

## The Crash-Event: Repetition and Difference in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*

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**Abstract:** *The article examines and interprets British science fiction writer J. G. Ballard's controversial 1973 novel Crash from the perspective of the philosophical concept of the event. The protagonists of Crash eroticize automobile collisions and their repercussions in human bodies, striving to increase the intensity of their existence via pornographic quest of the perfect, final crash. In Vanhanen's analysis, Crash brings together the pornographic emphasis of repetition with the singularity of the life-changing crash-event that the novel's characters encounter. Vanhanen considers Freudian interpretations of the novel's crash fantasies as traumatic compulsion to repeat—which itself is a manifestation of the death instinct. This shall be compared with philosopher Gilles Deleuze's conception of the death instinct being a "neutral" metaphysical primary drive rather than part of the Freudian duality between Eros and Thanatos. Via this conception, it becomes possible to approach Crash not only as a "cautionary tale," as Ballard has described it, but also as an affirmative "psychopathic hymn" to the potential of self-differentiation released by the event.*

**Keywords:** *Deleuze, Crash, cars, desire.*

Driving along the highway, how would it feel like to let go of the steering wheel and push the accelerator pedal to maximum? As your own control of the car diminishes, other factors step in: the inherently oblique geometry of the driving lane begins to guide the trajectory of the vehicle; traffic statistics calculate the density of incoming traffic, increasing or decreasing the probability of head-on collision; minute variations of road temperature, air humidity and wind speed add their own influence to the swerve of the car, now starting to spin around; material qualities of the shattering windshield decide the pattern of glass shard wounds on your face; chemical composition of the driver seat's upholstery determines the flash point of the car's interior getting into contact with flaming fuel...

The simple act of relinquishing control sweeps you away from your safe zone to face the inhuman agency whose influence is in normal conditions minimized. An interruption into regulated flow of things appears out of imperceptible potentialities, an *event* that has already happened, as if slipped straight out of the future tense into the past, skipping the present—a

point of indeterminacy that becomes apparent only after its passing.

In what follows I shall focus on the British science fiction writer J. G. Ballard's controversial novel *Crash* (1973) and interpret it from the point of view of an event that is life changing. *Crash* is a story of a group of people who have developed a sort of fetishistic relation to car crashes, being sexually aroused by images related to collisions, wounds and scars resulting from impacts, re-enactments of crashes and fantasies of different kinds of automobile disasters. From the perspective of event-ness, the novel's titular crash represents a quintessential example of event where different ontological levels of existence (ranging from semiotic to material) are synthesized together, producing unforeseeable mixtures. Also, the temporality of an actual collision, with its anticipation and after-effects, can be seen to be as complicated in Ballard's text as in many philosophical accounts of the concept of event.

In my analysis of *Crash* I turn to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, for whom an event is an ontologically primary concept that precedes substance and empirical states of affairs. In Deleuze's theory, the event is a change of pattern, a coming-together of relations that produces something new in empirical reality, but which also alters its conditions of existence: the event thus not only modifies the future, but also the past so that we cannot view our conditions in the old manner anymore (1994, pp. 189–90).<sup>1</sup> Approaching Ballard's work from a Deleuzian perspective is thus not arbitrary, since I propose that this critical reconsideration of the conditions underlying one's current state of normality is what Ballard's *Crash* and his other works of speculative fiction strive to bring to the fore. As the author Zadie Smith interprets it, Ballard's method is "taking what seems 'natural'—what seems normal, familiar and rational—and revealing its psychopathology" (2014, para. 5). In *Crash*'s case the state of normality under dissection is the ever-increasing technological dependence and communications landscape forming "an almost infantile world, where any demand, any possibility, whether for life-styles, travel, sexual roles and identities, can be satisfied instantly," as Ballard (1995, p. 4) describes the post-war world in his later preface to the French edition of the novel.<sup>2</sup> This description seems even more relevant in our current times.

*Crash* can thus be seen as a speculative study of what kind of extremes this possibility of instant and infinite satisfaction can lead to and, as such, a reaction to the ethos of liberation of sexual and violent desires and freeing of social restrictions by the 1960's generation. Samuel Francis considers *Crash* as "[p]arodying the post-Freudian 1960s ideal of healthy, guilt-free polyperversity" (2011, p. 110). As Roger Luckhurst in his introduction to *Crash* states, "[i]t is a book that flags the end of the New Wave [science fiction of 1960's and 70's] avant-garde by pushing its logic of violent transformation to exorbitant ends" (2008, p. 519). *Crash* can thus be read as a hyperbolic description of the collective transformative event of 1960's societal liberation, placing a magnifying glass upon its latent tendencies actualizing in the lives of the crash-fixated characters.

Even though widespread social and technological changes—at least in the post-war Western world—form *Crash*'s background, the book depicts events mainly in personal focus. The crash-event that becomes an object of desire for the novel's characters is conditioned by increasingly technological and mediated world, but takes place on the level of individual subjectivities. The principal question seems to be: can we desire our own annihilation? This personal dilemma mirrors the Cold War world's nuclear doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction, the retaliation-capacity assuring the total annihilation of not only the target nation but also the aggressor in the

1 Event, for Deleuze (1994), introduces a change in a structure, i.e. in a series of things both material and immaterial. A basic example of an event would be that it is a *singular* point, as in change of direction of an infinite series of ordinary points in a geometrical line (pp. 189–90).

2 The French edition's introduction is republished in the 1995 English edition of *Crash*.

event of intercontinental missile exchange. This precarious balance formed a “bomb culture,” as writer, artist and countercultural activist Jeff Nuttall’s 1968 book of the same title (2018) aptly nominates it. When the “sane” state of normality is founded upon such nihilistic ideology, what might seem as insanity becomes a legitimate reaction to impossible situations, as 1960’s thinkers such as Gregory Bateson, Michel Foucault and R. D. Laing theorized.

So, according to this logic, even though the actions of the novel’s characters might be diagnosed as displaying aberrant paraphilia towards eroticized crash-scenarios, they may be interpreted as manifestation of deeper-level culture-wide structures. It can be argued that while the technological progress of automobile culture denotes increased individual freedom of mobility and hence of possibilities to actualize personal desires (see e.g. D’Costa, 2013), a contrary fascination with the idea of annihilating collision runs deep within the contemporary culture. Just think of the dark collective allure of disasters such as Princess Diana’s fatal crash in a Parisian underpass.<sup>3</sup> What if instead of controlled, predictable movement we somehow secretly yearned for a crash? And what if this crash-desire was essentially of libidinal, erotic nature? This is the premise of Ballard’s novel *Crash*.

### The Serial Crashes

*Crash*’s themes have been interpreted in multiple and often conflicting fashions, but some common notions can be agreed by all.<sup>4</sup> *Crash* depicts a world where the link between the car and sexuality, arguably prevalent in 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture, has been taken to the extreme. The novel’s narrator, advertising film producer ‘James Ballard,’<sup>5</sup> becomes acquainted with a sinister figure, Dr Robert Vaughan, after ‘Ballard’ has had a head-on collision with an oncoming car on a freeway exit ramp. When ‘Ballard’ is recuperating in an almost-empty airport casualty hospital ward after the crash, Vaughan shows acute interest in his crash wounds. Eventually ‘Ballard’ and his wife Catherine get to know and become embroiled in Vaughan’s coterie of car crash enthusiasts, entering various sexual liaisons with them—these encounters all have to do with crashed cars and the various wounds and scars resulting from such collisions. Vaughan’s obsession seems to unfold in the other characters “the mysterious eroticism of wounds: the perverse logic of blood-soaked instrument panels, seat-belts smeared with excrement, sun-visors lined with brain tissue” and awakens them to car crashes’ liberation of “tremor[s] 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 on to a driver’s crotch as if in some calibrated act of machine fellatio” (Ballard, 1995, p. 12).

Vaughan’s stated mission is to explore the “benevolent psychopathology” that he and his co-conspirators are trying to actualize out of the virtual potentiality of a culture “ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography,” according to Ballard’s preface (1995, pp. 138, 4). In practice, Vaughan’s exploration entails looking for accident sites and photographing the scenes, mimicking the postures of the victims with his sexual partners, as well as studying research films of calibrated test crashes and arranging recreations of spectacular accidents with stunt drivers.

It is no coincidence that Vaughan, a photographer, is described as “TV scientist” and “computer specialist” as the world of *Crash* is essentially a semiotic mediascape of information

3 Just a quick internet search will produce a number of websites devoted to car crashes of famous people. There is even a Wikipedia list of “notable people” killed in traffic collisions: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_people\\_who\\_died\\_in\\_traffic\\_collisions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_who_died_in_traffic_collisions).

4 Florian Cord (2017) provides a good overview of differences in critical reception of *Crash* (pp. 18–80).

5 Single quotation marks are used to distinguish the novel’s character ‘Ballard’ from the author Ballard.

and circulating images. From this point of departure, the author studies, and the novel's protagonists follow, the "pornographic logic" of a world obsessed with representations, finding pleasure in transgressing the supposed control of consensual normality that is at the same time invested with repressed desires. As Lauren Langman observes, "pornography obeys certain rules, and its primary rule is transgression [...] its greatest pleasure is to locate each and every society's taboos, prohibitions and proprieties, and systematically transgress them, one by one" (2018, p. 669).

This pornographic logic compels to seek ever-changing variations of relations between various objects of desire in order to find the ever-fleeting, ultimate transgressive pleasure, resulting in the novel's characters devising imaginary scenarios of car disasters combined with sex, as well as dwelling on the minutest details of the fatal crashes of celebrity figures such as Albert Camus, James Dean, Jayne Mansfield—and even John F. Kennedy, the assassination of whom is considered as a special kind of car crash by Vaughan (Ballard, 1995, p. 130). In these constant rearrangements of objects and signs, both imaginary and those realized by the protagonists, concrete physical, corporeal and technological facts are collided with the semiotic sphere of images, fantasies and meanings. Consider the following passage from the beginning page of *Crash* as a demonstration of this:

*In his vision of a car-crash with the actress [Elizabeth Taylor], 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. (Ballard, 1995, p. 8)*

In their obsession to actualize every potential combination of crash-altered automobiles and human bodies, *Crash*'s protagonists resemble the fictional libertines of Marquis de Sade's novels, who as men of status and resources have the means to satisfy their own desires almost without limit. However, from this freedom opens a vortex of the pornographic logic's perpetual demand to transgress repeatedly, to an absurd degree, resulting in numbness of repetition instead of pleasure. As Timo Airaksinen notes, "what is originally supposed to be supremely stimulating reappears now as something so boring that one wonders why the Sadean heroes bother" (1995, p. 141). Therefore, the libertines cannot truly create an event, a singular point in the series of combinations of desired objects and effects.

*Crash* adopts the pornographic quest of the perfect transgression against repressed desire, which remains, however, perpetually unattainable namely because of the pornographic logic's constant supply of ever new combinations of desire. These combinations appear as fantasy images and, after their enactment, as *tableaux vivants* lingering in the post-orgasmic calm after the crash, ready to be appreciated in erotico-aesthetic terms by the crash enthusiasts. Yet these imaginary and real scenarios never provide a closure but compel one to devise further combinations. Ballard supplies the reader with extended lists of Vaughan's dream couplings of:

*The lungs of elderly men punctured by door handles, the chests of young women impaled by steering-columns, the cheeks of handsome youths pierced by the chromium latches of quarter-light [...] ambassadorial limousines crashing into jack-knifing butane tankers [...] taxis filled with celebrating children colliding head-on below the bright display windows of deserted supermarkets [...] alienated brothers and sisters, by chance meeting each other on collision courses on the access roads of petrochemical plants [...] massive rear-end collisions of sworn enemies [...] specialized crashes of escaping criminals [etc. etc. ad nauseam].* (Ballard, 1995, pp. 13–14)

This seriality cannot but bring to mind Andy Warhol's serial works, which similarly combine different pictorial elements, usually of famous people or other popular media content, with visual distortions introduced by his silkscreen and painting techniques. During 1962–1964 Warhol produced his own "Death and Disaster" series of silkscreen paintings based on newsprint pictures of car crashes among other disasters. These graphic images, often depicting bloodied and mangled crash victims, were silkscreened, often multiple times, on vibrantly coloured canvases and named accordingly, such as *Green Disaster #2 (Green Disaster Ten Times)* or *Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)*. This impassive shuffling of different disaster motifs, colour schemes and descriptive names combined with the often shocking imagery provides a close predecessor in the visual arts to Ballard's literary vision of the alluring immediacy and brutality of post-war media landscape.

*Crash's* constant rearrangements of eroticized details of violent events—delivered not without a touch of absurdity and black humour, as in a fantasy image of "luckless paranoids driving at full speed into the brick walls at the ends of known culs-de-sac" (Ballard, 1995, p. 15)—suggest that the author's implication is that the technological advance of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has increased the possibility of these combinations, multiplying the range of areas of life that can be sexualized or turned into pornography. As such, Ballard's perspective comes very close to those anti-humanist tendencies of poststructuralist philosophy which emphasize the non-voluntary, irrational and pre- or unconscious elements of subjectivity. It is technology that shapes us, not the other way around, and *Crash* describes the adaptation of human sexuality to the technological reality of "tens of thousands of vehicles moving down the highways, [...] giant jetliners lifting over our heads, [...] the most humble machined structures and commercial laminates" (Ballard, 1995, p. 138).

Following the poststructuralist bias of structure-before-subject, the milieu of *Crash* is as impersonal and abstract as possible: the narrative circles West London surroundings, the ring roads, junctions, under- and overpasses near Heathrow airport and Shepperton film studios, "the endless landscape of concrete and structural steel that extended from the motorways to the south of the airport, across its vast runways to the new apartment systems" (Ballard, 1995, p. 48). After being released back home from the hospital following his initial crash, 'Ballard' notices his new sensitivity to his once-indifferent surroundings: "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 their access roads and interchanges" (Ballard, 1995, p. 53).

These perpetually halfway spaces can be called "nonplaces" (*non-lieux*), to use the terminology of anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) referring to anonymous places of transience, or "any-spaces-whatever" (*espaces quelconques*), to quote Gilles Deleuze's term denoting either

disconnected or empty environments that are unable to provide any overarching principles of connection between their different elements (1986, p. 120). Therefore these spaces can engender pure potentiality that in *Crash* is used by the protagonists to break down any barriers inhibiting exchange between different ontological categories. That the expanses of these post-modern nonplaces turn out to enable violent sexual encounters between technological and anatomical parts speaks—to Ballard—of the implicit potentiality of modern technology to “provide us with hitherto undreamed-of means for tapping our own psychopathologies” (1995, p. 6).

### Death Drive and Crash-Trauma

Deleuze’s any-space-whatever is a space of freedom, of an open future, but Ballard seems to consider this liberation, heralded by 1960’s counterculture’s eroding of conservative values, as leading potentially to atrocity. *The death drive always wins*. And in *Crash* the death drive, a psychic entity theorized by Sigmund Freud,<sup>6</sup> assumes a very literal manifestation on the highways and streets of the novel’s world. Roger Luckhurst writes that *Crash* “neatly literalizes Freud’s later speculations about the existence of a ‘death drive,’ a primitive human instinct that might actively wish for the quiescent state of death” (2008, p. 517). As Ballard himself states, “[a]fter Freud’s exploration within the psyche it is now the outer world of reality which must be quantified and eroticised” (1968, back cover). As Ballard is effectively likening his project of speculative fiction to Freud’s work of revealing the hidden conditions of human volition, a look into Freud’s theory of the death drive vis-à-vis *Crash* is a necessary endeavor.

The initial reception of the novel—mirroring the way David Cronenberg’s 1996 film adaptation was later received—certainly made evident the fact that Ballard’s anti-humanist view was picked up by the commentators. Both *Crash* the novel and *Crash* the film were at the time of their release vilified exactly as nihilistic and pornographic. An often-quoted anecdote has one publisher’s reviewer writing in his or her assessment of the book and the writer: “This man is beyond psychiatric help” (Tighe, 2005, p. 80). This, and other moral condemnations in subsequent critical evaluations of the book, have doubtlessly resulted in part from the cool, detached and neutral style of the prose, describing various technological, medical and sexual atrocities in the same clinical tone, as if in some scientific article. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

*I felt the warm vinyl of the seat beside me, and then stroked the damp aisle of Helen’s perineum. Her hand pressed against my right testicle. The plastic laminates around me, the colour of washed anthracite, were the same tones as her pubic hairs parted at the vestibule of her vulva.* (Ballard, 1995, p. 81)

The pornographic detail is there, but the clinical, abstracted diction negates any possible excitement for most readers. As Victor Sage comments on Ballard’s style, “[h]orror and laughter both arise in Ballard out of his deadpan tone and this fact complicates the schematic nature of his effects” (2008, p. 38).

In a science fiction fanzine interview, Ballard says that he situated the novel in his own contemporary environment and used his own name for the narrator character in order to “achieve complete honesty [...] complete realism [...] and] complete authenticity” and that *Crash* is “an investigatory book” with “all the neutrality of a scientific investigation” (Ballard

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6 Freud’s original German term *Todestrieb* is translated also as death instinct.

interviewed in Goddard, 1973, p. 53). This neutral tone with its lack of perceptible authorial voice and decipherable intention seemed to leave a moral void into which the reader had to take a plunge and, in the opinion of the critics, was in danger of getting lost. Ballard himself responded that his tone reflects a “terminal irony, where not even the writer knows where he stands” (1976, p. 51).

As the abstract, anonymous nonplace that *Crash* depicts no longer imposes any limitations—once one has got rid of one's own internalized patterns of control, such as safe driving and healthy living—the flows of desire of the novel's characters become paradoxically aimless, as they are fixated on devising endless variables of collision between automobile disasters and sexual pleasure. As the pornographic logic of increasing intensification demands ever-new combinations of metal against flesh and bone, what is there to do but to devise more and more crash-fantasies?

*Crash*'s protagonists quite literally circle around the same abstract geometry of ring roads and ramps, repeatedly devising novel combinations of crash-fantasy components. What is left other than constant rearrangement of these images? Only a final, fatal crash would seem to offer a way out of the fantasy loop, a movement intensive enough to detach them from the gravitational equilibrium of the pleasure-seeking orbit, and to point a flaring trajectory towards a terminal point: death.

*Crash*'s perverse fetish for eroticized car crashes and their repercussions in the form of wounds, abrasions and scars would thus seem to bring forth the perspective of the interplay between repetition and singularity. Obsessive repetition displayed by the novel's characters, the book's structure and its language seems to call for a psychoanalytical interpretation, where the compulsion to repeat would denote an indication of the Freudian death drive. Freud's claim is that the death drive represents a fundamental urge possessed by all organic life: an urge to fall back into an earlier state of things, meaning the inorganic state from which life emerged. Within life, then, exists a deep-seated will to its own annihilation (Freud, 1961, p. 32).

Freud admits that the proposition of the reality of a primal negative drive is speculative (1961, p. 18), even though he initially deducted its existence from observations gained in his practice. If Freud's basic assumption of the human psyche was that it was fundamentally oriented towards increasing pleasure, either by avoiding displeasure or producing pleasure itself, the observance of compulsory need of traumatic patients to repeat negative experiences suggested that the pleasure principle cannot be the only driving force of mental events. Something else drives us towards manifest behaviour that is harmful to us as individuals and the death drive would thus offer an explanation of seemingly incomprehensible self-destructive actions. Notably in our present context—the eroticized car crash—Freud refers to the traumatic effects of events such as “severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life” as being indicators of the death drive and assumed causes of the traumatic repetition compulsion (1961, p. 6).

In his later work, Freud (1962) detaches his theory of the death drive from merely individual psychopathologies to apply it to the whole of the social world, where in his view the drive is inherent in all human relations, manifesting as aggression and thus posing a problem of controlling this drive on societal level.

Whether situated within the individual or the social, the notion of positive life force against negative death drive continues the Freudian tradition of dualities between, e.g., the ego and the id or reality principle and pleasure principle. Under the light of this dualism the paraphiliac

behaviour of the characters in *Crash* would appear as classic example of the influence of the death drive. Because of some originary event that threatens the very unity of the subject—a car crash, in this case—Vaughan, ‘Ballard,’ Catherine *et al.* are traumatically compelled to repeat this event of such intensity that it has surpassed their psychic capacity to respond to it.

Yet, as I propose, it would seem that according to the logic of *Crash*, the compulsion to repeat the fantasizing and actualizing of crash-sex scenarios is for the novel’s characters a peculiar route to affirmation and creation rather than a paradoxical clash of positive and negative drives. They are acting according to the emerging “benevolent psychopathology” prophesized by Vaughan. Ballard the author has himself vacillated between the warning tones of his French edition introduction (“a warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape” [1995, p. 6]) and later more affirmative pronouncements (“*Crash* is not a cautionary tale. Crash is what it appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn” [Ballard interviewed in *Self*, 2006, p. 32]).

Rather than depicting activity related to traumatic neurosis, could *Crash* be considered in terms of the production of something new—a production of event? Emma Whiting (2012) notes perceptively that despite Ballard’s works of early 1970’s (*The Atrocity Exhibition* [1970] and *Crash*) treating subjects that might seem to situate the books in the tradition of “abject literature,” as nominated by Julia Kristeva, these novels do not bring the reader into a direct and disturbing contact with the abject content, as our culture already circulates images of abjection at such rate that their challenging, as well as psychically restorative force is numbed (pp. 92–93). Despite the photographic-level of detailing of visceral aftermaths of disasters, the texts do not traumatize, but rather “seem strangely devoid of horror. The crashes and crashed bodies provoke little affect either within or without the text and are often presented as merely elaborate, stylistic poses” (Whiting, 2012, p. 92). An analysis of *Crash* by Jean Baudrillard (1991) would agree, as Baudrillard sees the novel as an emblem of the postmodern condition of hyperreality where reality and image cannot be separated and signs make evident their nature as effects. In *Crash* everything is mediated, circulated through representations, so that even the most grotesque automobile disaster or sexual act (or their combination) is devoid of affect, both for the novel’s character and the reader. There will be no real trauma in the world of *Crash*.

### The Speculative Drive – Deleuze and the Event

Based on the above observations, do Whiting’s and Baudrillard’s interpretations of *Crash*’s affectless quality undermine the possibility of any trauma-based interpretation of the novel? Approaching the death drive through Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of the Freudian concept might provide us with grounds for understanding *Crash*’s defusing of the traumatic structure despite its repetition compulsion. For Deleuze, the Freudian death drive is, indeed, a speculative concept—and rightly so. Freud’s speculations on the death drive cannot be deducted in any straightforward manner from the observations made in his clinical work, as the drive necessarily remains beyond empirical reality. The speculative work, then, is to construct the drive and in his own work on the death drive Deleuze detaches it from Freud’s dualistic model of the libido versus death drive. This desexualized drive—besides death drive Deleuze calls it “neutral energy”<sup>7</sup>—is not dependent on pleasure as its antithesis and is a matter of the “metaphysical surface” rather than the physical body (Deleuze, 1990, p. 208).

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7 As Deleuze (1990) states: “We must interpret the expression ‘neutral energy’ in the following manner: ‘neutral’ means pre-individual and impersonal” (p. 213).



The metaphysical surface is, for Deleuze, a pre-individual, “virtual,” field of radically open potentiality and it forms the transcendental condition for any individuals’ emergence in the extended, physical world. As the empirical surface, our everyday world consists of individuated things, which are restricted by already actualized or determined relations between them. “Counter-actualization” is a process where the individual’s actualized relations are dissolved and distributed anew, as if gaining access to the conditions of the individual’s actual existence (Deleuze, 1990, p. 178).

In this Deleuzian context, counter-actualization requires a taking hold of, or even a creation of, the *event*. From the perspective of the actual—a given present that is populated by “states-of-affairs”—the event appears always as virtual and untimely: a passage out of the orderly state towards a chaos that cannot ever be fully lived. Events arise from the interactions of things as their logical attributes. As in Deleuze’s example, the virtual event “to cut” can be actualized in many different positions, for instance in active “I cut” and passive “I am being cut.” The virtual event is “neutral” with respect to these different actualizations, and is as such impersonal and pre-individual and should be thought of as infinitive expression “to cut” (Deleuze, 1990, pp. 5–6). From the perspective of the actualized world, events are occurrences that are happening to me. From the perspective of the virtual and metaphysical field, events subsist out of chronological time and are not voided in their accidental actualizations. The infinitive hovers over the actual states-of-affairs.

At this stage it is necessary to ask: what is the connection between Deleuze’s interpretation of the death drive, his metaphysical concept of the event and the activities and ideas depicted in Ballard’s novel *Crash*? Let us take repetition into consideration. Freud speculated death drive as a fundamental drive towards the end of individual life; death drive was at the bottom of the neurotic compulsion to repeat harmful patterns. In this case repetition is repetition of the same. Again and again, the subject finds him- or herself in a position that is negative in valence. At first glance we could psychoanalyse *Crash*’s protagonists as displaying the exact symptoms of repetition compulsion. Yet, for Deleuze there is another, more constitutive level of repetition—not of the same, but of difference. Deleuze sees the history of philosophy from Plato to Heidegger being dominated by difference understood as secondary in relation to identity. The terms (x and y) of any relation of difference (between x and y) are thought to have primary identity, the relation itself being a secondary type of occurrence between them (Deleuze, 1994, p. 30). Against this understanding Deleuze posits difference as the primary transcendental principle, which creates the now-secondary order identities by the way of the *event* constituting a sufficient reason for empirical phenomena—to take a relatively simple physical example, a cloud is formed because of its preceding differential conditions between air temperature and moisture, differentials that come together in an cloud-event.

In Deleuze’s philosophy difference is no longer subordinated to identity. Difference as prioritized ontological principle acts as the genesis of variation; repetition makes possible the continuation of this variation. Repetition can now be considered as a fundamentally creative process. This view orients also Deleuze’s reading of the death drive: it becomes Freud’s great discovery of speculative metaphysics, asserting primary repetition that is not in Deleuze’s interpretation an inclination of the organic matter to return to a previous inorganic state but a process of continuous self-differentiation—perpetual change and adaptation of the constitution of the self (1994, p. 113). From the subjective point of view of an individual, this self-differentiation may appear as dissolution of subjectivity and as such appears as a harbinger of impending death. In *Crash*’s case the characters’ physical merging with automobiles in the violent intercourse

of the crash-event and the psychological melding of body parts with car parts in their crash-fantasies speaks of the allure of this self-differentiation as self-negation.

Freud already provides a model for this as he postulates a same tendency towards release of tension both in drives of pleasure and death: “to keep constant, or to remove internal tension due to stimuli,” calling this tendency the “Nirvana principle,” an orientation towards zero excitation (1961, pp. 49–50). This is apparent in the pleasure principle’s function:

*to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation [...] but it is clear that the function thus described would be concerned with the most universal endeavour of all living substance—namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world. We have all experienced how the greatest pleasure attainable by us, that of the sexual act, is associated with momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation. The binding of an instinctual impulse would be a preliminary function designed to prepare the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge. (Freud, 1961, p. 56)*

Freud, then, effectively describes the orgasmic sex-death in the ultimate crash, so desired by *Crash*’s characters. Yet, in *Crash*, the crash-event that the novel’s protagonists are continuously circling around and sometimes enacting is portrayed—perhaps scandalously—as life-changing and affirmative process from the perspective of those who have undergone the transformation through collision. In the novel, ‘Ballard’ looks at Vaughan’s extensive collections of photographs of crash victims, extracting from their myriad details a whole new world of meanings. Looking at the photo dossier of “the crash, hospitalization and post-recuperative romance” (Ballard, 1995, p. 99) of Vaughan’s acquaintance, Gabrielle, who was left crippled after her car accident, ‘Ballard’ can grasp the depth of her collision’s transformative power:

*I realized the extent to which this tragically injured young woman had been transformed during her recovery from the accident. The first photographs of her lying in the crashed car showed a conventional young woman whose symmetrical face and unstretched skin spelled out the whole economy of a cozy and passive life, of minor flirtations in the backs of cheap cars enjoyed without any sense of the real possibilities of her body. [...] This agreeable young woman, with her pleasant sexual dreams, had been reborn within the breaking contours of her crushed sports car. [...] The crushed body of the sports car had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality, releasing within its twisted bulkheads and leaking engine coolant all the deviant possibilities of her sex. (Ballard, 1995, p. 99)*

Through observing the effects of the collision on the young woman, the incorporeal sense of the event becomes manifest to ‘Ballard.’ The crash-event is transformative both in the empirical, corporeal world of bodies bearing the marks of their encounters with crumpling metal and shattering glass, and in the metaphysical meaning of making visible the conditions of psychological, vocational and sexual normality that formerly bound the characters and are now seen as obsolete once one has crashed with reality itself and understood it as continuous self-differentiation – at the limit of which lies the death of the Self or the “I.”

## ***Crash's* psychopathic hymn**

Do we have the resources to consider the death of the self as something other than traumatic? In order to read *Crash* ultimately not as “cautionary [tale], a warning” but “a psychopathic hymn” (Ballard, 1995, p. 6; Self, 2006, p. 32) we must pinpoint what this hymn is sung in praise of. I would propose that in this matter we should focus on the “beyond” in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. What lies beyond the organic orientation towards pleasure is, as we have discussed above, drive towards death, i.e. the organism’s instinct to return to a state of zero excitation. In Deleuze’s analysis this instinct—Freud’s death drive—becomes an affirmative force of self-differentiation. Especially in his writings with Félix Guattari the locus of this differentiation, from the point of view of the organism, is nominated as the Body without Organs (*Corps-sans-Organes*, often used in the abbreviated form BwO/CsO).

As Deleuze and Guattari state, the BwO is the “limit of the lived body” (1987, p. 150) and the term refers to the ontological understanding of the body as assemblage of affects—pre-individual relations of increasing and decreasing intensity. Hence, the BwO undermines the traditional notion of the organism as self-enclosed unity of determined configuration of organs. “The enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 158). The BwO denotes a body considered not as a self-enclosed unity, but rather a “plane” that collides together heterogeneous elements on the basis of which phenomenological experience of the lived body emerges. *Crash's* hymnal quality emerges especially in its monomaniacal descriptions of syntheses of these heterogeneous elements, of metal, glass, flesh and fluids: “this automobile marked with mucus from every orifice of the human body [...] layout of the instrument panel, like the profile of the steering wheel bruised into my chest, was inset on my knees and shinbones [...] the car-crash, a fierce marriage pivoting on the fleshy points of her knees and pubis [*etc. etc.*]” (Ballard, 1995, pp. 137, 28, 99). Also, as *Crash's* world is that of Baudrillardian hyperreality, the heterogenous elements include also incorporeal elements—images, ideas, fantasies—which are no less real than corporeal things.

As the transcendental condition of subjective experience, the BwO is evident to the experiencing subject only in the most ambiguous states that disturb the normality of the body. Deleuze and Guattari refer to the drugged or the masochistic body in relation to these intensive states and quote William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch* as depicting the drugged body’s revolt against the organized organism:

*The human body is scandalously inefficient. Instead of a mouth and an anus to get out of order why not have one all-purpose hole to eat and eliminate? We could seal up nose and mouth, fill in the stomach, make an air hole direct into the lungs where it should have been in the first place.* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 150)

Compare this with *Crash*:

*I visualized my wife injured in a high-impact collision, her mouth and face destroyed, and a new and exciting orifice opened in her perineum by the splintering steering column, neither vagina nor rectum, an orifice we could dress with all our deepest affections. I visualized the injuries of film actresses and television personalities, whose bodies would flower into dozens of auxiliary orifices, points of sexual conjunction with their audiences formed by the swerving technology of the automobile.* (Ballard, 1995, pp. 179–80)

'Ballard,' after he has had intercourse with a deep, indented scar in the thigh of Gabrielle, envisions a future sexuality of mobile erogenous zones. The crash-event that the protagonists of the novel have all encountered has become a harbinger of new fluidity of desire that can be conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari's *Body without Organs*. The Deleuzian conception of event means not only the production of something genuinely new in the experiential world (here: the crash-sex interface of automobiles and their human drivers and passengers, a previously unthinkable proposition) but also the altering of the past in a way that the latent, virtual potentialities enabling the empirical emergence of the event become understood (here: various elements of the post-war technological and mediated landscape that produce the possibility of the crash-event).

The event itself eludes presence in its actualization, which concerns both the future and the past, with the virtual event remaining in the infinite mode. As I see it, the literary devices of *Crash* reflect this: the crash-event remains undescribed in the novel, at least in any substantial manner that would be comparable to the exquisitely detailed descriptions of crash fantasies or the tableaux of altered metal and flesh after the crashes. For instance, Vaughan's terminal crash has already happened in the beginning of the novel.<sup>8</sup>

What about trauma? Is it not the case that *Crash* depicts a textbook example of the libidinal conflict between the erotic drive towards increasing of excitation and the thanatic counter-movement towards the oblivion of zero intensity? Would the result of this oscillation between Eros and Thanatos be the traumatic compulsion to repeat the crash-event that originally presented a threat to one's organic unity? We can turn this Freudian analysis around, as Deleuze does, and by this interpret *Crash*'s protagonists' quest as not negative but affirmative. For Deleuze, what is primary is not some originary lack that desire would be oriented towards in the hope of fulfilling the lack, but rather the metaphysical difference-in-itself that lacks nothing. The question becomes that of perspective: from the point of view of organic normality that the social control seeks to keep intact, becoming-other is aberration, perversity, negativity—even death of the Self. From the perspective of the *Body without Organs*, intensive differences do not recognize negativity, only variation. Yet, the state of death as zero intensity (cf. Freud's Nirvana principle) is always present in the BwO as the condition from which relations emerge and recede into. "It is in the very nature of every intensity to invest within itself the zero intensity starting from which it is produced, in one moment, as that which grows or diminishes according to an infinity of degrees" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 330).

As the intensive body of differential relations of varying intensity, the BwO is not otherworldly, however. Deleuze and Guattari's criticism of Freud concerns his way of universalizing the drives and the subsequent subject formation—hence Deleuze and Guattari's figure of Anti-Oedipus as criticism of the Western familial/Oedipal situation taken as a universal model for the development of subjectivity, as well as their usage of the concept of machine instead of structure. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari see the BwO, with its substratum of the neutral energy of zero intensity (i.e. the death drive), as necessarily historical. This means that the BwO exists bound in certain organization, but as an enemy of it (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 158), providing potentiality for change in order to devise escape routes towards alternate modes of existence. Following Deleuze and Guattari, one can ask: if life is understood in the most general terms as transmission of intensities, why limit life to the activity of the organism? Organism, as self-enclosed and self-maintaining system is oriented towards habituation as the repetition of the same. The event, as

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8 *Crash* begins in the end – or after the end of Vaughan, as 'Ballard' recounts how Vaughan has died in his ultimate crash, finally enacting his obsession of colliding with the actress Elizabeth Taylor (however missing his target and plunging through the roof of a tourist bus instead).

the repetition of preceding elements in a way that produces difference, “escapes” the traumatic model of repetition of the same.

Claire Colebrook (2011) emphasizes the need in philosophical thinking to move beyond the model of the organism, a traumatic body bounded between desire for expansion and fear of obliteration, in order to approach that which is truly yet unthinkable. J. G. Ballard, in speculating an assemblage of various elements of different modes of existence, both organic and inorganic, opens up a trajectory towards thinking our current social and technological situation in novel terms. Therefore, *Crash* offers itself not only as an object of literary analysis, but also as a source of philosophical thinking in itself. The question of whether *Crash* is a moral, cautionary tale or immoral pornography is now beside the point. By constructing a literary world where the characters are swept up with the erotic allure of technology, media and self-modification via auto-erotic crashes, the crash-event in the book and the crash-event of the book reveal heretofore hidden genealogies leading to this speculative modern moment of the “autogeddon” (Ballard, 1995, p. 50) to come.

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