



## Heiddegerian enframing, nihilism & affectlessness in J.G. Ballard's *Crash*

CARLOS SÁNCHEZ FERNÁNDEZ\*  
*UNED, Madrid (Spain)*

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### ABSTRACT

J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973) allows a reading in the terms of Heidegger's concept of *Ge-stell* or *enframing*, according to which in modernity everything, humans included, is seen as a mere means to often questionable ends. Prompted by violent sexual fantasies and an unleashed death drive, its main characters, a wild bunch of symphorophiliac drivers, live a life of existential nihilism, treating human beings as objects, mere fodder for their prearranged car crashes. In so doing, they take an active part in a general process of dehumanisation afflicting Western civilisation, where people are just *standing reserve* (*Bestand*). This would be closely linked to so-called affectlessness, where emotions go nowhere but to an ever-increasing self-absorption in a world without others. In turn, this would be symptomatic of a civilisational shift from word to image, in a society where technology and performativity reign supreme and everything is evacuated of meaning.

**KEYWORDS:** Enframing (*Ge-stell*), nihilism, affectlessness, technology, the car, death drive, standing reserve (*Bestand*), dehumanisation, eclipse of the other, wound culture.

### 1. INTRODUCTION: ENFRAMING AND STANDING RESERVE

J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973) has been interpreted as an attempt on the part of its characters to disconnect from ambient nihilism by a desperate search for true self through sexual transgression mediated by the automobile (Stephenson, 1991: 66-67, 72-74).

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\**Address for correspondence:* Bda. Felipe II, bl. 48, 4º-A-Iz., 41013 Seville, Spain; e-mail: [csanchez319@alumno.uned.es](mailto:csanchez319@alumno.uned.es)

To support this view, we could draw from Leo Bersani when writing on Freud's idea of sexuality as "an aptitude for the defeat of power by pleasure, the human subject's potential for a *jouissance in which the subject is momentarily undone*." (Bersani, 1995: 100, my emphasis) It is my contention, though, that this liberation from that most metaphysical of categories since Descartes, subjectivity, evolves in *Crash* into an even worse, not momentary but permanent metaphysical condition: the one Martin Heidegger calls *Ge-stell* (variously translated as 'enframing', 'framework', 'frame', or 'grid') (Borgmann, 2005: 428; Edwards, 2002: 113; Schalow & Denker, 2010: 100). *Ge-stell* could be defined as "the challenging claim that sets upon man to order the real as standing reserve", resources or, in its original German, *Bestand* (Heidegger, 1977: 19). As a mode of Being's self-revealing, enframing "holds sway in the essence of modern technology", whereby one's own will, plans and designs are imposed on things, generally by means of a wilful and aggressive assault, making them available and disposable as one wishes (Borgmann, 2005: 428; Fell, 2002: 331-332; Heidegger, 1977: 20). In *Crash*, enframing holds sway in the form of the automobile, the Western commodity par excellence and an enhancer of the characters' death drive. Indeed, if *Ge-stell* is a way of Being's self-revealing, "where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing." (Heidegger, 1977: 27). In fact, it "covers up revealing as such." (Wheeler, n.p.) Under this negative and reductive dispensation, therefore, Being reveals itself, if anything, by withdrawing (Schalow & Denker, 2010: 100).

Accordingly, in the society inhabited by J.G. Ballard's fictional creatures, the existing is acknowledged as unidimensional, inasmuch as it is always seen under the prism of value. More precisely, this value is that inherent in Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power, which in *Crash* is embodied by the car, a symbol of the free individual's empowerment (Schalow & Denker, 2010: 100). In this way, Vaughan, the protagonist, may be seen as an example of the mechanised animal that man becomes when adopting the instrumental and grotesque understanding of the world promoted by technology, which typically engulfs and diminishes it, if providing its user with a feeling of power.<sup>1</sup> For Vaughan, as for the technological dispensation reigning supreme in the contemporary West, beings are thus reduced to not-beings, always ready to hand without so much as giving them a thought. Owing to this, all he sees in his surroundings is everything's sheer instrumental value for satisfying transitory urges inextricably bound with his car (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2005: 13). Human beings are not excluded from this instrumentalisation (Borgmann, 2005: 429). Consequently, virtually every character in the novel gets reduced to the condition of "functionaries of the enframing", thereby losing subjectivity's corollary: "a deep immanent truth" (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2005: 13). This is so in spite of Vaughan's confusedly enacted, rather than verbally articulated, discourse of self-liberation from prevalent behavioural frames and social roles. He attempts to transcend the mediocre reality of the (post)modern city and the drudgery and slavery of daily work *à la Nietzsche*, namely in an aesthetic way, as an artist of life beyond good and

evil, for “only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified” (Nietzsche, 1999: 113). Posing as an overman in his transit over the abyss lying between the human and the posthuman, he only achieves the condition of unofficial suburban executioner, hybrid butcher or lethal, metallised centaur.

In Vaughan’s alliance with technology with a view to escaping the constraints of modern life he miscalculates, driving out any possible sense of awe and wonder springing from his experience of reality. His car precludes access to mystery, that which enframing cannot reach, condemning it as defective (as it is not yet “ordered and on call”) or, quite simply, as non-existent (Edwards, 2005: 461; Wrathall, 2005: 351). In so doing, Vaughan falls prey to the great danger enframing poses to Being: it forecloses any other perspectives on the existing, while at the same time concealing the fact that it too is a perspective on Being or a mode of its disclosure (Borgmann, 2005: 429; Edwards, 2002: 115). Any possible feeling of personal fulfilment or self-achievement on the part of Vaughan or the other members of his deviant cell out of their courting death must hence be put down to their aberrant psychopathologies, and nothing else. That is all their abject ceremonies of blood, vomit, semen and vaginal mucus amount to.

## 2. SEXUAL ENFRAMING: NIHILISM AND DEHUMANISATION

Vaughan’s entire life is based on a typically postmodern confusion between reality and fantasy. His wishful, insane, utterly unrepressed, totally conscious, and completely uncheckable fantasies, which he regards as a “better world” than the real one, always press him forward beyond any possible “reality-testing” instance (Francis, 2011: 120). Just in the same way as in Catherine Ballard’s case, Vaughan’s take on reality includes death and the dead merely as a part of his erotic amusements; thus, Ballard, on describing a sexual encounter with his wife, similarly and tellingly avows: “Her pleasantly promiscuous mind, fed for years on a diet of aircraft disasters and war newsreels, of violence transmitted in darkened cinemas, made an immediate connection between my accident and all the nightmare fatalities of the world perceived as part of her sexual recreations” (Ballard, 2008: 33-34).<sup>2</sup> The only way that Vaughan, in his unflinching, reckless exploration of sex-death and mutilation, can understand and imagine every single driver’s life is just death: for him, as he steps onto his car every night, all of them are already dead; for him, life is merely death’s quarry. Although necrophilia as such is not illustrated in the novel, it only falls short of it: the dead, according to Catherine, should be left lying around for months before disposing of the corpses (Ballard, 2008: 33). Vaughan also manipulates corpses on the very site of crashes in order to photograph them, thus adding to his preparations for his ultimate, self-annihilating car crash while also providing for his fantasy-based erotic life in the meantime. In the end,

both characters, for all of their luxuriant sex life, are living paradigms of existential nihilism as the “negation of the value of life.” (Woodward, 2009: 9). What is more, Catherine’s husband and narrator, Ballard, also begins to suffer from this moral illness right after his first car accident, while still in hospital: “The week after the accident had been a maze of pain and *insane fantasies*” (Ballard, 2008: 28, my emphasis). For them, human lives can only be valuable in terms of the fulfilment of their deranged fantasies. Technology, in the form of the car, will prove instrumental in securing those lives as an available resource, lacking, like everything else under the sway of enframing, “in any inherent significance, use or purpose.” (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2005: 13) In this way, Ballard tells us how Seagrave, a stunt driver and Vaughan’s right-hand man, “had built an abattoir of sexual mutilation” in his imagination for the benefit of five female celebrities he targets as possible victims of a thoroughly planned car accident (Ballard, 2008: 109). Cars in *Crash* are mobile avatars of the Nazi Lager. Any other perspectives on the human are majestically disregarded.

Indeed, many examples could be taken out of *Crash* of what Gregory Stephenson, referring to J.G. Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), calls the “reduction of human individuals to objects” in order to be emotionlessly exploited, the relations established with them being merely “mechanistic, dehumanized” (Stephenson, 1991: 64-65). Yet again, we are exploring the realm of enframing, where everything, objects and beings, is brought to presence by the challenging revealing of modern technology: namely, as immediately and completely available for use or consumption by human beings after having duly and instrumentally been identified and measured (or *researched*, in Vaughan’s case). This finds an expression in Stephenson when he refers to “the emotional and spiritual sterility of contemporary Western culture, its loss of vitality and of direction.” (64) Such sterility, if we follow Heidegger’s argument, is the natural and predictable outcome of a world of means without ends, where “the sense of significance and purpose has been eroded by the technological disclosure of beings and this same disclosure prevents further disclosive events of Being which might restore a more meaningful world.” In such a world, “human beings no longer have a home”, inhabiting a wasteland of nihilism in which an abyssal dimension cannot be ignored, one whereby “life appears to have no justification and is devoid of any necessity concerning reasons, values, or norms.” (Woodward, 2009: 65, 223). Hence, Heidegger calls this time of spiritual decline “the darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the reduction of human beings to a mass,” and, finally, “the hatred and mistrust of anything creative” (2000: 40).

This nihilism would correspond to that moment, after the end of WWII, “when the farthest corner of the earth has been conquered technologically and can be exploited economically” (Heidegger, 2000: 40). To this we should add, according to Fredric Jameson, the colonisation of the very human unconscious, something characteristic of late capitalism, the economic system that has supported the extraordinary flourishing of technoscience since

the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1992: 36). According to Herbert Marcuse, this is a form of political dominance that is being imposed in the name of rationality; in this way, reason's instrumental turn in modernity results in a rationally based totalitarian society. In it, the scientific method has eventually made a more and more efficient domination of man a consequence of the domination of nature (Habermas, 1986: 54, 58). As Gianni Vattimo explains following both Nietzsche and Heidegger, the "grandfathers of postmodernity": "nihilism is the consumption of use-value into exchange-value", which dissolves Being into "universal equivalence" (Vattimo, 1987: 30). This process is concomitant with capitalism and technoscience, and therefore starts in modernity; thus, already Marx calls our attention to the direct relation existing in a community between the decrease in the valuation of people and the increase in the valuation of things: in other words, technological progress ends up in the commodification of people (1988: 72). It is in postmodernity, though, in the "multicultural Babel" in which we are living, that it reaches its zenith (Woodward, 2009: 157-158).

In *Crash*, all of this is evident in the way every single character instrumentalises every member of the crash circle, let alone other drivers, in their quest for their own pleasure, always mediated by technology in the form of the automobile. Under these conditions, sex is "a laboratory experiment, the sexual researcher a detached figure manipulating human subjects as though they were as much *mechanical equipment*." (Gasiorek, 2005: 87, my emphasis). In the end, everyone in the novel, from Vaughan and the members of his perverted cell to road or airport prostitutes, is either in actual fact or potentially a sexual object, flesh to be preyed upon with no scruples or regrets whatsoever. As Zadie Smith puts it, "*Crash* is an existential book about how everybody uses [...] everybody." The difference between things and people has become too small in it to be meaningful any longer (2014: n.p., par. 17). This dehumanisation could be put down to the demise of modern, sovereign subjectivity in postmodernity. From now on, it will be seen as a mere function of the world of objectivity, the subject thus irrevocably tending to become an object for manipulation itself. Hence, in *Crash* the power balance between people and technology is inverted, eventually depriving its characters of human attributes such as interiority and individual agency, as if they had been mass produced (Smith, 2014: n.p., par. 16).

This is what surfaces in Ballard's statement about enrolling Vaughan in his "confused hunt" after car crashes (Ballard, 2008: 50, my emphasis). Vaughan could even be thought to embody certain sociologically prevalent, banal modalities of male violence, especially against women, his attempt on Liz Taylor's life being liable to be read as "the ritualistic enactment of cultural meaning about sex" (Weeks, 1983: 72).<sup>3</sup> What started as a quest after true self and absolute reality has by now become an inertial yet deadly chasing game after anything that moves. Hence, if we are to believe J.G. Ballard in the sense that the psychopathic hymn that he acknowledges *Crash* to be has a point (namely, that the

cultivation of deviant perversion and transgressive violence is risky and comes at a high price), a hymn it remains: the author's fascination for his own fiction and the wayward imagination behind it is evident. In an interview, after defining every sort of violence as "wholly bad", he recognises, however, that "we're also *excited* by violence", maybe even "for good reasons." (Barber, 2014: 32, original emphasis)

Certainly, violence, death, and the ultimate abject object, the corpse, all of them being related to enframing, are parts of the perverse pansexuality we are dealing with in *Crash* (Kristeva, 1982: 4). This "decentring, ego-destructive," and "body-disintegrating" sexuality, which is colonised by the Freudian death drive and to which everything else in the novel is subordinated, is the ultimate motive behind its characters' hunting sprees (Francis, 2011: 112; Gasiorek, 2005: 97). This is conspicuous in Vaughan's fantasies about his fetishised Elizabeth Taylor, whom he wishes to join those other celebrities whose famously fatal car crashes he researches and re-enacts with Seagrave's invaluable assistance (Ballard, 2008: 8, 110-111). His fascination with celebrity death could be explained as a "vicarious extension" of the death drive and "its endless cycle of repetition compulsion", the celebrity standing for Vaughan's "ego ideal" in Freudian terminology (Brottman & Sharrett, 2002: 130).

Secondarily, this sort of identification with a celebrity would also correspond to the blurring of the boundary between the emotionally disturbing though endlessly fascinating spectacle of "happy life gone wrong" on the one hand, and the life of the average citizen on the other, which would equate to a sort of spurious democratisation characteristic of contemporary societies, where spectacle and life conjoin under the sign of nothingness (Featherstone, 2005: 16; Silverman, 1999: 110). This is an index of how insane fantasies about other people's deaths may not necessarily be the preserve of a psychopathic or deranged minority, such as the members of Vaughan's symphorophiliac cult, but rather a mass phenomenon. We would be living in what Mark Seltzer calls a "wound culture" characterised by "the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound." Thus, "mass attraction to atrocity exhibitions, in the pathological public sphere, takes the form of a fascination with [...] the opening of private and bodily and psychic interiors: the exhibition and witnessing, the endlessly reproducible display, of wounded bodies and wounded minds in public. In wound culture, the very notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle." (Tew, 2012: 414-415) An especially apposite illustration of this social phenomenon is given us in *Crash*, when Vaughan, Ballard, and his wife Catherine watch an accident near Heathrow airport:

Hundreds of faces pressed at the windows of the cars moving down the flyover. Spectators stood three deep on the sidewalks and central reservation, crowded together

against the wire mesh fence that separated the roadway embankment from the nearby shopping precinct and housing estate. The police had given up any attempt to disperse this enormous crowd. One group of engineers worked on the crushed sports car, prying at the metal roof which had been flattened on to the heads of the occupants [...] I looked round at the crowd. A considerable number of *children* were present, many *lifted on their parents' shoulders* to give them a better view. The revolving police beacons moved across the watching faces as we climbed the embankment to the wire mesh fence. *None of the spectators showed any signs of alarm*. They looked down at the scene with the calm and studied interest of intelligent buyers at a leading bloodstock sale [...] More spectators strolled across the common from the shopping precinct. They climbed through a break in the wire fence. Together we watched [...] (Ballard, 2008: 127-128, my emphasis)

Every car crash becomes a “shared event”; its site, a “proscenium”; the wound, “a contact-point or switch-point between inner and outer worlds.” (Chrysochou, 2009: 6-7). The postmodern society of enframing is one made up of morbid voyeurs unable either to handle the death drive in a mature way, or to treat people as human beings rather than as spectacle characters or media carrion.

### 3. ENFRAMING AND MORAL INDIFFERENCE: ECLIPSE OF THE OTHER

Voyeurism, which is made not only possible but almost compulsory in this visual, postmodern society of ours, can only end up in utter moral unconcern, as exemplified by Catherine Ballard’s disappointment on receiving the news that Vaughan, not her husband, has died in a crash; when the latter gets home to tell her, he reports: “I was certain that she had expected me to be Vaughan, arriving after my death to console her.” (Ballard, 2008: 181) Such a reaction is based on the same insane logic as her admiring and even envying Ballard’s killing Helen Remington’s husband in the accident he undergoes at the beginning of the novel: “Already Catherine saw me in a new light. Did she respect, and perhaps even envy me for having killed someone, in almost the only way in which one can now legally take another person's life?” (33).<sup>4</sup> Neither she nor her husband will flinch from the acknowledged fact that Vaughan will crash into her car any day, most probably killing her: “After his last attempt to kill my wife Catherine, I knew that Vaughan had retired finally into his own skull. In this overlit realm ruled by violence and *technology* he was now driving for ever at a hundred miles an hour along an empty motorway, past deserted filling stations on the edges of wide fields, waiting for a single oncoming car. In his mind Vaughan saw the whole world dying in a simultaneous automobile disaster, millions of vehicles hurled together in a terminal congress of spurting loins and engine coolant.” (8, my emphasis). Towards the end of the novel, Ballard avows: “Still uncertain whether Vaughan would try to crash his car into Catherine's, I made no attempt to warn her. *Her death would be a model of my care for all*

*the victims* of air-crashes and natural disasters. As I lay beside Catherine at night, my hands modelling her breasts, I visualized her body in contact with various points of the Lincoln's interior, rehearsing for Vaughan the postures she might assume. Aware of this coming collision, Catherine had entered an entranced room within her mind. Passively, she allowed me to move her limbs into the positions of unexplored sex acts.” (179, my emphasis). In fact, Ballard’s fantasies about his wife’s death are no less than a part of the “affectionate responses” they would exchange while together on the road; furthermore and tellingly enough, he defines these fantasies as more and more “*calculated*”, as anything under enframing’s sway, even surpassing Vaughan’s on the same issue: “I began to think about Catherine's death in a more calculated way, trying to devise in my mind an even richer exit than the death which Vaughan had designed for Elizabeth Taylor. These fantasies were part of the affectionate responses exchanged between us as we drove along the motorway together.” (149, my emphasis).

This is just a sign of how in our mediatic and virtual postmodernity, society and thought are exposed to internal confusion and to the virulence and transparency of an evil which, no longer finding anywhere to manifest itself as such, filters everywhere into indifference and even hatred (Baudrillard, 2002: 77). This is how some of the defining features of Vaughan’s and his circle’s behaviour coincide with those to be seen in some of the most prominent examples of mediatic violence in our time, such as the New York 9/11 attacks: sacralisation of death, absolute indifference to the victims, or the transformation of oneself and others into *instruments*. Their conduct, however, could also illustrate how terrorist practices involving the sacrifice of both one’s and others’ lives could articulate “a deep-seated challenge to the passive nihilist consumer society, in which to die *for a cause* is unimaginable.” (Diken, 2009: 78-79, my emphasis) Nothing to wonder at in a society bent on deterrence, pacification and control, neutralising dissent, and rooting out all radicalism, negativity and singularity (death, the outmost of singularity, included) through contemporary forms of violence more subtle than straight aggression, such as psychical and media regulation (Baudrillard, 2002: 92-93). Hence, Vaughan and his partners would be following the mandates of enframing in their indifference to their own and others’ deaths, while also revolting more generally against them in a challenge to the ultra-conformist and “framed” society such mandates originate in, and which they refuse to belong to.

Be that as it may, their attitude, in that it is indifferent to human death, would be the unavoidable consequence of a nihilism that will not listen to Being or allow it to speak to us through beings in their multidimensionality (Marmysz, 2003: 35, 39). Under the sway of Heidegger’s *Ge-stell*, the temptation to enframe the very Being of beings, and the denial of “what cannot be reified and totalized” would make nihilism rage in our culture (Levin, 1988: 9). According to this, when interpellated for a meaning to human life, the universe may seem even to deny itself, with the correlate of the inexistence of any real meaning at all (Gasiorek,



2005: 198-199)<sup>5</sup>. After the end of WWII and fully within the postmodern mindset, nihilism being indisputably triumphant, the question, as Baudrillard, inverting Heidegger, poses it, should be: “Why is there nothing rather than something?” (1996: 2)

Enframing, in Heidegger’s thought and as we already saw, also includes humans in the fashion of “human material”, which becomes disposable “with a view to proposed goals.” (2001: 109). In this light, the car and car-crashes as they are depicted in J.G. Ballard’s novel could work as supreme signifiers of the failure of the imagination and its eventual consequence: freedom from morality. Henceforth, technocracy itself will decide on all questions (Gasiorek, 2005: 194). Retrenched in their “new Nautilus”, alienated from “social restraints”, and feeling self-sufficient in their cars, “the demands of others become intrusive” to drivers (Barthes, 1991: 88; Graves-Brown, 1997: 69). Against a background of banalised violence and anomie expressed as aggressiveness, ideas of responsibility towards others might simply not be accommodated in the society *Crash* depicts.

In this plays an important part the fact of the overwhelming burden that humans have had to shoulder in our post-1945 welfare societies, now that the Other as a contrasting, oppositional image has been tabooed, and “homeopathic” violence and negativity have been strictly forbidden (Sage, 2008: 35, 37-38). The postmodern “spectrality” of identity, that is to say, its generalised “dispersal and simulation” once broken any sense of a stable ego, and the concomitant transformation of “relationships into a ceaseless stream of differentiation” would ultimately make difference something meaningless. Maybe the clearest example of another source for this socially widespread meaninglessness is that of language itself. According to J.G. Ballard, nowadays not only are many among the most socially prominent speakers using language as anything but an instrument of communication, but they are also doing this quite openly (Baker, 2008: 19-20; Baxter, 2008a: 124-125). If according to Heidegger nihilism is oblivion of Being, and if language is the “house of Being”, then this is a patent sign of the nihilism we are living in (1993: 217). If we are to use Heideggerian terminology, ours is a world of “chatter”, a way of speaking “severed from the context of thought, feeling, and perception” (Inwood, 1997: 57). This reinforces the effects of enframing: in the contemporary West, people are not only seen as standing reserve, but they are cut off from meaning and purpose by the very same human attribute that articulates them, namely language. They are doomed to live like disoriented zombies without a soul of their own.

All these sociological and cultural phenomena would be leading towards an “eclipse of the other”. Quite simply, in our society there might be no more room for any “troubling” or discursively significant otherness, one which would unsettle our sense of self (Baudrillard and Guillaume, as qtd. in Silverman, 1999: 89-90). This would also be the premise of “a secular attitude without morality, without judgment, without hope”, the stuff of a “black mysticism of transcendental collapse” oriented towards a godless, “laughing”, nihilistic

apocalypse (ibid.). On account of such a mysticism, the long shadow of a by now presumably dead God still (negatively) lingers in our current anomic society, as well as the practical impossibility of arbitrating a secular ethics whose basic postulates will stay above the unrestricted satisfaction of personal desires as the sole guiding principle. In this respect, we would be living in an immanent, not imminent apocalypse, unlike during modernity. Postmodern apocalypse, deprived of any “transcendental meaning”, would therefore be a feeling of “continued disaster” from which one cannot maintain any distance. In Maurice Blanchot’s words: “How is it possible to say: Auschwitz has happened?” Indeed, it would never have stopped taking place (Blanchot, 1995: 143; Slocombe, 2003: 169-170). The same could be said of the systematic, industrial slaughtering of the millions of victims of reckless car driving, whom we all take for granted and ignore under enframing’s domination: they could be seen as the real fuel propelling the hectic traffic of Western cosmopolises, as the instrumentalised victims of the Shoah fuelled the void purpose of the Nazi death camps, namely universal nothingness.

#### 4. AFFECTLESSNESS AND THE VISUAL: COMPLETION OF NIHILISM

In the end, this abstraction and depersonalisation of the human being, their fetishisation, this widespread derealisation of people’s both human and material environment under the framework of technology and an unleashed nihilism connected to the death drive, are closely linked to what J.G. Ballard calls the “most sinister casualty of the century: the death of affect” (Gasiorek, 2005: 94-96, 70; Slocombe, 2003: 78-79).

Indeed, if Michel Delville is right when he states that J.G. Ballard’s fiction takes place in an “affectless void”, which is our time’s, then maybe we should listen with different ears to the charges of nihilism sometimes levelled against his work: at least implicitly, a nihilist principle might be at play in it (1988: 82). Certainly, a world presided over by this affectlessness, by this utter lack of concern for others would be an impossible, nihilistic world. This poses a serious problem, as our postmodern culture of constant and instant self-gratification does not seem to be very “conducive to a responsibility for ‘the other’, which is at the heart of any *moral* spacing.” (Zygmunt Bauman, as qtd. in Silverman, 1999: 88, original emphasis). In the end, the death of affect is not neutral, neither in our society nor in *Crash*: in the latter, emotions go nowhere, if not to hasten destruction, self-destruction included (Litt, 2008: x). And, of course, when others are seen as mere disposable material, destruction and self-destruction are much likelier to take place than otherwise.

A key factor in understanding the novel’s predatory inertia, its postmodern, nihilistic take on death, and the waning of affect at play in it is the fact that its characters, just like us readers, live in an environment saturated with visual representations, with an ever-growing

proliferation of images, often of a toxic nature, being perpetrated and propagated by the media. As J.G. Ballard acknowledges in an interview when commenting on *Empire of the Sun*, a fictional autobiography, “technology kills feeling”; as for the death of affect, moreover, “it is brought about by systems of mass communication.” (Cartano & Jakubowski, 2014: 220). In a world full to the brim with profuse, exaggerated sensory stimulus, anything is eventually made equivalent to anything else; besides, as the human mind gets over-loaded with data and these, like everything else and according to the workings of enframing, are “perpetually available”, everything is evacuated of meaning (Gasiorek, 2005: 109; Whiting, 2012: 88). In urban postmodernity, in “a world of signs divorced from the world of signification,” signifiers will “float free of their attachment to specific meanings.” (Silverman, 1999: 81). In this way, enframing lays down its law: information and knowledge are subject to instrumentalisation, too; performance and profit reign supreme.

The most important among the aforementioned stimuli are those of a visual nature, to the point that we could understand them to be causing a general civilisational shift “from word to image” (82). This is reinforced by the availability of a second-hand, visual standing reserve made up of “frozen, stored, contrived, and re-presented” images for manipulation and control by the media, as mediatic representations, by being taken out of context, can be extraordinarily malleable. This would ultimately lead to the public becoming “anaesthetised against the real”, and to “cultural amnesia” under the “rule of the screen” (Jenks, 2004: 163, 165; Silverman, 1999: 113, 119). This amnesia, which is “an amnesia of the image” befitting the “passivization” of more and more uncritical individuals and an “obliteration of choice by a new mass conformism”, is directly connected to the transition from the historical to a “mythical stage” through the “media-led” reconstruction of events (Baudrillard, 1993: 91-92; Silverman, 1999: 111, 113). These are “hollowed out”, passively “consumed by their own representations,” leaving only the “empty shells” of their own simulations available to the consumers of the products of “an ever-expanding media realm” characterised by its “derealizing effects” (Crosthwaite, 2009: 20-22).

In this world of mirages, meaningless chatter and pervasive indifference, cultivation of the merely superficial would be contributing to smother any vestiges of “reality” or referentiality still existing in our society. As the narrator of *Crash* acknowledges at a certain moment while driving through a spectral London, “I thought of being killed within this huge accumulation of *fictions*, finding my body marked with the imprint of a hundred television crime serials” (Ballard, 2008: 45, my emphasis). Not in vain does J.G. Ballard affirm in his introduction to the 1995 edition of *Crash* that ours is “a world ruled by fictions of every kind”, even those of theory (2008: n. p., par. 3). Our society would be based on a consensual, “esthetic” [sic] hallucination of reality (Baudrillard, 1983: 147-148; Bukatman, 1993: 30). In our postmodern time, everything, war included, becomes spectacle, mere show, and true self or identity are but delusions or the stuff reality TV is purportedly made of. TV dissolves into

life, life into TV (Baudrillard, 1983: 55). In the end, “TV is the world”, a world of homogeneity where difference no longer matters and everything is acknowledged only as stored, disposable energy or material: *Bestand* or standing reserve, the common fate of everything under enframing (Featherstone, 2007: 67).

A transition from word to image having been completed after reality has become confused with an aestheticised image of itself, we are installed in the midst of a figural culture founded on “visual regimes of signification” where TV is to be found alongside cinema and advertising. All three of them are channels for non-stop, omnipresent and almighty spectacle, where the emphasis falls upon primary, unconscious processes such as desire and the id rather than on secondary ones, such as the ego (Baudrillard, 1983: 152; Featherstone, 2007: 68; Heller, 2005: 91). An alliance of the irrational and the spectacle holds sway over postmodernity, when awareness and critical thinking are all but extinguished. Thus, “ultraviolence” has become “a critical and accepted part of the mainstream”, horror has been banalised, and the fetishised wound that TV has contributed so much to make popular have nearly acquired the condition of “sophisticated entertainment” (Whiting, 2012: 93-94, 97).

This is intimately related to the way how, late in his life, while commenting on horror films and TV series, J.G. Ballard states that, from his personal point of view, we are living in a time of “violence as spectator sport” (Sellars, 2014: 440). This is the sport that the Ballards give themselves to during their onanistic sessions while watching pain and violence on television, the latter being, along with the automobile, the most characteristic device of contemporary technology. In Ballard’s words: “I was already becoming a kind of emotional cassette, taking my place with all those scenes of pain and violence that illuminated the margins of our lives – television newsreels of wars and student riots, natural disasters and police brutality which we vaguely watched on the colour TV set in our bedroom as we masturbated each other. This violence experienced at so many removes had become intimately associated with our sex acts.” (Ballard, 2008: 26) This could verify Paul Virilio’s contention that (post) modern media (and art too, for that matter) can be defined by their “obsession with sensationalism.” (Noys, 2005: 107). There, within a “new culture of shock”, one that “uses the speed of modern media technologies to overcome our capacities for response” and is very much akin to the wound culture we spoke of above, pain and violence are certainly experienced “at so many removes” from the real, that is, only in the head, the last place that was designed to deal with them (Whitford, 2014: 39).

If, according to Bataille, “confrontation with death always requires the detour of a spectacle”, in the French author’s wake and despite their efforts to restore death’s dignity by turning it into a most abject spectacle, all the transcendence achieved first by Seagrave’s and then by Vaughan’s suicides is of this kind: they are but banal, insignificant non-events, not even worthy of five minutes of screen fame, as their “sacrificial violence” only “empties the

human experience of any transcendent meaning.” (Bukatman, 1983: 292; Noys, 2005: 118). That would be the “the form of the real in modern culture: the image [of death on television] as nightmarish apparition.” (122) Moreover, Vaughan proceeds to his spectacular though irrelevant ending precisely because of his obsession with the images of the “imaginary deaths” and “insane wounds” hanging “in the *gallery* of his mind like exhibits in the museum of a slaughterhouse.” (Ballard, 2008: 6, my emphasis) Quite disturbingly, the author himself compares the “image-saturated” society of the 1970s with Nazi Germany, finding a prophecy of the former in the latter’s “maximising of violence and sensation” as conducive to a similar “fictionalising of experience”. (Baxter, 2008b: 510) In its amorality and superficiality, in its depthlessness, the foreseeable mediatic future can also be imagined as a huge, infantile, Vegas-like jukebox or a pay-per-view video device, where life would be just a “sensationalist novel” pervaded by “violent imagery” (Nordlund, 2014: 228). Everything, the body and life themselves too, gets reduced to bidimensional abstractions: to photographs, screens, surfaces, images; violent ones, for that matter (Chrysochou, 2009: 2). Thus, we can understand better Ballard’s reaction when, on being shown a photograph album full of deranged snapshots of car crash “violence and sexuality”, he acknowledges how “some latent homo-erotic element” was brought “to the *surface* of [his] mind” (Ballard, 2008: 81, my emphasis). Vaughan himself becomes “subsumed into his technological other,” turned into “a mere object caught up in a virulent reproduction or mimesis”, a self-inflicted illustration of human *Bestand* (Chrysochou, 2009: 5). In the end, the only verdict the universe stoops to give on his and Seagrave’s meaningless suicides is silence.<sup>6</sup> When human life is only worthy in its capacity as ready-to-hand material, human death is nothing but a banal occurrence. Hölderlin’s (and therefore Heidegger’s) gods also keep silent in their self-imposed exile, having departed long ago and far away from all this techno-nihilistic inconsequentiality. We are living through a very dark night, the world’s night (Heidegger, 2001: 89).

Indeed, this accelerating entropy could be seen as the dark side of our time’s neon-lighted, cybernetic global village (Delville, 1988: 26). Drowning in this ocean of fictions and owing to the resulting ever “growing emptiness of the symbolic order”, the ultimate outcome of this process can only be the completion of nihilism: despite Heidegger’s hope for the coming of a saving god and the restitution of Being, there can be no ground any longer for any system of metaphysics to overcome or, at least, uplift Western contemporary alienation (Foster, 1993: 531; Pawlett, 2010: 197; Wernick, 2010: 201). It is under the terms of this postmodern, nihilistic dispensation that Ballard roams the roads of London at the end of the novel, once Vaughan is dead. There is nothing left for him but to plan his own death in a car crash (Ballard, 2008: 185).

## NOTES

1Vaughan is a former TV scientist who has left everything in order to dedicate his life to his one obsession: car crashes (Ballard, 2008: 11, 48). He leads a perverted circle of maniacs devoted to symphorophilia. Symphorophilia can be defined as a perversion whereby sexual gratification is achieved by staging, taking part or witnessing catastrophes such as car crashes, fires, etc (“Symphorophilia”, n.d.: n.p.).

2James Ballard, the author’s acknowledged alter ego, is a producer of TV commercials who, after a car accident, discovers the up to then unexpected sexual potentialities of everything (Ballard, 2008: 19). Ballard joins Vaughan’s deviant cell. Quite soon, they roam the roads around Heathrow airport together, always on the lookout for car crashes. To prevent any ambiguities, from now on we will always call Ballard the author “J.G. Ballard”, whereas we will refer to the narrator-character as “Ballard”. Catherine is Ballard’s wife. Being promiscuously unfaithful (with her unfaithful husband’s knowledge and consent), she is described as having a “natural and *healthy* curiosity for the perverse” (Ballard, 2008: 38, my emphasis).

3Vaughan eventually commits suicide by a failed attempt on Elizabeth Taylor’s life in a car crash, after thorough preparations (Ballard, 2008: 181).

4Helen Remington is a doctor Ballard crashes into before ending up in hospital at the beginning of *Crash*. Her husband dies in the accident. She and Ballard subsequently enter a sexual affair whose encounters always take place in Ballard’s car. That this car is an identical replica of the one destroyed in the accident bespeaks the repetition compulsion and ultimately the death drive at play in their encounters (Chrysochou, 2009: 11).

5Although Gasiorek is commenting on *Millennium People* here, I find his ideas to be perfectly applicable to Vaughan’s, Seagrave’s and Ballard’s empty, death-tempting gestures in *Crash*.

6“The gods have died [...] We emerge from *the void*, we stare back at it for a short while and then rejoin the void [...] the universe has nothing to say. *There’s only silence*”: J.G. Ballard, *Millennium People*, as qtd. in Gasiorek, 2005: 195-196 (my emphasis).

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