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**Calder Gillie**

*Goldsmiths, University of London*

## The Network Imaginary in J.G. Ballard's *Crash*

The focal point of this discussion of J. G. Ballard's 1973 novel *Crash* is the road network. The term road network signifies not only the combination of roads into a wider system but the concept of the network in broader, historical, social and political terms. *Crash* has often been considered in terms of technology, the body and sexuality. The author, for example, describes it as 'the first pornographic novel about technology' (Ballard, 1973, p.iii). See also Florian Cord's account of the subversion of bodily boundaries in *Crash* (Cord, 2017, p.42-65). Equally, *Crash's* inclusion in cyberpunk anthologies, for example, *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*, suggests a somewhat cybernetic approach to the novel but belies cyberpunk's primary focus on the individual body's modification by technology.

Although there is a reciprocity between the technological approach and the networked approach, they are not entirely coterminous. While the work of

many critics approaches the network, the 'network imaginary' in *Crash* has not been extensively examined. To support the relevance of a networked approach to the novel, we will examine the presence of networks in *Crash*, considering the historical context of the road network in order to demonstrate the permanent imbrication of communications technology with political discourse. Two specific discourses attendant to the road network will be considered: first, the discourse of connection and second, the discourse of automobility and individualism. As these discourses also appear in *Crash*, we will discuss their purpose and repurpose. We will also explore a materialist approach to the road network. Finally, we will use the figure of the traffic jam to bring together network discourse, the author's repurposing of it, and a material awareness of the interventions that make possible the regime of automobility.

J. G. Ballard's 1973 novel *Crash*, narrated by the suggestively-named James Ballard, describes the events following his serious car crash. The crash precipitates a focus on driving and crashing, including encounters with a group of people who have also experienced car crashes, an interest in the infrastructure of the road, and an automobile sexuality. In this paper, we focus on the networks present in the novel. It is difficult to define the theoretical artefact of the network clearly and concisely. A network can be defined simply as a collection of interconnected nodes. The imbrication of this system of interconnected nodes into the fabric of society is more difficult to trace. The original theorist of the network society, Manuel Castells, defines it as 'a society whose social structure is made up of networks powered by micro-electronics-based information and communications technologies' (Castells, 2004, p.3). I would add to this Ulises Ali Mejias' observation that 'the network has become the dominant operating logic of late capitalism' (Mejias, 2013, p.4). Whilst these two statements form a simplified definition of the network, *Crash* provides a description of a networked life and a political network aesthetic.

In *Crash*, each of the character's occupations is imbricated in

communications networks. Dr Robert Vaughan occupies a position at the interstice of several communications networks. He is both computer specialist and TV scientist. His specific interest is ‘the application of computerized techniques to the control of all international traffic systems’ (Ballard, 1973, p.50), combining nascent digital information networks with older physical transport networks. The narrator works in television. His wife, Catherine, works for Pan American airlines, starts a ‘small air-tourist charter firm’ (p.24) with one of her boyfriends, and takes flying lessons at the weekend: a life immersed in air travel. Helen Remington also works at the airport, as a doctor in the immigration department. Despite being a primary economic node, the airport is not a temporal or spatial centre. As the author writes in a 1997 essay, the airport is a ‘centripetal city whose population forever circles its notional centre’ (Ballard, 1997, para.7). Circling the fragmented locations around the airport, filling stations, car-washes, service stations, access roads, breakers’ yards, car-parks, coalesces into a broader experience of a decentralised, economic network. These are the ‘non-places’ which Roger Luckhurst suggests that Ballard’s fictions describe (Luckhurst, 1997, p.129). Instead of ‘places of identity, of relations and of history’, according to Marc Augé, we now have non-places (Augé, 1995, p.52):

spaces in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense; spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality, in which only the movement of the fleeting images enables the observer to hypothesize the existence of a past and glimpse the possibility of a future. (Augé, 1995, p.87)

The narrator echoes a similar sentiment: ‘I realized that the human inhabitants of this technological landscape no longer provided its sharpest pointers, its keys to the borderzones of identity’ (Ballard, 1973, pp.38-39). The keys to (non-)identity in *Crash* are the flows of capital through global communications networks.

It is clear that *Crash* describes a mobile, global, networked experience.

Ballard's other novels also focus on global economic flows. In a post-colonial analysis of *High-Rise* and *Concrete Island*, David Ian Paddy demonstrates how these two novels respond to the economic problems in London at the beginning of the 1970s, which 'can be traced in part to its lost status as one of the world's central trading ports resulting from the loss of its colonies' (Paddy, 2015, p.154). The starting point for Paddy's analysis is that modernity was not a singularly Western phenomenon produced in isolation, 'but itself a product of the west's interaction with the rest of the world, including the economic exploitation of colonialism which first provided the surplus gold that was the motor for modern capitalism' (Young, 2007, p.98). In *High-Rise*, Paddy reads the characters' isolationism as a response to the detrital, post-imperial London.

[T]he London they wished to leave behind is populated by a working class of deskilled or unskilled workers made redundant by [...] closed docks and warehouses, as well as a number of immigrant communities coming from former British colonies. The citizens of the high-rise blocks are choosing an insular, essentially parochial vision of life, cut off from the city, from other classes, from outside responsibilities. (Paddy, 2015, p.154)

*Crash* and *High-Rise* each describe different approaches to the changing movement of goods in 1970s London; the retreat in *High-Rise* finds its opposite in *Crash*. If *High-Rise* retreats from the global, staying at home, then *Crash* enters into it, going out for a drive. The former novel is set in one place only, describing an absolute centralisation of life, whilst the latter is not set in any one place, describing absolute decentralisation. Both absolute centralisation and decentralisation can be seen as a response to the drying-up of colonial resources. Indeed, *Crash's* global economy mirrors the argument of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri that 'as colonial regimes were overthrown [...] we have witnessed an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p.xi). The economy of *Crash* seems to conceptualise Hardt and Negri's new global capitalist

‘Empire’.

So far, we have considered the presence of networks in J. G. Ballard's novels, particularly *Crash*. We have seen how an experience of decentralisation and loss of identity is communicated to the reader. Now we will specifically examine the road network, its history, and the discourse attendant upon it. Through this analysis we can see that the novel reproduces and repurposes discourses of the road network. In his history of communications networks, Armand Mattelart suggests that the era of global communications we are now living in is a historical development beginning in 1794 (Mattelart, 2000). Road, rail, postage, the telegraph, and the telephone have culminated in the broadband connection we experience today. Mattelart describes the similarity of discourses justifying different kinds of communications networks, which can be grouped widely into a single philosophy:

[n]etworks, a leading symbol of progress, have also made their incursion into utopian thinking. The communication network is an eternal promise symbolising a world that is better because it is united. From road and rail to information highways, this belief has been revived with each technological generation, yet networks have never ceased to be at the centre of struggles for control of the world (Mattelart, 2000, p.viii).

A comparable disparity between utopia and reality is described by Jo Guldi in her analysis of road building in Britain. Guldi traces the standardisation of the road network and the development of the infrastructure state to 1726, the year of the military survey of Scotland (2012, p.4) that began a period in which the roads were subject to a process of standardisation: ‘[i]n 1726 the roads of Britain were mire and muck. [...] By 1848, the road system consisted of forty-foot wide highways of level gravel that extended to every village and island in the nation’ (2012, p.1). Each piece of this gravel was sorted according to size by elderly women sitting by the side of the road (Guldi, 2012, p.4). In an analysis strikingly similar to Mattelart’s (although *Networking the World* is

not cited in Guldi's *Roads to Power*), Guldi also invokes the disparity between political discourse and political reality:

[i]n debates over highways, rail, the post, and broadband, modern persons often believe that information and technology unite distinct people into one body. Britain's transport revolution was the first major public episode of uniting the everyday journeys of commerce into a system of high technology and top-down control. But Britain's experience was not one of connection. By 1848, what Britons shared in common was their experience of political contest and wariness in travel. (Guldi, 2012, p.22)

The standardisation of the road network resulted in the privatisation of travel; routes no longer shifted on the basis of flooding, and travellers no longer had to ask for directions but could rely on maps. Quite simply, Guldi states that 'it was in the course of the transport revolution that strangers became so deeply separated' (2012, p.21-22). The network is supposed to deliver absolute connection, generalised exchange, complete interchangeability. But, as we have seen, this is merely the promise, this is the failed utopia of the network.

The transcendent, utopian discourse of connection attendant upon the development of the road network is repurposed in *Crash's* figure of 'autogeddon'. The neologism 'autogeddon' implies a Judaeo-Christian eschatological perspective: 'Armageddon' is a Hebrew word from the Book of Revelation locating the site of the last battle between good and evil before the Day of Judgement. The total connection described by autogeddon, however, is based on the complete dysfunction of the network. As Ballard sits on the veranda watching the cars go past after his accident he feels 'almost as if an accident was about to take place involving all these cars' (Ballard, 1973, p.39). He sits on the veranda waiting to spot the beginning of the 'end of the world by automobile' (p.40). In this vision of autogeddon, there is unity; a combined purpose for 'all' roads, 'all' cars. Florian Cord argues that the novel's use of such religious imagery 'strongly suggest[s] that the crash is in fact an act of transcendence' (2017, p.37). In the passage describing James Ballard and

Vaughan's LSD trip there is a proliferation of transcendent sights:

[a]n armada of angelic creatures, each surrounded by an immense corona of light, was landing on the motorway on either side of us, sweeping down in opposite directions. They soared past, a few feet above the ground, landing everywhere on these endless runways that covered the landscape. I realized that all these roads and expressways had been built by us unknowingly for their reception. (Ballard, 1973, p.154)

Here, the roads and expressways are seen to facilitate a transcendent 'reception'. As the roads are repurposed for this utopian connection, the discourse that has historically been attendant upon the road network is itself reconfigured. This exposes the contradictions that Mattelart and Guldi have traced and suggests that Armageddon would be necessary to truly create the connection the road network has been imagined to produce.

We have addressed the discourse surrounding the whole road network, which promises a utopian connection. Now, we shall examine the discourse attendant to the individual driver, who is not conceived of as a component of the network but as a singular, bounded entity. The relationship between these two discourses is significant; in both, certain connections and disconnections are emphasised, whilst others are neglected. As the road has an ideology of connection, the car has a principle of 'automobility', both of which legitimate the car and its infrastructure. Like the discourses of connection and communication, Steffen Böhm asserts that automobility 'is fundamentally political' (2006, p.4). Böhm applies to automobility Foucault's discussion of the relatedness of regimes of truth, power, and subjectivity, positing that the most fundamental regime of subjectivity attendant upon the car 'is the intertwining of automobile discourses with those of individualism, where the two mutually inform and support each other' (2006, p.8).

The relationship between the individual driver and the surrounding traffic exemplifies this. Traffic 'is a socially negotiated phenomenon where trajectories cross and intersect in a complex but never independent



movement' yet 'drivers and their cars are seen as fetishised commodities independent of any social relations' (Böhm, 2006, p.12). There is a contradiction, therefore, in the discourse of automobility, because the mobility of a driver is reliant on a complex set of factors, especially the adherence of other drivers to protocol. Indeed, the failures in protocol which result in traffic accidents are also considered as separate from the individual driver. In his conception of the original accident, Paul Virilio suggests that the accident is repressed by the 'positivist ideology of Progress' (2007, p.10). The accident is considered to be an exception, yet '[t]o invent the sailing ship or steamer is to *invent the shipwreck*. To invent the train is to *invent the rail accident* of derailment. To invent the family automobile is to produce the *pile-up* on the highway' (Virilio, 2007, p.10). In the interrelated discourses of utopian connection, automobility and the repressed accident, certain aspects of the network are privileged. As network discourse promises a utopian connection to distinct road users separate from the accident, network discourse neglects the fact that movement on the road network is socially mediated and that dysfunction is integral to the system.

As the discourse of connection appears in *Crash*, discourses of automobility and individualism are also reworked. The figure of the car crash can be seen as expressing the frustrated desire of automobility. Despite the regime of automobility's cultural and material influence, it is inherently contradictory:

[a]utomobility is ultimately impossible on its own terms. Its impossibility is contained in the very combination of autonomy and mobility. At the point at which the subject tries to move, the specifics of that movement – the technologies deployed, the spaces which need to be made available, the consequences of the form and place of movement, and so on – require a set of external interventions to make it possible. Cars need roads, traffic rules, oil, planning regulations, and the representation of car driving as autonomous movement involves disguising such conditions. (Böhm, 2006, p.11)

Driving in *Crash* often describes movements that break the protocol of the

network. The car accident can be seen as a self-assertion that attempts to overcome the contradictions inherent in automobility. Here, the drivers reject the external interventions, traffic rules and social mediation necessary for movement within the network. Driving ‘at sixty miles an hour into the oncoming lane’, for example, is a recurrent event in *Crash* (Ballard, 1973, p.16). The central reservation is another limitation that is railed against: ‘the car struck the central reservation’ (p.16), ‘the car crossed the reservation and turned up the highspeed exit ramp’ (p.16), ‘a black limousine with an extended wheelbase [...] skidded across the central reservation’ (p.118). Driving in *Crash* often involves being in the ‘wrong’ lane, passing cars on the ‘wrong’ side, going the ‘wrong’ way. This mobilises the assertiveness intrinsic to automobility but ignores the restrictions that make it possible. Crashing, therefore, can be seen as the ability to go anywhere being precluded by the impossible combination of autonomy and mobility. Crashing is equivalent to travelling on a road that is not restrained by external interventions, a road that takes you wherever you want to go. It represents a transcendent, absolute idea of freedom, promised but not delivered by the road network. Again, Ballard's repurposing of the discourse of automobility reveals its inherent contradictions and the frustrated desire this produces.

We have seen how specific discourses justified the historical development of the road network. Alongside this, we can consider the system of automobility in terms of non-linear systems and the flow of matter-energy. John Urry suggests that

[a]utomobility can be conceptualized as a self-organizing autopoietic, nonlinear system that spreads world-wide, and includes cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and many novel objects, technologies and signs. This system generates the preconditions for its own self-expansion. (2005, p.27)

A nonlinear system is one in which there are interactions between multiple components, which together have emergent properties (De Landa, 2000,

p.14). Autopoiesis, for example, is an emergent property similar to Manuel De Landa's conception of autocatalysis, a self-stimulating process of positive feedback (2000, p.34). The industrial revolution in nineteenth century Britain exemplifies autocatalysis:

new intensification in agriculture, which was based on simple positive feedback (between cattle raising and the crops their manure helped fertilize) [...] played several roles in the industrial takeoff. On the one hand, it served for a long time as the principal consumer of metal tools and hence catalyzed, and was catalyzed by, the iron industry. On the other hand, the new agricultural system (which is examined in more detail in the next chapter) favored different types of soils than those used by the previous agricultural regime, and so created a large pool of unemployed farm workers, who would provide the muscular energy for the new factories. (De Landa, 2000, p.78)

This analysis focuses on the nonlinear and autocatalytic process through which social institutions have emerged, whereas orthodox sociological approaches conceive of society as a set of institutions, ignoring their mutual interactions (De Landa, 2000, p.19). In the case of the road network, Urry suggests that autocatalytic interactions produced its spread across the globe: '[o]nce economies and societies were 'locked in' to [...] the steel-and-petroleum car, then huge increasing returns resulted for those producing and selling the car and its associated infrastructure, products and services' (Urry, 2005, p.27). The crucial point is that alongside discourse, material processes contributed to the global domination of the road network. The reciprocal interaction between discourse and material-energetic flows is complex and beyond the scope of this paper. However, we can conclude that there is a disjuncture between the discourses surrounding the road network and the material processes that have helped to produce it. Individualistic discourses of automobility are clearly at odds with any consideration of emergent properties, whilst discourses of connection prioritise transcendent connections and neglect material connections. The neglected autocatalytic process that connects road users and has driven the global domination of the

road network is the flow of capital (Urry, 2005). The repurposing of the network discourse allows us to imagine the emergent properties of the road network anew, to drive the system into a new orbit.

*Crash* accommodates many ideas and possibilities, which explains the lively critical debate surrounding it (see Cord, 2017, p.18; p.65; p.67). Alongside the individualistic crash and the transcendent autogeddon, the novel describes flows of matter and energy. The interactions between discursive and material critical approaches to the novel emerge in the figure of the traffic jam. One description of a specific traffic jam at the junction of the M40 motorway and the A40 in Uxbridge encapsulates both the repurposing of discourse and the reconfiguration of the material network:

We had entered an immense traffic jam. From the junction of the motorway and Western Avenue to the ascent ramp of the flyover the traffic lanes were packed with vehicles, windshields leaching out the molten colours of the sun setting above the western suburbs of London. Brake-lights flared in the evening air, glowing in the huge pool of cellulosed bodies. Vaughan sat with one arm out of the passenger window. He slapped the door impatiently, pounding the panel with his fist. To our right the high wall of a double-decker airline coach formed a cliff of faces. The passengers at the windows resembled rows of the dead looking down at us from the galleries of a columbarium. The enormous energy of the twentieth century, enough to drive the planet into a new orbit around a happier star, was being expended to maintain this immense motionless pause. (Ballard, 1973, p.118)

In this description of immobility, there is constant movement between different scales: from Vaughan's hand to the global to the cosmic. This makes it one of the most striking and significant passages in *Crash*. I would like to focus on the relationship the passage suggests between the individual driver, global movement of energy, and the earth's place in the solar system. The crucial sentence in the passage—'[t]he enormous energy of the twentieth century, enough to drive the planet into a new orbit around a happier star, was being expended to maintain this immense motionless pause'—combines the discourses we have examined with an awareness of the material aspect of the

regime of automobility in order to suggest a 'new' possibility.

First, we can see that 'energy' is the focus of this passage. The scale of the energetic interventions that make movement by car possible are shown to be at least global, and potentially cosmic. The repeated references to the sun suggest its energy as the original reason for our life on earth. As Georges Bataille states, '[t]he origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy - wealth - without any return.' (1988, p.28) For Bataille, lack of reciprocity is politically relevant. It is the increasing extraction of this solar gift which, as De Landa states, has powered urban development through new agricultural methods (2000, p.34). Equally, the industrial revolution and, eventually, the steel-and-petroleum car, have been powered by the harnessing of solar energy stored in fossil fuels. The references to the sun demonstrate that the traffic jam that Ballard and Vaughan sit in at the junction of the A40 and the M40 in Uxbridge is, therefore, the materialisation of a solar flow of energy. Returning to Vaughan's impatient hand, we are reminded of Bataille's political provocation, which questions the way in which humans have used such a gift as thousands of years of the sun's energy. Yet the passage's multivalent ideas of transcendence hint at the potential for alternative uses of energy. The 'new orbit around a happier star' can simultaneously describe both the contradictory, eternal promise of the network and the desire for new political possibilities. In this way, network discourse is repurposed to imagine new materialisations of energy. Third, between the events occurring at a cosmic scale, we constantly return to the frustrated desire of automobility: Vaughan's fist pounding the door of the car, and his anger at the 'immense' pause. From the desire of the individual driver to the sun's cosmic intervention, Ballard portrays how the regime of automobility is reproduced. In the focus on matter-energy and the desire for a 'new orbit', a specific political network aesthetic is produced. Urry suggests that '[t]he current car-system could not be disrupted by linear changes but only by a set of interdependent changes occurring in a certain order that might

move, or tip, the system into a new path (2005, p.33).

In other words, this change would have to be emergent, resulting from the assembled properties of all the components of the system, and not reducible to any individual component. We can combine Urry's statement with Cord's description of the crash as a 'catastrophic strategy' (2017, p.33). This term is defined as 'a new mode of subversion against a virtually all-powerful system' (Cord, 2017, p.10). Perhaps by amalgamating the ideas of the catastrophic strategy and the tipping point, we can see the crash as a disastrous attempt at bifurcation. Patrick Jagoda identifies a similar dramatisation of emergence in a genre of films that started being produced in the 1990s (2016, p.75). 'Network films', as Jagoda calls them, are invested in representing 'the creation of complex higher-level phenomena from interactions among lower-level components of a system' (2016, p.3). Ballard's novel creates a political representation of emergence prior to its popular adoption in cinema.

*Crash* presents us with two political strategies: repurposing and catastrophic bifurcation. Repurposing is applied to network discourse in the novel to imagine alternative uses for the material network. This repurposing reveals how network discourse contains the potential for its own destruction: without the contradictions inherent to it, it cannot be as effectively repurposed. The second strategy, catastrophe, is imagined as the only functional one, capable of producing these alternative uses of the road network, as only catastrophe can produce a 'new orbit'. The focus on materialism, as we saw in the passage describing the traffic jam, suggests an equivalence between Ballard's idea of catastrophe and the emergent properties of non-linear systems, specifically the possibility of bifurcation. This dramatisation of emergence in *Crash* brings us to an awareness that the complex interactions which have produced the contingent world we inhabit also allow for the possibility of other worlds: new paths, new orbits.

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