J.G. BALLARD AND THE PROMISCUITY OF FORMS

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In the late 1960s the legibility of the city appeared near a threshold of oblivion. Discourses on urbanism multiplied seemingly in inverse proportion to the dissolution of the city's coherence. It was a moment in which the Western city, beset by one "crisis" after another, increasingly became a function of networks and forces surpassing it; a time after which the city retained an objective shape only if obsolete maps were used. Lodged amidst these transformations is the work of J.G. Ballard: nowhere is the disappearance of the axial city and its replacement by a new fragmented yet homogenous consistency more evident than in his novels *Atrocity Exhibition* (1969), *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High Rise* (1975). Ballard renounced the possibility of understanding the city as an extensive configuration of fixed positions and instead chose to describe new regularities and distributions of events across a discontinuous and decentered field, of which no objective view was possible.

His texts are intertwined with the fate of urbanism in the 60s: he decomposes the ground on which urbanist discourse attempted to salvage or to beget a form for the city, to delineate a cohesive object whose structure was intrinsically adequate to perceived social or human needs. But urbanism collided with that moment in capitalism when the rationalization of built space became secondary to problems of speed and the maximization of circulation. Urbanism continued to operate in an increasingly bereft domain; it sought to impose spatial intelligibility onto a locale that was being transformed by the anti-territoriality of capital. Urbanists found their own thought accommodating itself, in the guise

of new forms, to developments it was powerless to affect. At one extreme, for example, are the technocratic fantasies of Buckminster Fuller (e.g., his Tetrahedonal City), the World City or global Ecumenopolis of Constantin Doxiadis, his vision of total planetary urbanization, and Paolo Soleri's immense vertical Arcologies. Such models presumed to incarnate a still sovereign human reason and the preeminence of the designer, but their plans actually entailed the full subordination of the city's inhabitants to the enormity of their systems.

If Fuller, Doxiadis and Soleri attempted in vain to rationalize or contain the phenomenon of urban sprawl, at another extreme the British group Archigram sought to emulate and participate in the "irrationality" of the capitalist city. Borrowing from earlier machine aesthetics, Archigram envisioned the city as "a kit of parts," in which standardized industrial elements could be playfully deployed according to the dictates of individual desires. Along with others (e.g., the Austrian group Coop Himmelblau) they propagated the fantasy of a "responsive" environment, of "feedback," and were bound up in a '60s belief that the city could be rendered adaptable to the needs of its population. Specifically, Archigram sought to reconcile individual desire with the physical texture and dynamics of a throw-away consumer society; but the reconciliation they attempted began to put in question the very externality of body and city to one another. Along with related work by Japanese Metabolist architects, Archigram projects seriously undermined notions of the city as a functional integration of parts; instead they posed models of adjacent semi-autonomous systems, operating at different rates of speed so that ideas of an underlying structural or organic unity to the city became unworkable.

Both Ballard's *Crash* and Archigram projects share common roots in the general mechano-morphic eroticism of British Pop; and one must remember Ballard's association in the late 1950s and 1960s with art circles in Britain that included Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi and Reyner Banham. Thus it is not difficult to see *Crash* as a convulsive consummation of Archigram's Plug-In City - Ballard's paroxysm of functionalism in which city and body form one visceral aggregate of technical systems and organs. But the sheer density of the field it describes distinguishes *Crash* from the kinetic mobility of Archigram work. Rather than an open-ended set of possibilities to be determined by an independent subject, Ballard's terrain presupposes the evaporation of any distance between bodies

Coop Himmelblau: Heart Space, 1969.

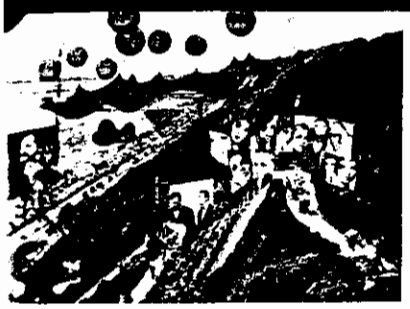
and their environment. Once the city had been reduced to "a kit of parts" only a humanist mirage could prevent its inhabitants from becoming one more relay in this new network.

Jean Baudrillard has rightly characterized *Crash* as "a purely immanent mix of the body and technology," but the nature of the "mix" needs to be made clear. Most readings of *Crash* situate it as a terminal image of consumer society, and obviously on one level it is. However, it must be insisted that the automobile or the automobile-as-commodity is incidental to Ballard's text. The "product" that finally concerns him is the human subject in whom are fulfilled some of Marx's speculations in the *Grundrisse*:

> ...the discovery, creation and satisfaction of new needs arising from society itself; the cultivation of all the qualities of the social human being, production of the same in a form as rich as possible in needs...production of this being as the most total and universal possible social product, for in order to take gratification in a many-sided way, he must be capable of many pleasures...(p.409).

The existence of a being able to make a statement like "I love my Buick" is hardly the recent result of media manipulation; rather, it is the triumphant production over a century and a half of a logic internal to capitalism itself. Ballard provides a delirious description of this literally "many-sided" capacity of a subject to conjoin with any object or surface. Thus the perforation of the body's physical integrity in *Crash*, through wounds and orifices, discloses a condition of permanent openness and receptivity. Ballard presents the body as the last domain of an external nature to be made over into "purely a matter of utility" (*Grundrisse*, p. 409).

Ballard takes to a limit effects that Jean-Luc Godard examined in *Weekend* (1968) and *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967). The title of the latter film referred to, among other things, Paris, prostitution, and "neo-capitalism;" it emphasized the inseparability of the body and representations of it from the multiple economies of the city. In fact Godard explicitly avoided using the word "city" in the film, specifying instead "la région parisienne." He presents Paris less as a built environment than as a modulating, heterogenous texture, experienced only as periphery, interwoven with flows of images, money and desire. But at the same time, the anti-urbanism of *Two or Three Things*, with its recurrent images of an older Paris under demolition, of bulldozers and new construction sites, showed



Archigram: Instant City, 1969: The hardware is made up of tension nets held by balconies, travelling cranes, telescoping robots, projective screens and neon signs.

Godard coping with a familiar modernist dilemma (that goes back to Baudelaire's response to Haussmann). In the words of Manfredo Tafuri, this recurring problem was "how to come to terms with the anguish of urban dynamism."

But for Ballard the city's physical metamorphoses are not an issue. In spite of its title's connotation of speed, *Crash* and Ballard's related novels disclose a fundamental dereliction and inertia of what once constituted the city. This dereliction takes a variety of forms, including that suggested by the arena of its events: everything in *Crash* occurs within a field that is defined spatially only by proximity to the airport. Nothing even hints at the existence of an urban center. Ballard never takes us into the airport itself but travels ceaselessly around its fringes: a boundaryless world of airport perimeter roads, airport shopping malls, parking garages, buses, airport whores. It is a permanent in-between, an in-transit, adjoining both the speed of air travel and the dissipation of the axial city. The artist Robert Smithson was also drawn to the airport as a non-site implanted on an urban periphery, located ostensibly in the suburbs yet radically distinct from them. Like the Orly observation deck in Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* (1964), the layout of the airport was an entrance onto another network of lines, viewpoints, languages and temporalities. Ballard and Smithson understood how the airport, in spite of its geographical sprawl, was a machinery of displacement, that it rested not on extensive terrain but "on a firmament of statistics."

One perplexing feature of *Crash* is the apparent convergence of two radically dissimilar realms, two different models of circulation. On one hand, Ballard delineates a wholly vehicular city, dominated by the extensive (and seemingly anachronistic) space of the automobile, its labyrinth of routes and support structures. On the other, he outlines what might be called the "tele-visual" city, a setup constituted by simulation and reproductive technologies, and as insubstantial as the purely projected *Instant City* (1969) of Archigram. But Ballard assigns no priority to either of these, insisting on the full interpenetration of these "incompatible" spaces. As much as the text is littered with the carnage of the car crash so it is also with cameras, viewfinders, stacks of photographs, video screens, slow-motion replays. Everyone in the novel is equally entangled with the lure of the automobile *and* the business of television or film, especially the presiding figure of Vaughan, "one of the first of the new style of TV-scientists" whose dubious vocation is "the application of computerized techniques to the

control of all international traffic systems." But in his obsession with assassinations and the deaths of celebrities in car crashes, i.e., with the corporeality of the image, Vaughan's real project is to explore the congruence of these overlapping zones.

One of Ballard's crucial images is the automobile coupled with recording apparatus: a movie or TV camera bolted to a car dashboard, with the human body at the same time fully merged with both vehicle and viewfinder. But Ballard is not describing a subjection of the body to either car (commodity) or image (spectacle). Rather he diagrams how events, trajectories and their reproduction all circulate indifferently on the same isotropic surface; and Ballard is ultimately less interested in outlining the homogeneity of space and of surfaces than he is the interchangeability of operations, connections and syntheses. The potential singularity and intensity of the car crash (which André Breton had suggested in a footnote at the end of his novel *Nadja*) are neutralized by being merely one of innumerable modes of conjunction.

One is sometimes tempted to position Ballard as a late 20th century Lautréamont, and certainly his ambivalent, even nostalgic relationship to Surrealism is a conspicuous part of his work, including *Crash*. But if his writing is haunted by Surrealism, it is also marked by a recognition of the inability of Surrealist operations to achieve the same effects that were once sought. For Breton the city offered "certain juxtapositions, certain combinations that greatly surpass our understanding." In Breton's *Nadja* or Louis Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* the city allowed the exercise of a *goût d'errer*: passage through its (magnetic) field always held the possibility of a transfiguring encounter with a given site or person, of paths or itineraries punctuated by combinations of talismanic objects. But the kind of de-territorialization that Ballard outlines is taken to such limits that anything can conjoin with anything, thus exploding an aesthetic of juxtaposition (or of perversion). In *The Atrocity Exhibition* "Talbert has accepted in absolute terms the logic of the sexual union. For him all junctions, whether of our own soft biologies or the hard geometries of these walls and ceilings, are equivalent to one another. What Talbert is searching for is the primary act of intercourse, the first apposition...". There is a fundamental regularity to the field in spite of the hetereogeneity of its contents, and it is the very uniformity of exchange values that derails what once might have been Surrealism.

A paradox of *Crash* is the remoteness of its violence from a modernist experience of shock, which presupposed a subject autonomous enough to maintain a distance from the ceaselessly evolving collage-city, founded on the chaos of anarchical industrial production. Ballard's derelict and amorphous city is concurrent with the global dispersal of the body of the multinational corporation into shifting mobile arrangements, and the relation of the subject to this new city is not one of opposition. Rather he outlines the subject's decomposition, scattering and remapping onto its new surfaces, paralleling related processes in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, published the same year as *Crash*. There are then no independent agents, defining their own trajectories and meeting in random collisions. Instead, Ballard details a permanent condition of interface, of sheer contiguity, an invasion of the subject so thorough that his frequent use of the word "dream" no longer describes anything interior. The city coincides with this promiscuity of forms, an infinity of intersections, in which the accidental is no longer possible. It is not so much a text to be read and interpreted as a delirium of conjugations to be named and enumerated. Even the bare recitation of these new syntactical formations generates a constellation of epiphanies. And Ballard the writer has the superb tact never to impose on his reader the beauty or horror of this syntax.