that its assimilation into wider theory has been at the expense of its affect, "*the productive emotions* that attended the notion that readers make meaning" (Harkin 2005: 413, emphasis in original). More controversially, Harkin further opines that reader-response lost academic cachet due to the fact that it wasn't "difficult" enough, and did not, therefore, serve as so arcane an intellectual currency that it distinguished its holder (ibid.: 415).

In this increasingly specialised age of reader-oriented criticism, whose various and varied explorations are well represented in this edited collection, it is thus important to underscore the theoretical and philosophical foundations laid by these early reader-response critics, and the legacy of their assimilation into wider literary analysis. While new reader-oriented projects have taken on the name of reader-response, it should be noted, with some few exceptions, that the original iteration of reader-response rarely stepped into quantitative or quantitatively informed analysis.[3] The new quantitative

2 Louise Rosenblatt first outlined her 'transactional theory' in 1938, decades before the reader-response movement. When reader-response formalised into a movement, she returned to her transactional theory in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978), and other texts.

3 Norman Holland is the major exception here. Holland's work, however, while claiming a certain psychological rigour in its analysis of real readers, has not aged particularly well. His *Five Readers Reading*, for example, wherein he investigates the variety of response through prolonged interviews with the titular five readers, characterises these same readers through baffling descriptions ("a lapsed Catholic with aspirations toward aristocracy") and wildly inappropriate stereotypes (the single female reader as "a tall, very attractive woman, gentle and subdued in her manner") (Holland 1975: 3–4). Its worth to current response theorists is, therefore, limited.

studies now being conducted under the name of reader-response would, in reader-response's original era, probably have been under the aegis of reception studies. Of course, the work taking place in one field informs that taking place in the other field, a movement of ideas that can only be of benefit to both. However, because the competencies required to conduct reader studies through quantitative methodologies (taken from psychology, cognitive linguistics, cognitive poetics, and so on) are becoming increasingly specialised, and the training necessary to do so increasingly arduous, engagement with the theoretical and philosophical foundations of reader-response has become increasingly rare.

This chapter is a small link in my wider project of revitalising the reader-response built by the aforementioned theorists. This revitalisation is a critical one, underscoring both the weaknesses and strengths of reader-response's original embarkation, and refiguring it to specifically deliver on its philosophy of the reader as the locus of interpretation. Response theorists such as Fish and Iser, for example, attempted to centre the reading experience on a monolithic conceptual reader, who reads the text in a critically approved way, and has critically approved textual experiences. In this way, they sought to remove the reader variable from their analytical equation, or at least constrain it to a few approved differentials. However, this is contrary to the philosophy which they themselves espouse, whose focus is in the lived reality of the text, a reality neither limited to specially trained readers, nor circumscribed by their approval. True analysis of the reader as the supplier and experiencer of textual meaning requires extending critical attention to the reader as a variable, whose variances may conceivably determine the path to meaning more meaningfully than either the author's intention or the text's structure. The focus of this chapter is, therefore, twofold: firstly, to establish a methodological base for this type of analysis; secondly, to give substance to theory through its deployment in an analysis of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973), specifically the unusual embodied experience of that novel, and the challenge of interpreting it.

2. Situating Reader-Response

While reader-response has always claimed to account for the experience of readers plural, its past deployments have generally relied on some form of conceptual reader: implied reader (see Booth 1961, Fish 1980), superreader (see Riffaterre 1966), informed reader (see Fish 1980), and so on. The concep-

tualisation of a reader or readers, compared to gathering data on or from real readers, is largely what separates reader-response from reception theory. This differentiation, however, has rarely been complete: the reader conceptualisations of response theorists are generally informed by a knowledge of readers and reading groups, often from the courses taught by the theorists;[4] while the framing and analysing of data in reception theory requires, itself, a form of reader conceptualisation. Moreover with the new means of incorporating the reader learned from the cognitive sciences, this differentiation appears to have, in recent years, more fully dissipated. Nevertheless, a conceptual reader (or readers) roughly serves to differentiate reader-focused literary analysis from reception theory, and other data-driven modes of reader and reading analysis. Of course, neither quantitative nor qualitative approaches claim to represent the experience of every reader: just as the response theorist chooses a conceptual reader in the knowledge of the types of readers thereby excluded, so does the reception theorist choose their methodology, demographic, scope, and so on.

The principal difficulty of reader-response, then, and the means by which its practitioners have been largely distinguished, is in the construction of this conceptual reader. This represents not only the methodology of the analysis, but the scope of the study. It may also be a magnet for the critic's own biases and experiences: in reader-response's founding era, response theorists typically imagined how academic or 'informed' readers might experience a text. In such a study, other potential reading experiences are then coded, variously, as tangential, marginal or simply wrong. Louise Rosenblatt and Judith Fetterley, however, buck this trend and truly give thought to the divergence of reading experiences and interpretations as fascinations to be studied rather than as anomalies to be constrained. Rosenblatt, for example, stresses how much the reader brings of themselves to the text, and underscores, without judgement, the reader's ability to read a text against cultural norms or the author's intention (see Rosenblatt 1938). Fetterley, meanwhile, says it is not only possible to read 'against the grain', but that, for most readers, it is necessary to do so to resist the process of self-marginalisation, a claim she contextualises against the white, straight, male domination of the American canon (Fetterley 1981: viii).

4 Stanley Fish, in particular, frequently draws on classroom discussions in his writing. For an example, see Fish (1980), 322.

The conceptual reader of reader-response serves as a mechanism to limit the near infinitely possible lived experiences of the text. Despite this, it is yet the aim of the reader-response theorist to illustrate how real readers navigate, experience and use texts. However, by foregrounding the reader as the primary agent in the interpretive process, and the great differences which individual readers bring to their reading, the response critic likewise foregrounds the vastness of the territory which their analysis begs to explore. Emphasising the vastness of readers' responses serves, also, to emphasise the limited area which the response critic can explore. Of course, this is true of all criticism; however, part of the discovery of reader-response is the impossible extent of the unexplored. The limitations assigned by earlier response theorists to the reader figure were not, therefore, solely to delimit what they assumed to be the major, correct, or intended textual experiences: these limitations also arose from necessity. It is not, therefore, the idea of these limitations that particularised the studies of these early response critics, but rather the contours of those limitations, being the conceptual reader through which the text was 'read'.

3. Redefining Limitations: Interpretive Frameworks

The philosophy of reader-response propels the critic to read and analyse contrary to their usual methods or inclinations in order to reveal some aspect of the multitude of ways in which a text can be experienced. In essence, to understand the reader that does not read like they do, the reader-response critic must learn to read *plurally*. In practice, however, the foundation of reader-response analysis has typically been a restrictive conceptualisation of the reader, deployed to make navigable the infinitude of possible readings and experiences that texts, through explication by different readers in different cultures, eras and so on, contain. Nevertheless, the restrictions which defined past conceptualisations have typically been defined by an elitism, or have, at least, been principally concerned with academically informed readers. This leads to expressions of what the reader should do, must do, will do, won't do: predictions which cannot hope to accurately forecast the reality of how readers will read.

The refiguration of reader-response theory that I suggest is a refiguration of this limitation: analysing the experience of the text not through another conceptual reader, but rather a conceptualisation of the mental strategies, contexts and predeterminations with which readers create readings. I

call these conceptualised knowledge systems 'interpretive frameworks'. Interpretive frameworks are the mental blueprints which provide readers with the contexts and cues necessary for interpretation. On the macro level, a formal interpretive framework may provide a reader with the context needed to know that we interpret a headline differently to a haiku. On the micro level, a generic interpretive framework may enable a reader to understand that a dilating door typically signifies that a text is science fictional. I specify 'may' here because a reader may not have the knowledge to navigate that particular interpretive quandary, but they still have an interpretive framework for science fiction. Even if this framework does not provide appropriate context in this instance, the reader may afterwards add dilating doors to their interpretive framework. Each text, therefore, provides new context for the next text. Thus, interpretive frameworks are elastic: composed of a gestalt of past experiences and capable of change through new experience. More simply, a framework is one's understanding of how things are and how things should or might be, ranging from grammar to genre to psychology.

Interpretive frameworks are, of course, metaphorical. The means by which we understand an individual's motives and the means by which we understand genre are not necessarily discrete processes; but, the idea of the framework is a useful discursive tool to denote the networks of knowledge which we utilise to understand not only new texts, but any new experiences. Thus, while we can sensibly discuss a reader's generic knowledge of science fiction and memoir as separate interpretive frameworks, this separation should be understood as discursive: a means of identifying the types of knowledge which a reader might bring to bear against a text, and the insights or interpretations that such context would provide. This analysis is not concerned with establishing a 'correct' or 'informed' interpretive framework, but rather analyses a number of the building blocks available for such frameworks, and what type of interpretations which might come from utilising the same.

Interpretive frameworks are essentially conservative mental processes in that they serve to familiarise the strange. Texts which subvert expectations, which defamiliarise, may be difficult to incorporate into one's pre-existing interpretive frameworks. Defamiliarisation, itself, is a challenge to the interpretive framework, potentially requiring a reassessment of how we have constructed them. Thus, if such subversions are to be incorporated into an interpretive framework, they may require a significant change to that framework. Genres, for example, can be seen as prototypical interpretive frameworks: a megatext of which individual texts are part, and against which the individual

text will be contextualised. Texts which challenge the boundaries of a genre may require us to rethink how we define the category itself. However, such experiences are then added to the individual's interpretive framework (their understanding or knowledge of the wider genre), making future subversions easier to navigate, even expected.

Thus, texts which muddle the interpretive codes of customary interpretive frameworks, or which combine and subvert multiple frameworks (as in slipstream genres or avant-garde art) can be of particular interest to the reader-response critic due to the fact that these subversions may serve to reveal the automatised expectations which they flout. J.G. Ballard's *Crash* is one such text.

4. *Crash*

Following a car accident in which another man is killed, *Crash*'s protagonist, James Ballard, becomes deeply and obsessively involved with a group of highway-haunting fetishists who are aroused by the watching and staging of car-crashes. The novel is predominantly focused on detailing the minutiae of Ballard's new sex life, and minutiae is worth emphasising as *Crash*'s descriptive focus is microscopic. Ballard's clinical overdescription of damaged and refigured bodies, as both author and character, turns the anatomist's gaze microphilic, descriptively dissecting the victims of car crashes, both human and mechanical. Their wounds, scars and disfigurements are thus elevated to "units in a new currency of pain and desire" (Ballard 2014: 109).[5] This eroticised explication of wounds and wounding has led to *Crash* being described by many of its readers in a strongly visceral vocabulary: repulsive, disgusting, nauseating, sickening, etc.[6]

5 On usage of the word 'disfigurement', see page 2 of *Disfigurement in the U.K* by Changing Faces.

6 Critical analysis of *Crash* is noticeably lacking in discussions of wounded or disabled bodies as real bodies, rather than as aesthetic categories. The danger of this abstractification, and its potential offense, is captured in the pages of *Science Fiction Studies*, wherein Vivian Sobchak, recovering at the time from serious surgery, took deep offense to Baudrillard's celebration of *Crash*'s world (see Baudrillard 1991; Sobchak 1991). Sobchak reminds us that the ability to consider these bodies as purely aesthetic categories is not the experience of every reader, and is a distinct privilege of non-disabled people.

Crash is not simply an account of a fetish but is, itself, focalised through that fetish. Blood, mucous and semen are not described as they are, but are poetically distilled, eroticised, and apotheosised. The act of reading *Crash* is thereby fetishistically performative: it is in the reader's mind that these images may be given life. It is through the reader's creative efforts, not just Ballard's, that the transformation of bodily fluid to erotic manna occurs. It is, therefore, particularly suited to a reader-response analysis, as the imaginative and interpretive demands on the reader are both visceral and unusual.

I have elsewhere analysed *Crash* in relation to the grotesque, which, I argue, is a category defined by an *affective* profile: an irresolvable tension between humour, awe (both its positively and negatively valenced aspect) and disgust (see Kavanagh 2019). In this chapter, I will focus, first, on some of the reading experiences which *Crash* offers, principally the embodied experiences. With an understanding of how *Crash* might catalyse such experiences,[7] this chapter then moves on to how these experiences might be interpreted. In the service of this analysis, I introduce pornography as an interpretive framework, examining why a reader might look to this framework for interpretive cues, explicating a number of the cues therein found, and illustrating the ensuing difficulties of trying to categorise *Crash* solely against this framework. This analysis focuses on the interpretive 'nodes' in two excerpts, for which a reader may require recourse to these wider frameworks.

5. Close Readings

The following two excerpts describe incidents in which the protagonist, James Ballard, has sex in a car. Neither of these excerpts are unusual in *Crash*, and the language is relatively similar to that of the rest of the novel. The first excerpt occurs prior to the narrator's own collision and ensuing involvement with the fetishist group, and the latter after. The excerpts are chosen for the means by which the contained language muddles contradictory interpretive codes, in particular, the means by which catalysts which reliably arouse embodied feelings of both sensory and moral disgust are played with, even aestheticized, through language and metaphor associated with awe and the sublime.

7 A catalyst causes an event to happen, but is not itself affected by the event. A catalyst is inert, requiring an active agent to spark change. I refer to textual features as catalysts to emphasise the reader as the agent of interpretation.

> I remember my first minor collision in a deserted hotel car-park. Disturbed by a police patrol, we had forced ourselves through a hurried sex-act. Reversing out of the park, I struck an unmarked tree. Catherine vomited over my seat. This pool of vomit with its clots of blood like liquid rubies, as viscous and discreet as everything produced by Catherine, still contains for me the essence of the erotic delirium of the car-crash, more exciting than her own rectal and vaginal mucus, as refined as the excrement of a fairy queen, or the minuscule globes of liquid that formed beside the bubbles of her contact lenses. In this magic pool, lifting from her throat like a rare discharge of fluid from the mouth of a remote and mysterious shrine, I saw my own reflection, a mirror of blood, semen and vomit, distilled from a mouth whose contours only a few minutes before had drawn steadily against my penis. (Ballard 2014: 8–9)

Noël Carroll describes disgust as the "emotion that has been adapted to guard the intimate borders of the human body — mouths, nasal passages, genitals, and so forth" (Carroll 2013: 98). This forms an easy comparison to Bakhtin's seminal description of the grotesque as that which is 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" (Bakhtin 1984: 318). Disgust, therefore, arises from core grotesque features, being the impure, the breached, the contradictory and the cross-contaminated.[8] This first extract is directed by the progressive breaching of the bodily seals: mouth, rectum, vagina, penis, and even the point where the eye meets the contact lens. Moreover, these seals are not only breached, but their porousness, their openness to the world, is emphasised by the passage of bodily fluids through them: vomit, blood, mucous, excrement, tears, semen. In their combined pool, Ballard looks and sees a reflection of himself: a fascinated, aroused and unashamed Dorian Gray, whose lesson is not the ugliness of debauchery, but its sublime beauty.

It is not only, therefore, catalysts for disgust which are worked into *Crash*. In this first extract, strong disgust catalysts are specifically combined with those typically used to convey feelings of awe and beauty. Through the narrator's fetishising gaze, the disgusting is literally (and literarily) distilled into the awesome. Clots of blood in vomit are as red as rubies, while the vomit itself

8 I refer to the grotesque, here and throughout, as an aesthetic and affective category, and do not imbue the term with any form of moral judgement or prudishness.

emerges as the miraculous discharge from a rare shrine and is distilled (purified) by the contours of a mouth previously engaged in oral sex. Excrement is sanitised through its production by a fairy queen. The miniscule, a reliable catalyst for awe (Keltner and Haidt 2003: 310), is likewise invoked through the fine detailing of Catherine's contact lenses, and the globes of liquid which form alongside them. This dialectic is not unique to this extract, but is the defining trend of *Crash*: the aestheticization and abstractification of the horrific and the disgusting. In the first extract, this is attempted through tying each disgust vector to a sanitised mystical or divine image. Catherine's vomit is thereby presented on a silver platter to be perused and enjoyed.

> Gabrielle placed a drop of spit on my right nipple and stroked it mechanically, keeping up the small pretence of this nominal sexual link. In return, I stroked her pubis, feeling for the inert nub of her clitoris. Around us the silver controls of the car seemed a tour de force of technology and kinaesthetic systems. Gabrielle's hand moved across my chest. Her fingers found the small scars below my left collar bone, the imprint of the outer quadrant of the instrument binnacle. As she began to explore this circular crevice with her lips I for the first time felt my penis thickening. She took it from my trousers, then began to explore the other wound-scars on my chest and abdomen, running the tip of her tongue into each one. [. . .]
>
> 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 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. (Ballard 2014: 147–148)

In the second extract, Ballard, in his descriptions as author and ministrations as character, fulfils the entirety of Bakhtin's grotesque conventions: that which is rooted in "exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness" (Bakhtin 1984: 303), and "orientated around the limits of the body, the violation of the body's physical seal, its interaction with the outside world" (ibid.: 317). Gabrielle's scars and wounds are here treated as new orifices and protuberances, and become the focus of Ballard's attention. Moreover, these wounds are not treated neutrally, but are laden with disgust-arousing imagery. Bal-

lard's first orgasm (leaking, flowing) is spent not only in a scar, but one described as a "corrugated ditch," connoting both a jaggedness and dirtiness. This semen, a potential disease vector, is lifted from this scar and smeared around the car. Another wound of Gabrielle's is described as a "sickle-shaped trough," invoking the dining table of the animal, and is explored by Ballard's tongue. Gabrielle is progressively mechanised: her clitoris an inert nub, her body revolving, and her wounds imagined as "abstract vents," thereby associating her body with the mechanical exhalation of hot (foul) air.

However, while Ballard's descriptions render these wounds in disgust-laden language, it likewise imbues them with a type of beauty which falls between an eroticisation and an aestheticization. While to even attempt such an aestheticization has the potential to inculcate a certain sociomoral horror and disgust, it also gives readers the 'safer' option to invest their creative energy in an appreciation for Ballard's artistry. Keltner and Haidt posit that "art can produce awe by rendering exceptional moments in time that are signs of vast, powerful forces," adding that "works that challenge and that involve obscurity are more likely to induce awe" (Keltner/Haidt 2003: 310). Ballard's style of writing combines a specificity of detail with an ideological and aesthetic vastness, visible in both the scope and constancy of *Crash*'s project and in its alternatingly apocalyptic and divine meditations on the postmodern world. According to Keltner and Haidt, this manner of awe is likewise fertile for a sublime experience as it involves a fear or danger that is distanced and partially neutralised (ibid.: 304), allowing prolonged meditation on Ballard's artistry.

Florian Cord, for example, contextualising *Crash* against Kristeva, Foucault and others, understands Ballard's characters as having lost their horror of the abject, a condition which he describes as liberating, figuring their acts through sublime and divine language (see Cord 2017: 44). Considered against particular scenes where *Crash*'s characters break a number of sexual taboos — such as Ballard's amorous encounter with Vaughan wherein he notes the "faint odour of a woman's excrement clinging to the shaft of his penis," before taking it into his mouth (Ballard 2014: 166) — Cord argues that these actions are those of men liberated from the paternal laws of guilt, shame and embarrassment (see Cord 2017: 45). Cord thereby transfigures, through complex philosophical and aesthetic interpretive frameworks, scenes with intense disgust vectors into images of sublimity, of men rising above deeply embedded cultural taboos. While the catalysts for a sublime experience are, as explicated, latent in *Crash*, Cord's transformation of the novel's negatively valenced em-

bodied effects figures these interpretive frameworks as liberatory, and their exercising in *Crash* as a means of defamiliarising ourselves from such taboos.

6. Interpreting *Crash*

The core challenge of *Crash*, and the reason why it is chosen for this case-study, is its disruption of the signs which point readers toward relevant interpretive frameworks. In short, it is difficult to find explanatory contexts to make *Crash*'s dangerous strangeness familiar, to answer the basic question of 'why'. Nonetheless, interpretation is the prerogative of the reader, not the text. And, even when the text makes this process more difficult, or even troubles the idea of interpretation itself, the text itself is never entirely alien, only alien *to*. Thus, even by their strangenesses are such texts contextualised, and, through such context, interpreted.

What frameworks, then, do readers have at their disposal when decisions, both microcosmic and macrocosmic, need to be made about *Crash*? Firstly, *Crash* clearly has some of the codes to suggest it can be contextualised against a specific genre of play, wherein play is part of the text's ontology: pornography. In both extracts, though more clearly in the second, we have clearly pornographic scenes, structured in relatively generically familiar ways: seduction, leading to foreplay, climaxing with the male orgasm, and told through a descriptive focus on the body which allows for the reader to more fully imagine, or imagine themselves into, the scene. As an interpretive framework, therefore, pornography may provide necessary interpretive context.

Contextualising *Crash* solely against one's knowledge of pornography can, of course, be complicated by a concurrent imagistic focus on car parts, wounds, and a fetishisation of said wounds, along with the various things that leak from cars and bodies. *Crash's* potential to arouse may, therefore, appear overwhelmed by its proclivity to disgust; however, the erotic is yet present in those same disgust catalysts and, as seen in Cord's interpretation, disgust may be overcome or sidestepped by the reader. The mixing of the potentially disgusting and arousing may also serve to underscore their near paradoxical relationship. Sex, while complicated by an unusual fetish, is still the focus of the narrative. Moreover, while the embodied experience of disgust can surely deflate those of arousal, arousal and disgust are also interlinked. To return to Bakhtin's language, both sex and the grotesque are orientated around protuberances, orifices, leaking, flowing and the piercing of bodily

seals. By this definition, all sex acts are grotesque acts. Interpreting *Crash* as pornographic, as intended to arouse, certainly remains problematic, but it remains possible, with this possibility, itself, revelatory of the grotesqueness of even non-automotive themed pornography. And, of course, the reader may share *Crash*'s symphorophilia, and have interpretive frameworks, and erotic preferences, readily made for the novel's strangenesses.

Ballard's portrayal of the body is grotesque in itself; however, the fact *Crash*'s many imaginitively wounded bodies are eroticised, treated as desirable, amplifies this grotesqueness. Ballard's treatment of the damaged body breaks from conventional representations of such bodies because it does not ask the reader to gag at, gape at or fear it, nor to sympathise with it, but to be aroused by it. This eroticisation may trigger the generic codes of pornography in an arena where acting upon them would be highly troubling. A reader finding themselves titillated by *Crash* could find such an experience distressing. It may, specifically, set a reader in a conflict with their own body if they disapprove of the arousal due, for example, to cultural taboos around the fetishisation of disability. Applying a pornographic interpretive framework to *Crash* can, therefore, make sense of certain aspects of it, but may fail to provide appropriate context to others, or even provide a context whose inappropriateness is disturbing.

Further complicating this dialectic is the particular language in which these acts are described, which not only emphasise the disgusting potential of sex acts, but concurrently resist the potential to abstractify the sex acts into pornography through clinical overdescription. Though the content is pornographic, the telling of it is not only disgust-laden, but clinical, to the point that the novel's outlandishness can become repetitious and boring. This clinicality, so obviously unsuited to the scenes it describes, feels polluted and polluting in its incongruity: a category mistake if we attempt to contextualise the novel solely against pornography. Baudrillard, in his controversial "Ballard's *Crash*", opines that there is a discordance produced by 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" (Baudrillard 1991: 316).

In *Crash*, contradictory interpretive and experiential codes are, therefore, combined: pornographic, yet clinical; disgusting, yet arousing; horrific, yet sublime. The combination of unlikes, of near mutually exclusive contextual codes (although, their combination reveals their overlaps), drastically complicates the ability of any reader to neuter, via explanatory interpretive frame-

works, what may seem as a wildly dangerous book. Even the reader who shares the fetishes which the novel explores or, like Cord, figures these fetishes as liberatory, and therefore has amenable interpretive frameworks for contextualising the novel, may not find *Crash* to be easily interpreted as solely pornographic.

It is also worth underscoring that, like pornography, interpretation, too, is a realm of play. The process of interpretation — of teasing meaning out of something, stamping it with our own take, exercising control over a wild object — is one of abstractification. Just as Ballard aestheticizes Catherine's vomit, with its clots of blood like liquid rubies, so too does the process of interpretation bind the text for our perusal and gratification. This is not, necessarily, an immunising process: it does not remove the potential of *Crash*'s discomforting embodied effects. We can preface and postface these excerpts with reams of contextualising, abstracting and academically neutering information and opinions, but it does not necessarily remove the potential embodied effects of, say, the image of semen jolting into a scar's corrugated ditch.

7. By Way of a Conclusion: Interpretation and Meaning

The embodied effects of the novel heretofore discussed, combined with the connected contextual, authorial and generic ambiguities, and a sparsity of plot and character development, does not result in a 'traditionally' enjoyable novel. Likewise, in relation to Ballard's use of clinical language, the flattening of effect therein achieved, though it may be regarded as an artistic achievement, does not lend to the novel's readability. For most readers, *Crash* will be, either at points or in its totality, uncomfortable, distressing, boring or a healthy combination of each. However, its particularity and singularity of vision, combined with its cultural cachet and the mere fact that it has been published, suggests that it may have been written for reasons other than simple enjoyment. The crossroads that a reader might thereby find themselves at requires them to answer a few questions: why would J.G. Ballard write this, why would it be published and why do people praise it so much? The novel's paratexts, and its cultural life and cachet, must also, therefore, be considered as interpretive frameworks. If the reader does not simply decide that the novel is a mistake, prank or scam, then it necessitates that these questions be answered by the simple assumption that the novel *does* something, that it has some manner of meaning or purpose, or at least that others have found such

in the novel. Meaning, then, is not simply something extracted from a text. A belief in meaning, which can be variously informed by different critical cultures, alters how we read, and how we process the text. The idea of meaning can therefore be considered an interpretive framework.

The search for meaning in *Crash* situates the reader at an interpretive crossroads that offers many potential routes; however, there are a variety of cultural signposts which readers might turn to for guidance. One of these is the simple fact that if one finds a work boring or otherwise unenjoyable, yet it has received high praise from others, then we feel pressure to find and partake in that appreciation. Such a work may, for example, be accomplishing something 'greater than' entertainment, or require specific cultural competencies to be entertaining: the presiding assumption of which is that a text can *do* something that makes it worth a difficult or slow read, that is, that the text has a significance due to a purpose, meaning or message. Whether this drive can propel a reader through the entirety of *Crash* is a different story, likewise as to whether the reader can find this vaunted meaning; however, it is certainly an effect of *Crash*, one upon which it will be more dependent than a traditionally 'enjoyable' text would.

Crash near necessitates that the reader who does not enjoy the novel, in a traditional sense, will continue reading and, during that reading, look for a justifying meaning or intention. A novel that appears to be purposefully unenjoyable or difficult sparks an unusual interpretive dilemma. Even stories of tragedy or loss, stories which cannot quite be said to be 'enjoyable', are nevertheless some variation of enjoyable. When the cathartic power of a text is in its ability to catalyse sorrow or spur tears, we consider its distressing effects worthy, even necessary. A novel such as *Crash*, even when readers acknowledge its message as worthy or important and therefore justify the embodied effects which aid and abet this message, does not get as easy a pass as the tragic novel.

Crash, of course, is also very different from tragedy. *Crash* may require the reader to supress the corporeal effects of the novel in order to progress and to appreciate it for its cultural and psychological commentary. Reading *Crash* can be an active struggle to proceed — to justify, to not feel, to avoid constructing images, to steal a glance rather than openly gape. It thereby calls for a justification, a belief in an underlying meaning. Without the belief in an intention higher than that to disgust or arouse, you either have pointless shock-lit or off-taste pornography. And, of course, this is not a necessity particular to *Crash*. Tragedy too requires some belief in a higher or greater worth

to justify the sorrow that it arouses. This worth, however, is far more culturally accessible due to the different social purposes of sorrow and disgust. Sorrow is communal and communicative, and begs understanding and sharing. Disgust serves to warn and reject, directing its emotional intensity not at the individual feeling disgusted but the offending item or behaviour. In this sense, these embodied effects, and their social purposes, can also be fruitfully considered as interpretive frameworks.

Crash, nevertheless, does find itself recommended, and its readers, even its detractors, have been largely successful in finding a message in it (though whether they felt that this 'justified' the text varies). *Crash*, in its typical physical and digital forms, eases the passage to such meanings and messages in the same manner that almost all texts do: paratexts. In *Crash*'s case, the publisher's peritexts establish shortcuts to semi-sanitised interpretations by asserting its originality, cultural importance, and giving hints as to where the reader should spend their creative and interpretive efforts. In the cited edition, the front cover features a quotation from Will Self, labelling Ballard as "the last great English avatar of the avant-garde." It also informs of an introduction by Zadie Smith. The back cover quotes Anthony Burgess, "a work of very powerful originality," and Martin Amis, "Crash sensationally and scintillatingly succeeds." Its blurb describes *Crash* as "the definitive cult, postmodern novel — a shocking blend of violence, transgression and eroticism."

Of course, the effect of this, on a cultural level, may find itself somewhat blunted over time, as the newness of *Crash* ages and domesticating codes become easier to access. Readers of *Crash*'s first edition, for example, did not have the cautionary tale introduction, the preface from Zadie Smith, nor the other disambiguating paratexts which ease modern readers into the text through sanitising pre-interpretations. Tellingly, however, we do have a reader's report on *Crash*, solicited by Ballard's publisher on an earlier and much longer draft of the novel. Without the benefit of these sanitising interpretive frameworks, without even the knowledge that the novel would be published, this reader states: "This author is beyond psychiatric help. Do not publish" (qtd. in Elborough 2014: 188).

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