

Introduction to the French Edition of *Crash*

by J.G. Ballard, 1974

The marriage of reason and nightmare which has dominated the 20th century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communications landscape move the specters of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermonuclear weapons systems and soft drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudoevents, science and pornography. Over our lives preside the great twin motifs of the 20th century – sex and paranoia. Despite McLuhan's delight in high-speed information mosaics we are still reminded of Freud's profound pessimism in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile basis of our dreams and longings – these diseases of the psyche have now culminated in the most terrifying casualty of the [20th] century: the death of affect.

This demise of feeling and emotion has paved the way for all our most real and tender pleasures – in the excitements of pain and mutilation; in sex as the perfect arena, like a culture bed of sterile pus, for all the veronicas of our own perversions; in our moral freedom to pursue our own psychopathology as a game; and in our apparently limitless powers for conceptualization – what our children have to fear is not the cars on the highways of tomorrow but our own pleasure in calculating the most elegant parameters of their deaths. To document the uneasy pleasures of living within this glaucous paradise have more and more become the role of science fiction. I firmly believe that science fiction, far from being an unimportant minor offshoot, in fact represents the main literary tradition of the 20th century, and certainly its oldest – a tradition of imaginative response to science and technology that runs in an intact line through H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, the writers of modern American science fiction, to such present-day innovators as William Burroughs.

The main fact of the 20th century is the concept of the unlimited possibility. This predicate of science and technology enshrines the notion of a moratorium on the past – the irrelevancy and even death of the past – and the limitless alternatives available to the present. What links the first flight of the Wright brothers to the invention of the Pill is the social and sexual philosophy of the ejector seat. Given this immense continent of possibility, few literatures seem to be better equipped to deal with their subject matter than science fiction. No other form of fiction has the vocabulary and images to deal with the present, let alone the future. The dominant characteristic of the modern mainstream novelist is its sense of individual isolation; its mood of introspection and alienation, a state of mind assumed to be the hallmark of the 20th century consciousness. Far from it. On the contrary, it seems to me that this is a psychology that belongs entirely to the 19th century, part of a reaction against the massive restraints of bourgeois society, the monolithic character of Victorianism and the tyranny of the paterfamilias, secure in his financial and sexual authority. Apart from its marked retrospective bias and its obsession with the subjective nature of experience, its real subject matter is the rationalization of guilt and estrangement. Its elements are introspection, pessimism and sophistication. Yet if anything befits the 20th century it is optimism, the iconography of mass merchandising, naivety and a guilt free enjoyment of all the mind's possibilities.

The kind of imagination that now manifests itself in science fiction is not something new. Homer, Shakespeare and Milton all invented new worlds to comment on this one. The split of science fiction into a separate and somewhat disreputable genre is a recent development. It is connected to the near disappearance of dramatic and philosophical poetry and the slow shrinking of the traditional novel as it concerns more and more exclusively with the nuances of human relationships. Among those areas neglected by the traditional novel are, above all, the dynamics of human societies [the traditional novel tends to depict society as static], and man's place in the universe. However crudely or naively, science fiction at least attempts to place a philosophical and metaphysical frame around the most

important events within our lives and consciousness. If I make this general defense of science fiction it is, obviously, because my own career as a writer has been involved with it for almost 20 years. From the very start, when I first turned to science fiction, I was convinced that the future was a better key to the present than the past. At the time, however, I was dissatisfied with science fiction's obsession with its two principal themes – outer space and the far future. As much for emblematic purposes as any theoretical or programmatic ones, I christened the new terrain I wished to explore inner space, that psychological domain [manifest, for example, in surrealist painting] where the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality meet and fuse.

Primarily I wanted to write a fiction about the present day. To do this in the context of the late 1950s, in a world where the call sign of Sputnik I could be heard on one's radio like the advance beacon of a new universe, required completely different techniques from those available to the 19th century novelist. In fact, I believe that if it were possible to scrap the whole of existing literature, and be forced to begin again without a any knowledge of the past, all writers would find themselves inevitably producing something very close to science fiction. Science and technology multiply around us. To an increasing extent they dictate the languages in which we speak and think. Either we use those languages, or we remain mute. Yet, by an ironic paradox, modern science fiction became the first casualty of the changing world it anticipated and helped to create. The future envisaged by the science fiction of the 1940s and 1950s is already our past. Its dominant images, not merely of the first Moon flights and interplanetary voyages, but of our changing social and political relationships in a world governed by technology, now resemble huge pieces of discarded stage scenery. For me, this could be seen most touchingly in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which signified the end of the heroic period of modern science fiction – its lovingly imagined panoramas and costumes, its huge set pieces, reminded me of *Gone With the Wind*, a scientific pageant that became a kind of historical romance in reverse, a sealed world into which the hard light of contemporary reality was never allowed to penetrate.

Increasingly, our concepts of past, present and future are being forced to revise themselves. Just as the past itself, in social and psychological terms, became a casualty of Hiroshima and the nuclear age [almost by definition a period where we were all forced to think prospectively], so in its turn the future is ceasing to exist, devoured by the all voracious present. We have annexed the future into our own present, as merely one of those manifold alternatives open to us. Options multiply around us, we live in an almost infantile world where any demand, any possibility, whether for lifestyles, travel, sexual roles and identities, can be satisfied instantly.

In addition, I think that the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decade [1960s]. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the preempting of any free or imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. For the writer in particular it is less and less necessary for him to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality.

In the past we have always assumed that the external world around us represented reality, however confusing or uncertain, and that the inner world of our minds, its dreams, hopes, ambitions, represented the realm of fantasy and the imagination. These roles, too, it seems to me, have been reversed. The most prudent and effective method of dealing with the world around us is to assume that it is a complete fiction – conversely, the one node of reality left to us is inside our own heads. Freud's classic distinction between the latent and manifest content of the dream, between the apparent and the real, now needs to be applied to the external world of so-called reality.

Given these transformations, what is the main task facing the writer? Can he, any longer, make use of the techniques and perspectives of the traditional 19th century novel, with its linear narrative, its measured chronology, its consular characters grandly inhabiting domains within an ample time and space? Is his subject matter the sources of character and personality sunk deep in the past, the unhurried inspection of roots, the examination of the most subtle nuances of social behaviour and personal relationships? Has the writer still the moral authority to invent a self sufficient and self-enclosed world, to preside over his characters like an examiner, knowing all the questions in advance? Can he leave out anything he prefers not to understand, including his own motives, prejudices and psychopathologies?

I feel myself that the writer's role, his authority and license to act, has changed radically. I feel that, in a sense, the writer knows nothing any longer. He has no moral stance. He offers the reader the contents of his own head, he offers a set of options and imaginative alternatives. His role is that of the scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory, faced with a completely unknown terrain or subject. All he can do is to devise hypothesis and test them against the facts.

Crash! is such a book, an extreme metaphor for an extreme situation, a kit of desperate measures only for use in an extreme crisis. If I am right, and what I have done over the past years is to rediscover the present for myself, Crash! takes up its position as a cataclysmic novel of the present day in line with my previous novels of world cataclysm set in the near or immediate future – The Drowned World, The Drought and The Crystal World . Crash!, of course, is not concerned with an imaginary disaster, however imminent, but with a pandemic cataclysm institutionalized in all industrial societies that kills hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures millions. Do we see, in the car crash, a sinister portent of a nightmare marriage between sex and technology? Will modern technology provide us with a hitherto undreamed-of means for tapping our own psychopathologies? Is this harnessing of our innate perversity conceivably of benefit to us? Is there some deviant logic unfolding more powerful than that of reason?

Throughout Crash! I have used the car not only as a sexual image, but as a total metaphor for man's life in today's society. As such the novel has a political role quite apart from its sexual content, but I would like still to think that Crash! is the first pornographic novel based on technology. In a sense, pornography is the most political form of fiction, dealing with how we use and exploit each other in the most urgent and ruthless way. Needless to say, the ultimate role of Crash! is cautionary, a warning against that brutal, erotic realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of technological landscapes.