

# 1 Introduction

Jane Arthurs and Iain Grant

At every moment of every day there is a crash event, affecting everything: transportation, economics, politics, computing, bodies, brains, cups and plates, birds, agriculture, chemistry, health, banking, manufacturing and so on, without end. Despite being insured, insulated by method, knowledge, prediction, risk analysis and technology against accidents, we are nevertheless permanently avoiding them. Every crash is followed by calls for legislation: 'it must never happen again' – and yet it always does. As roads and airways congest to the point of stagnation, we proclaim the miracle of modern safety regimes, while remaining haunted by the ghosts of disasters waiting to happen. As technologies advance, so catastrophe looms larger, threatening fiscal and economic, as well as physical systems. But the crash brings it all back home. From the crumpled remains of a Mercedes in Paris to the collapse of the World Trade Centre in New York; from Black Monday on the money markets to Chernobyl's meltdown; from *Crash* to *Titanic*: from James Dean and Jayne Mansfield to Warhol and Ballard – crashes are individuated, named, in order to prevent the sense that our history, far from being one of steady progress, is in fact an incremental accumulation of crashes. It preserves us from the fear of generalised catastrophe. All the better, therefore, should the victims be famous, and all the worse if, as when a Boeing hit an Amsterdam Tower block, effacing its illegal immigrant inhabitants, they remain anonymous. Every crash can be located on a scale in accordance with the celebrity or anonymity of its victims.

In analytic terms, every crash reminds us that we have stepped over the line separating the benignly abstract from the horribly concrete, from 'risk society' to crash cultures. How are we to study crashes, what method are we to use to ensure we absorb all their impact? Crashes take place where method goes awol and control fails (at least our control), where prediction runs up against its own inadequacies. Accident investigators, scouring fresh craters for oracular black boxes, regularly pale in the face of the profusion of fragmentary and merely suggestive evidence. The crash resists interpretation – not least because it is an event, with singular dates and places, shot through with time.

The taking place of events, their specificity, poses certain problems for their study. What might be the theoretical or practical value of conclusions reached on the basis of something so singular as an event? By definition, the conditions defining the event could not be repeated, revoking in advance the possibility of generalising from any

such conclusions. Nor do events reach conclusions; they emerge and dissipate, ramify and connect, impact and explode. With events, the real does not wait to be prejudged or interpreted; rather it impacts on our senses, our emotions, our bodies – creating a material effect that only in time will be reduced and shaped by discourse. The use of the crash as a starting point in these essays is not as a scientific, forensic examination of their causes and effects. We approach the crash as a symbolic *and* material event that can produce insights about the experience of living in a modern, technologically saturated world. It is through these events that we can intimate the force of our conventionalised ways of seeing and being: the discursive management of the unruly materiality of everyday life. It also draws attention to the interrelations between inanimate machines and living bodies – the relations of dominance and submission in industrial societies, or the convergence between them that in cyberculture poses new challenges to the emancipatory politics of Marxism and feminism.

The essays collected here do not aim to provide a single perspective. Rather they are a convergence of disparate elements whose effect on the reader should be to open any number of connecting routes. Yet there are recurring foci of attention that are particular to the time and place of their production. In part, this is a matter of public history – we wrote in the aftermath of particular events in Britain – Princess Diana's car crash, the controversy over Cronenberg's film of Ballard's *Crash*, the disasters on the railways at Paddington and Hatfield, the millennium computer bug that threatened systems breakdown, but before the events of September 11th in New York. In part it is contingent on disciplinary discourses shaping our concerns – whether they be philosophical, cultural or film studies – but mediated through a series of discussions, convened by Ben Highmore at UWE in 1998, known as the 'Everyday Life' group (augmented later by other contributors who shared our interest in this project).

These discussions centred on a number of related theoretical questions, namely: how can we overcome the gap between the abstractions of theory and the lived experience of everyday life, between concepts and the materiality of the world of objects? In terms of culture, what relation do the aesthetic texts of the 20th century have to the historical conditions of modernity? Or philosophically, how can the relationship between representation and the real be conceptualised? And how do the entrenched dualities of Enlightenment thinking constrain both how we pose and answer these questions? Starting from de Certeau's *The Practices of Everyday Life* (1984), we drew on Benjamin and Barthes, Haraway and Baudrillard, Deleuze and De Landa, Freud and Lacan, Elias and Foucault, Adorno and Irigaray. We took as our object the collected fragments of a 'crash archive' in the spirit of an ethnographic method that eschewed totalizing ambitions. The crash offered a way to think through the problematic to the extent that it resists representation, being instead an experiential moment in history when time and space are collapsed and reconfigured. The crash seems knowable only through its anticipation and its effects, the time before and the time after.

The results are (inevitably) partial but, we hope, will provoke new thinking. Each essay has its own thesis, but first, here, we briefly explore some of the shared concerns.

## *Introduction*

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) traces 'crash' as a word back to fifteenth century printing, linking it from the start to technologies of communication. Definitions range from noisy outbursts to overt destruction to information meltdown. Its onomatopoeic function means it is 'often impossible to separate the sound from the action', an inseparability of the material and its mediation that provides a structuring problematic of this collection. The crash is a 'noise' constantly in the background of the spread of communications, and reaching a crescendo from the mid-nineteenth century in discourses of commerce and mechanization. If noise it is, then the crash is also, in cybernetic terms, systemic noise that leads to collapse – the inseparable dereliction that accompanies all information, the cessation of exchange implicit in all trade, the broken transportation that is its animating possibility. The assumption that crashes are relatively rare, aberrant events, masks their ubiquity. The OED shows how the naming of the phenomenon proliferated into ever more explicit and elaborated fictional treatments of the crash as endemic to modern life.

Everyday life for the majority is hazardous and unpredictable. At its most extreme, we seem to be subjects of a system that is out of control, there being no human purpose behind the logic of capital accumulation and technological progress. In Marxist terms, the crash reveals the 'real relations' of capitalist production – the subjection of men to the inhuman machinery of industrialisation and technological rationalism, and the inherent irrationality of financial crises. Although the search for means to control these runaway tendencies is ongoing, we very readily wash our hands of the consequences when everything comes crashing down; it's just the market, or the inevitable unpredictability of so many forward technological leaps. Yet modernity is also fantasised as an untrammelled linear progress into a future in which the material world will be subject to the victorious human will alone. It is therefore accompanied by a horror of the prospect of an equal and opposite reversal, a cessation of evolutionary progress and regression towards devolutionary regress. As Grant explores in his essay, the cyclical time of pre-modern consciousness and rituals has been replaced by the metaphor of the open road on which we speed ever faster towards a utopian end. The crash insists on a failure of modernity's totalitarian ambitions, bringing us to an abrupt standstill.

These contradictory relations have become the focus of academic, as well as commercial, investigations of 'the risk society' (Beck 1992). Technoscience, Beck argues, which was once supposed to complete the project of rationalisation begun by the Enlightenment and banish terror, instead has provoked a new age of trans-spatial and trans-temporal hazards, as systems spread over the entire surface of the earth. Technological disasters are supposedly of a different scale of causes and consequences than hitherto. The singular, containable risks of the Wall Street Crash, WW1, and the sinking of the Titanic are less risky than a Chernobyl melt down. Yet what law necessitates that all risks concern the forward march of technology, rather than, as Greenslade's essay testifies with regard to the nineteenth century realist novel, the devolution of species? And in what sense is the actuality of the First World War measurable against the risk of the millennium bug that never happened? If the latter, not only no longer a potential risk but an not an actual one, counts nonetheless as an

index of risk, then risk society remains too idealist a frame within which to analyse the materiality of the crash.

Central to a materialist account of the crash, is the relation between the imaging of crashes that proliferate across the mediascape and the phenomenology of everyday life. Our premise is that reproduced images cannot be separated from the world they represent; rather, they have a material existence that are constitutive of that world. As Highmore's essay points out, for a materialist semiotician like Barthes, images, rather than being a question of interpretation, are lived in our everyday routines and bodily reflexes. Speculation on the potential for a new form of photographic and technological consciousness became commonplace in the period between the two world wars. A modern form of photographic consciousness was developed that could protect and defend the self against the pain of catastrophe through self-objectification – producing the cold, rationalist worker/soldier of fascism whose fragile bodies and minds are armoured against the technological 'shocks' of the factory or the war zone. On the city streets, billboard images of speeding cars produce simultaneously both a phenomenal shock to the passer by and a semiotic screen for managing that shock.

This 'desensitizing' effect is often cited in contemporary debates about the 'scandal' of our voyeuristic enjoyment of screen death. Modern subjects have developed a protective shield, though 'the real' has ways of breaking back through. The heavily mediated experience of the celebrity car crash for example, in which the celebrity's body is immortalised through photography, signals in Grimshaw's essay both a defeat of the body and its victory over death. The brief release of death from its repression in modern culture, in which death and the body's decay has become a challenge to a technological society premised on the rational control of nature, is recovered for that project by its mediaization.

The important part played by convention, in protecting us from the material and sensual violence of modern existence is, however, matched by a 'hunger' to regain the intensity of experience that is lost as a consequence. The proliferation of crash scenes in the media of the twentieth century enables audiences to act out this oscillation, beginning with the short film *How It Feels to be Run Over* (1900), which puts the viewer in position to experience the effect of repeated virtual death. Littau's essay highlights the physiological pleasure, the stimulation of the senses that crash images provoke in cinema audiences in the early years of cinema, a pleasure that has been overlooked in the interpretative tradition of psychoanalytic criticism. SHaH, in their essay tracing the development of the mediated crash across the twentieth century, argue that these scenes both administer and then cushion the shock through repetition. But the degree to which we have become inured to the assault on our senses of the shocks of modern life is side-stepped, in their view, by immersive simulations in postmodern, virtual environments. They allow us to regain the intensity of an unmediated experience of the crash, just as cinema audiences responded to the first moving images at the turn of the last century.

This desire to imaginatively repeat the trauma of bodily destruction is not peculiar to modern or postmodern culture, though it is manifest in culturally specific ways. Several of the essays return to Freud's psychoanalytic account of the traumatised

## Introduction

psyche to find an explanation. Freud's observation of the traumatic effects of modern technological warfare on the mind and body of the soldiers returning from the First World War was the impetus behind the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920. He wanted to explain the compulsion to repeat these painful experiences in the recurrent traumatic dreams suffered by these men. He compared it to the compulsive repetitions of the *fort/da* games of childhood, in which painful loss (of the mother) is symbolically re-experienced. Neither could be easily explained without some modification of his concept of the psyche as a homeostatic system regulated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, qualified only by the restraints imposed by the reality principle. His solution was to posit the presence of an instinctual force, the 'death drive', which arises from the fact of sexual reproduction. The death drive works in opposition to the sex drive as a force of disintegration and entropy as matter regresses to the inorganic state from which we temporarily emerge as individuals. The death drive endlessly struggles, not with safety, but with aggressively inventive life.

In order to link this biologically grounded theory to the observed repetitions of the traumatised psyche, Freud speculated that the death drive is the effects produced in the psychic structure by the force of 'unbound' energy which the individual ego works to 'bind'. Trauma results when a massive influx of stimulus, from outside or inside the body, overwhelms the capacity to bind energy. The psyche is unprepared and therefore can't make any sense of the experience. It then has to be repeated in the imagination until the trauma is successfully bound to an idea to counteract the disintegrating force of the death drive. Once this has happened the painful tension created by the trauma can be discharged.

In Lacan's psychological account of the death drive the real remains a non-signifying but ever-present threat to the subject's 'bounded' integrity. If a shaming fascination with scenes of broken, fragmented, violated bodies nonetheless remains, this is not because such broken bodies in any sense enable the symbolisation of the real. Instead they constitute a necessarily repeated attempt to bind the disruption threatened by the real into social and representational convention thereby repairing the bounded self, as Arthurs demonstrates in her essay analysing the responses of the traumatised viewers of Cronenberg's *Crash*. The compulsion to repeat the traumatic event also points to the real which representations screen, thereby evoking the (impossible) satisfaction of the drives which could only be achieved through the disintegration of the individual ego. The planes crashing into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre were shown over and over again as television commentators struggled to find words for an event that ruptured the bounded image that Americans have of themselves. Yet Žižek, writing a few days later, points to the degree to which 'this threat was libidinally invested – just recall the series of movies from *Escape From New York* to *Independence Day*. The unthinkable, which happened, was thus the object of fantasy: in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and this was the greatest surprise' (Žižek 2001).

The saturation of modern cultures with technology produces both utopian and dystopian assessments of the human consequences of our convergence with the machine, a convergence that is figured in the conjunctions of flesh and metal that result

from the crash. The emancipatory, humanist politics of Marxism and feminism have emphasised the use of machines by the ruling class to enhance their own dominance over their 'others', a dynamic in which those others become structured into a dualistic framework. In this dualism it is the body of the western white male that fuses with the machine, a fusion that provides transcendence over the body, and therefore over nature. As Khaira and Carlin demonstrate in their essay, while the black body disproportionately bears the wounds of the crash, it is excluded from sharing the white utopia of total mastery through convergence with the machine. Thus the fully technologised body as a fantasy of disembodiment, is freed not just from death but also from the restrictions and particularities of the local gendered or ethnic body – a fantasy that emerges most insistently in visual forms of narrative that provide a specular distance from the body. It is suggested by Beezer that this fantasy can be understood as a desire to totalise, to eradicate the other through the construction of a visual field of appearances, manufactured as objects for that subject, beyond which we may know nothing.

Using fragments, 'since the whole is untrue', a critical method based on Adorno's negative dialectics (1966), Beezer's essay works by juxtaposing fragments from disparate narratives to expose their inconsistencies and contradictions.

Narrative works to smooth over contradictions in an ideological unity of form that requires heroes and villains, causes and effects, beginnings and endings. Blame must be attributed – a primary focus of news stories. Investigators proliferate – loss adjusters, safety experts, journalists, police, biographers, detectives – all sifting through fragments of evidence to reconstruct the sequence leading up to the event. Claims and counterclaims are made as the fragments of evidence fail to add up to a watertight case. Thus in the aftermath of the crash, the ideological narratives of the culture can be subject to challenge in ways that reveal some hidden truths. Just as the crash rearranges the relation between objects, collage can be used as an aesthetic and analytic technique to reveal new relations. In Henning and Goddard's investigations of Amelia Earhart's disappearance, fragments of evidence and multiple stories are used to question the way we use evidence to construct meaning, thus working to undermine our faith in this process. The shrine to Diana at Kensington Palace is, in Lindahl-Elliott and Alfonso's essay, a bricolage of iconic fragments drawn from the dispersed times of her life and brought together in a popular alternative to 'official' narratives that worked to establish the meaning of her death. The shrines created an anachronistic 'heterotopia', a term used by Foucault to signify a space that, unlike utopias are real spaces that work to dismantle the established social and political hierarchies of modernity.

The disintegration of bounded entities and the mixing of disparate objects in the conjunction of human and machine has been claimed for an emancipatory politics through the figure of the cyborg. An amalgam of human, animal and machine, the cyborg in Haraway's *Manifesto* is re-imagined as offering a new relation between the (feminist) subject and the technologically saturated environment in which we live. 'The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics' (Haraway 1991: 150). It exists across fictional and factual categories of experience, indeed its presence in science fiction

## Introduction

works to blur the distinction between imagination and material reality. Haraway uses the figure of the cyborg to address the problems posed by the end of the traditional, humanist categories on which feminist epistemology and methodology have been based. Women can no longer be conceived as the nature over which men and their technology exert dominance. Whilst potentially both utopian and dystopian, there can be no possibility of retreat to an organic body to integrate our resistance. Subsequent writers have questioned whether an emancipatory politics can survive at all in a technoculture where human agency is in question as a result of the dismantling of the boundary between humans and their natural and technological environment. In Latour's 'actor network theory' humans don't have agency on their own but rather agency is acquired by a thing being a component of a larger system (a network), a network that crosses human/non-human boundaries. It is the network as a whole that effects and determines (Latour 1993). This dispenses with the binary between humans and machines which Marxist politics assumes.

Cyborg bodies and intelligent machines are hybrid identities produced from a concept of life based in DNA code that is continuous with cybernetic code. This means there is a physical continuity between nature, technology and culture. These exist in a non-linear network that constitutes a cybernetic system. Systems failure as a result of 'noise', does not end in collapse but rather gives rise to new and different orders in a self-organising way, as in the imperfectly copied genes of DNA that allows for evolutionary change. At the molecular level nature is a machine, the pre-personal material reality of body and world (Deleuze and Guattari 1984). This enables a concept of the drive that exists prior to any individuated organism, just as Freud conceived the death drive, thus decoupling reproduction from human sexual relations and allowing instead the replication of cyborgs. It is in this context that we might begin to understand Ballard's *Crash* (1973), in which the crash is figured as a 'fertilizing event'. In its repetitious and detailed descriptions of metal amalgamated with soft flesh, Roden's essay sees in *Crash* the construction of cyborg bodies that are not real unities (organisms), but drives. *Crash* is the metaphor of these drives, with the crash always an attempt to refashion the relation between organism and machine. While Botting and Wilson's essay argues that the libidinal economy of Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), with its repetitious sequence of sex then crash then sex then crash, is the expression of a drive that is working towards the total consumption and consummation of all the energies stored in mechanical and biological apparatuses alike.

We invite you to explore in these essays the tangled wreckage of crashes and the traces of their impact in the lived materiality and mediated cultures of modernity – whether digital or cinematic, fictional or fiscal, virtual or actual, celebrated or anonymous, mass-produced or epoch making in their singularity.

## The Essays

### **Bill Greenslade: Will it Smash?: Modernity and the Fear of Falling**

By tracing the motif of the financial crash in the realist novels of Dickens and Trollope, Elliot, Meredith, Gissing and Hardy, the inherent irrationality of capitalist relations is

revealed. By the end of the century the crash is figured as violent and unpredictable in its consequences, in a world devoid of moral certainty or just rewards for virtue. Failure or success becomes the only moral standard. Good is what survives. Modernity's 'other' erupts in the non-realist genres of the period, in horror, the supernatural or fantasy, where the crash encodes the ever-present fear of falling back and down into the primitive slime of homogeneity. Only through aspiring to an illusory, god-like power over the forces of capital could men hope to escape this fate. Thus a religious ethic is replaced by the 'will to power' of a punitive masculinity, manifest in the brutality of Wilcox in *Howard's End* or Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*. In these novels, the promise and adventure of 'being modern' is brutally rubbed out by the destructive forces that such power unleashes.

### **Seminar for Hypertheory and Heterology (SHaH): How it Feels**

The effects on our consciousness of exposure to the shocks of modern life is mediated through the technologies of cinema, TV and computer simulations. Taking Freud's explanation of trauma management in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, these writers propose that the 'age of technology' has speeded up the oscillations of the *fort/da* process to the point that all feeling has been deadened. Only in the 'crash' can we find an approximation to 'the plenitude of barely imaginable intensity' which virtual death provides. Staged rail and car crashes were a popular spectacle in the cinema of the turn of the 19th century, allowing the audience safely to experience 'how it feels to be run over'. As we enter the 21st century, the speed of digital processing is made psychologically manageable through the mediating conventions of interactive digital games, saturated with the proximity of virtual death in increasingly 'realistic' scenarios. And theme park rides hurl us ever faster in emulation of the test pilot's 'out of body' experience in response to the G forces of his accelerating machine.

### **Karin Littau: Eye-Hunger: Physical Pleasure and Non-narrative Cinema**

The story is often told of early cinema audiences fleeing auditoria as trains hurtled towards the camera. Such stories do not so much suggest that naive audiences mistook the screen image of the oncoming train for a real one, but that visual pleasure is a physical sensation. Rather than identifying psychologically with screen characters (contemporary film theory), audiences suffered eye-hunger, creeping through their 'flesh' and exciting their 'nerves' (early C20th film theory). If de-emphasising the psychological moment in cinema spectatorship allows us to re-establish the physiological underpinnings of the act of spectating, it also recontextualises cinema as one physical spectacular form amongst many: public executions in pre-enlightenment societies, or outings to the morgue at the turn of the twentieth century (and who would not be tempted to touch?). Drawing therefore on accounts of the physiology of cinematic spectatorship, this essay brings them to bear on a popular early twentieth century site of eye-hunger: crash-spectating.