‘An Unrehearsed Theatre of Technology’: Oedipalization and Vision in Ballard’s *Crash*

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The technological is never grasped except by (auto) accident.

Baudrillard

It is clear that Freud’s classic distinction between the manifest and latent content of the inner world of the psyche now has to be applied to the outer world of reality. A dominant element in this reality is technology and its instrument, the machine.

*The Atrocity Exhibition*°

Ballard’s novels of the early 1970s offer themselves as the revelatory annals of a world which has turned apocalyptic, and where received, normative systems of representation operate as a blocking of this fearful knowledge. *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973) explore shared conditions of life which are catastrophic in ways that characteristically elude consciousness. What is restrictive in the ordinary workings of consciousness becomes clear through the novels’ direct dealings with scenes and situations of catastrophe, whose function here is to disrupt the normalizing vision – a field made up of what Ballard elsewhere terms ‘the conventional stage sets that are erected around us’³ – revealing what this vision masks. But in what sense might the novels be considered to be bringing to light a hidden knowledge? If, say, they are concerned with the bodily and psychic risks of inhabiting a highly technologized world, then the sense of risk could be said to be one that many of this world’s inhabitants consciously share. For the purposes of answering our
question it is useful to take seriously Ballard’s declared interest in the thought of Freud: the novels’ reflections on the relationship between psyche and the ambient culture are a recognizable development out of a central psychoanalytic concern and form of enquiry.

In the classic Freudian account passage through the Oedipus complex brings the individual subject to the position where, for the first time, s/he finds that his/her wishes are aligned with the imperatives of the culture:

The Oedipus complex is not reducible to an actual situation – to the actual influence exerted by the parental couple over the child. Its efficacy derives from the fact that it brings into play a prescriptive agency (the prohibition against incest) which bars the way to naturally sought satisfaction and forms an indissoluble link between wish and law.4

The individual is facing not (just) the empirical father or parent but cultural rules and norms in their immoveability. Imposition of this inflexible law is, however, experienced as a kind of empowerment. As Lacan ingeniously puts/puns it, the nom du père is also in an immediate conversion its homophone, the non du père: the prohibition is also a placing in the system where one finds as one’s own a proper name and identity; a sense of unsustainable confrontation paradoxically mutates into a sense of freedom. From the oedipalized standpoint cultural law is on the side of the desiring subject; this happy view is sustained largely by the pressure of unresolved anxiety, now barred from consciousness except in this anxiety’s unrecognized displacements.

In the novels’ perspective, the recent-modern, relatively sudden extension of technology’s power to shape human behaviour at levels ranging from the most intimate to the most public has a psychic significance directly comparable to that of oedipalization in the classic sense. We are dealing here primarily with the burgeoning technologies of medicine, communications and transport. They offer, in their differing though often crossing ways, something akin to a prosthetic extension of human capabilities (Freud in 1930 famously characterized modern, technologically augmented Man as ‘a kind of prosthetic God’5): the injured are repaired, biological process is superseded, the effects of distance are commuted or abolished. As a condition of the prosthesis’ acceptance, desires are fixed