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BANHAM AVEC BALLARD

On sight and violence

Mark Overtoun

Blended sensations. Richard Hamilton, Here Is a Lush Situation, 1956.

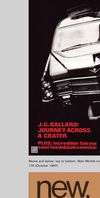
In January 1961, the eminent architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner gave an address at the London headquarters of the Royal Institute of British Architects during which he inflicted square-bracketing disciplinary blows had become apparent within architectural culture over the previous decade. A certain haste has spread the word to Canada public audience through a broadcast on the BBC, one of which was aired on the corporation's Canadian television.

Gets right down to business: Pevsner's opening salvo accuses the Latin-derived adjective "virtuosi of functionism" – the virtuosi of historical reference – in architecture. But on closer inspection, Pevsner discloses that this was driven by distaste for what might be described as the emergent conditions of affect in the architecture of the period. Although Pevsner's talk didn't mention beyond architecture, it might here be understood as a discipline-specific manifestation of the emergent "structure of feeling" characteristic of the expanding media forms of post-war consumer society. One may, if so characterising what disturbed Pevsner, and this is clearly linked to the changed conditions of affect, is the lapse of "order into "unfeeling" that, in the displacement of specifically determined form by mutability, transient, and ephemeral sensations, underwrote the emergent structure of feeling underlying necessity. Perhaps the most prominent celebrant of this happened to be Reyner Banham, Pevsner's former doctoral student and the first convenor of the Independent Group at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), who was in the lecture hall as one of the official respondents to Pevsner's talk. We will come back to Banham and the Independent Group, but let's first look more closely at what Pevsner said about the "virtuosi of functionism."

It was, he warned, a return with a difference, for while his audience might recognise the architecture of the "virtuosi" as "Gothic in its general proticrisis, ironic, the allusions made were to "much more sound stylus" and the result might thus appear not to be a kind of historicism at all. Although in the following talk Pevsner would describe this technique as "anti-cultural" and hence "anti-functionalist" in his lecture it was clear that, for Pevsner, the "virtuosi of functionism" had transgressed the charge of "new functionism." Although Le Corbusier's chapel at Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp (1950–1955) might have been the most prominent future-form, it is for Pevsner Gropius's work that Pevsner cited accept—in the case of a pilgrimage chapel, he deemed states of bedlamed sensation appropriate. Gropius's work, Pevsner suggested, was the extension of this inhumanly architecture became an instrument of indiscriminate and generalised public excitation and mimetical affect. As he wrote, "When it comes to an administrative building, such as Le Corbusier's Chandigarh Secretariat, then I would speak of 'outrageous stimulation.'"

As I've already suggested, although Pevsner's criticism was addressed to architecture, it is a lament that also implies a wider mass experience consisting of cultural and economic transformation. Certainly, "outrageous stimulation" could be a phrase that might be applied to post-war image-world belonging to what has been called the second machine age and the post age, most obviously with regard to the ever-intensifying penetration and saturation of society by advertisements, from billboards on commodities whose mode of operation was rather precisely registered in Pevsner's talk. Pevsner was speaking in the early years of the post-war period which Pevsner was looking back, much preoccupied the Independent Group at London's ICA, whose members included figures such as the artists Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton, the critic and curator Lawrence Alloway, the architects Alison and Peter Smithson—and, of course, Reyner Banham.

In 1955, the same year that the ICA presented Richard Hamilton's "Man, Machine and Motion" exhibition, Banham had given his talk entitled "Art and automobile design and advertising, the first to be Independent Group discussion, and published it in the ICA journal, Ark, in 1956. Banham, at the age of the forty-strike, his reflections on the subject published the same year in his influential article "Vehicles of Desire."Considering the American automobile from the perspective of austere postwar Britain, Banham's essay addressed the most emblematic and economically pivotal consumer object of the post-war period. Banham's "Vehicles of Desire" was subtitled "Art and about two." It analogised the dynamic transformations of US car styling under highly competitive market conditions, leveraging this against architects' proclamations to determine underwrit and timeless standards in design. To the singular, transcendent object of elite cultural arbitrage, Banham opposed the mass-produced, transient, ephemeral, "disposable, thick-ripe stream of loaded symbols"—the "repetition of brackets, headlamps, bumper-bumbs ... incipient tail fins ... protruding exhaust pipes, cuirasses wind-screens," but also "the profiling of wheel arches, the bumping of mudguards, the angling of roof posts," as well as "the grouping of the main masses, the quality of the main curves of the ponds,"an



Richard Hamilton, Homage à Chrysler Corp., 1957. Courtesy the estate of the artist.

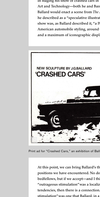
Banham's reflections on car design had a profound impact, by his own account, on Richard Hamilton. Their influence is, to take one example, evident in Hamilton's Homage à Chrysler Corp. (1957), which Hamilton defined ofsolescence as a wealth-producing deliver of industrial production. Hamilton Banham had characterised the operation of the automobile industry as "emotional engineering for public consent,"Hamilton went further, advocating the use of social science research to intensify compulsions, "to increase the speed of the obsolescence cycle." Hence the "propaganda techniques could be employed in consumer commodities by industry to mould the consumer to its own ends." In 1957 and 1958, Hamilton had produced two works, Homage à Chrysler Corp. and Hommage à la Lust Situation, respectively, that dove directly on automobile advertising, and the latter work was based on a Ford Thunderbird advertisement. In the Banham had discussed in his essay. In these paintings, skylogo who were styling of both car and female model which were typically coupled in advertisements—becomes the precursorlike for a merging of the form This "coitus(ep of fleshy plastic, and smooth, flesher metal"as Hamilton would describe the relationship between the two, the artist sought to a large upon the surface effects of production and pictures, a time in which the hypermodern surfaces of chrome and of sex appear and merged with those of the defiladiron advertised images.

Describing the development of these paintings, Hal Foster has argued that they were the first artists in which there is an analogical relation between the parts of the female body and the commodity object to one of an "actual commingling"—carnal friendship—which tends the line of the as implicated, and across which the eye slides between points of intensity and sensation. Foster has argued that, in the work of Hamilton, the relation of elements of the car to have been constantly consumed by Hamilton, as, I Hom, accounts of desire in terms of metonymic slippage meet with the sexualised commodity. As Foster writes, Hamilton "recognizes that all these forms are now enclosed in the image of a general fetishism Lustsituation, the commodity-form, and the female body. Hence the Pop image, which allows for the organic mixing not only of disparate details with Hamilton's mutations but also of the optical jumpiness of the subject with the erotic smoothness of the object, it is this emotional combination that makes his early paintings both pull apart and hold together."[1]

The importance of the Independent Group for the artists C.L. Ballard has often been attested.[2] He himself spoke of the impact of their exhibits at the seminal show This Is Tomorrow, held at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1956: "It was my experience of the real world being commented upon, and I felt that I was being given a new language with which to describe what I saw." Deeply preoccupied with the psychological effects of what he called the new media and communications landscape, Ballard would experiment with a series of speculative works modeled on advertising. In 1970, while working as a sub-editor at the journal Uncanny Tales, he produced a series of fictional advertisements for a fictional product called "Crash Car of Next Year."Using objectified and sensational graphics, these were intended to be affixed to roadside billboards and read at speed from passing cars. A decade later, he would produce a number of digital pop "advertisements for ideas"that appeared in magazines like Ambit and New Worlds, to which he was a regular contributor. His hope to place these mainstream magazines such as Vogue (as opposed when cross-pressed prohibition.

When Michael Moorcock took over as editor of the British science fiction magazine New Worlds, he was interested in Ballard's work and asked for a Space Age,"a life apparently supplied by Ballard—made the front or an homage to William Burroughs, whose techniques Moorcock acclaimed as "science fiction in themselves." The designer and central mouth of Burroughs's work, he declared,"mirrors exactly the mood of our art contemporary with the Independent Group, which, in fact, concluded with a review by Ballard of Burroughs's novel, which Ballard then as "first authentic mythology of the age of Caps Canaveral, Thrombosis and Belsen, ... a progress report from an inmate in the cosmic madhouse."

Media and Science, Vol. 1, Issue 1, Mar-Mai-Iuin, 1968 (February 1970), 1776 (August 1987), and 1776 (October 1987).



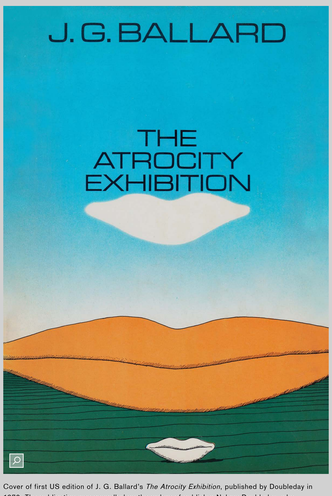
Under Moorcock's editorship, the scope of New Worlds broadened to include writing on art—the work of Eduardo Paolozzi, who became credited with the cover design for the magazine, and Richard Hamilton, whose "Lust Situation 1957 was carried a piece on Richard Hamilton. "Science fiction had been a prominent interest of Independent Group members including Paolozzi and—perhaps most notably—Lawrence Alloway. The kind of science fiction, if it was that, pursued by Ballard in the second half of the 1960s was, however, quite different from the "technocratic optimism" of the Independent Group, tended to recite the Independent Group, oriented as it was toward exploring what Ballard called "inner space," the conditions of subjectivity within a technologically propelled and media-saturated consumer society infused with violent and sexual imagery. This Ballard explored in a series of "condensed novels"that came to comprise his book The Atrocity Exhibition, by ringing his show of cracked eyes in 1970 at the Institute for Research in Abnormality, Ballard's novel is a series of fragmentary vignettes in which Ballard would erect a scene from The Atrocity Exhibition in the form of what he described as a "speculative illustration."One of the three stories on show here, as Ballard described it, "is a Pentax 35mm film of an imaginary Ford of American automobile styling, around the mid-fifties. Huge flared tail-fins and a maximum of nostalgia-display."[3]

First ad for "Crashed Cars," an exhibition of Ballard's sculpture held in April, 1970.

In this panel, we see Long Ballard's thinking into relation with some of the positions we have encountered. No doubt Ballard and Pevsner make strange bedfellows, but if we accept—and I think we can—that Pevsner's image of "outrageous stimulation" was a localised condensation of broader transformations in the structure of feeling, then Ballard's "condensed novels" were central to the Independent Group, oriented as it was toward exploring what Ballard called "inner space," the conditions of subjectivity within a technologically propelled and media-saturated consumer society infused with violent and sexual imagery. This Ballard explored in a series of "condensed novels"that came to comprise his book The Atrocity Exhibition, by ringing his show of cracked eyes in 1970 at the Institute for Research in Abnormality, Ballard's novel is a series of fragmentary vignettes in which Ballard would erect a scene from The Atrocity Exhibition in the form of what he described as a "speculative illustration."One of the three stroke on show here, as Ballard described it, "is a Pentax 35mm film of an imaginary Ford of American automobile styling, around the mid-fifties. Huge flared tail-fins and a maximum of nostalgia-display."[3]

Cover of first UK edition of Ballard's The Atrocity Exhibition, published by Jonathan Cape in 1970.

And here the issue of "telling"is written, for we find it be deeply implicated in the relation of the "inner space" to "outer space." Ballard comes to seem that around this time Ballard and the Independent Group, so emerging and resonating some of their key discursive and pictorial terms. In the "Vehicles of Desire" article, Banham had written that the car body stylists aim to confer "qualities of apparent speed, power, freedom, sensuality and sex appeal on a static piece of engineering." In 1957, he had to feel that Ballard was so emerging from this discourse to describe the automobile as "an iconic entity that combines the elements of speed, power and freedom within a fluid, sensual form and that, perhaps, accounts for how we may have of the inherent dangers of these violent and sensitive machines." In the "Crash Car" exhibition, Ballard's sculpture, Paolozzi's sculpture, Hamilton's Lust Situation, and Pevsner's outrageous stimulation are the means by which design excludes the violence immanent to the fetishization and the death of drive that is the sublimated "inner space." The point is made clearer in another passage in which Ballard recalled his observation that "road and motor vehicles, which after all are the objects of the most obsessive fears inflicted into media embrace, ... The large advertisements for cars, for example, show the car as a kind of protective cocoon, the interior of which is a luxurious bedroom, and the car is organized by its readers to Vietnam features in the pages. It I remember, the bit of the dying man's head was slightly exaggerated like a stylized cake bobby or car fin."[4]



Cover of first US edition of J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, published by Doubleday in 1970. The publication was cancelled on the orders of publisher Nelson Doubleday, who demanded that all copies of the book be destroyed; only a few examples of the edition survive.

In a recent interview, Charles Platt—the future cryonics specialist who had handled graphic design at *New Worlds* under Moorcock's editorship and had worked closely with Ballard—commented that "the media landscape creates an equivalence between the curve of a thigh and the contour of automobile sheet metal, and a car crash becomes a perverse erotic event."[27] Let's return to the scene of Richard Hamilton's automobile paintings and set them alongside this description of an image from Ballard's *Crash*: "Each of the spectators at the accident site would carry away an image of the violent transformation of this woman, of the complex of wounds that fused together her own sexuality and the hard technology of the automobile."[28] While the paintings and the novel share a preoccupation with the merging of body and machine, in Hamilton's case this was developed out of the corporeal mimetics of body styling of the kind Platt observes, which was already present in the consumer objects of the media age.[29] Ballard's vision built upon this, but then reworked it through a violence that was in a sense directly enacted upon styling—or, better, was immanent to it, insofar as styling is understood as the dissimulation or occultation of violence. In this process, mimetic correspondence did not disappear but was displaced and refound in the violent fracturing of organic and machine bodies impelled by the force of impact that formed the new principle of conjugation. Here Hamilton's array of points of attachment—Foster's "charged details"—seemed to recur in the guise of the distribution of wounds that have erotically repatterned the body in a continuum with the machine.

Undoubtedly the death of affect—"the most sinister casualty of the century"[30]—was also welcomed by Ballard as a kind of liberation, with its counterpart, stylization, ushering in a postfunctional and thus postperverse future that he characterized as "lunar."[31] Writing in the notes for his car crash exhibition, as they were rescripted in his ficto-autobiographical novel *The Kindness of Women*, he commented: "Across the communications landscape stride the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermonuclear weapons systems and soft-drink commercials co-exist in an uneasy realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography. The death of feeling and emotion has at last left us to pursue our own psychopathologies as a game."[32] Yet at the same time, this pursuit itself could evidently become a way of working back toward and recovering affect. If the "death of feeling" was to do with an ever greater alienation "from any kind of direct response to experience,"[33] then the violence he enthusiastically reported (or perhaps fantasized) that was provoked by his show of crashed cars seemed to push against this, even if—or especially because—it took place within the mediated space of the exhibition venue. A similar logic was in operation when Ballard lauded Paolozzi's sculpture for its provision of an "ironic and imaginative replay of [a technological object] in which other people recognize their first perception of that object, that first blunted perception, heightened and illuminated."[34]

If something animates and holds together the acts of violence in Ballard's literature, it is perhaps the paranoiac fantasy that there *is* something that holds everything together, some hidden position, perspective, or arrangement that might be obtained from which the fragmented media-subject could gain coherence—from which, even momentarily, things would fall into place, appear significant, make sense, be solved, become "real," and hence maybe also affective.[35] Such, at any rate, is the implication of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, where the compulsions of the name-shifting protagonist Travis/Travers/Traven/Tallis/Talbot/Talbert resolve—like the Warren Commission Report on the JFK assassination—into matters of geometry, trajectories and coincidences of space and time. These stitch together episodes as diverse as Talbert's belief in the equivalence of all junctions and his related search for "the primary act of intercourse, the first apposition of the dimensions of time and space"; the imaginary refiguration of a lover's body to produce an "obscene version" of it in the search for "a more significant geometry"; and Tallis's apparent murder of Karen Novotny because she obscured the meeting of the wall planes in a room.[36] "Her figure interrupted the junction between the walls in the corner on his right," Ballard writes. "After a few seconds her presence became an unbearable intrusion into the time geometry of the room. ... Coma sat down beside Karen Novotny's body. She glanced at Tallis, who pointed to the corner. 'She was standing in the angle between the walls.'"[37]

1 See Nikolaus Pevsner, "The Return of Historicism," in *Pevsner: The Complete Broadcast Talks–Architecture and Art in Radio and Television, 1945–1977*, ed. Stephen Games (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2014). Pevsner's concerns are already evident in "Functional Architecture," an earlier radio talk that was broadcast in New Zealand in 1958, also published in the same volume.
2 Nikolaus Pevsner, "Modern Architecture and the Historian or the Return of Historicism," *RIBA Journal*, vol. 68, no. 6 (April 1961), p. 235.
3 The historian's *bête noire* here was a project by Michael Webb—later of Archigram but then a student in the school of architecture at Regent Street Polytechnic in London—for a building for a furniture manufacturers' association. Claiming this design "out-Gaudied Gaudi," Pevsner went on to describe it on the radio as "abstract sculpture of a doughy, rooty, bony, or gristly kind." See Nikolaus Pevsner, "The Return of Historicism," p. 414, and "Modern Architecture and the Historian," p. 231. Webb's project, completed when he was a fourth-year student, had been on view as part of Arthur Drexler's "Visionary Architecture" exhibition at MoMA shortly before Pevsner's Royal Institute of British Architects address.
4 Nikolaus Pevsner, "Modern Architecture and the Historian," p. 237.
5 Hal Foster, "Notes on the First Pop Age," in *Richard Hamilton*, ed. Hal Foster with Alex Bacon, October Files, no. 10 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 46.
6 "Borax, or the Thousand Horse-Power Mink" (4 March) and "Metal in Motion—The Iconography of the Automobile" (7 July). See Graham Whitham, "Chronology," in *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, ed. David Robbins (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), pp. 30–31. Hamilton's exhibition had in fact debuted at Newcastle University's Hatton Gallery earlier that same year.
7 Reyner Banham, "Vehicles of Desire," in *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 4. The essay was first published in *Art*, no. 1 (September 1955).
8 Ibid., p. 5
9 Richard Hamilton, "Persuading Image," in *Collected Words, 1953–1982* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 142. The lecture was delivered in 1959 under the title "The Designed Image of the Fifties."
10 Richard Hamilton, "An Exposition of *She*," in *Collected Words*, p. 36.
11 Hal Foster, "Notes on the First Pop Age," p. 54.
12 Ibid., p. 61.
13 See, for example, Roger Luckhurst, "Ballard / *Atrocity* / Conner / *Exhibition* / Assemblage," in *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions*, ed. Jeannette Baxter and Rowland Wymer (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 36.
14 "1971: Frank Whitford. Speculative Illustrations: Eduardo Paolozzi in Conversation with J.G. Ballard," in *Extreme Metaphors: Selected Interviews with J.G. Ballard, 1967–2008*, ed. Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), p. 43. The interview was first published in *Studio International*, vol. 182, no. 937 (October 1971).
15 Michael Moorcock, "Editorial: A New Literature for the Space Age," *New Worlds*, vol. 48, no. 142 (May–June 1964), p. 2. See also Rob Latham, "Assassination Weapons: The Visual Culture of New Wave Science Fiction," in *Cutting Across Media: Appropriation Art, Interventionist Collage and Copyright Law*, ed. Kembrew McLeod and Rudolf Kuenzli (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
16 Michael Moorcock, "Editorial," p. 3.
17 J. G. Ballard, "Myth Maker of the Twentieth Century," in *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p. 130.
18 See David Britton's wide-ranging study *Eduardo Paolozzi* at New Worlds: *Science Fiction and Art in the Sixties* (Manchester: Savoy Books, 2013).
19 See Rebecca Peabody, "Science Fiction as Muse: Lawrence Alloway and the Art of Speculative Criticism," in *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator*, ed. Lucy Bradnock, Courtney J. Martin, and Rebecca Peabody (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015). In 1954, Alloway became the co-convener of the Independent Group with John McHale.
20 "Speculative Illustrations," p. 40.
21 J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition, with Author's Annotations* (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1990), p. 16.
22 Ibid., p. 72.
23 Ibid., p. 20.
24 Reyner Banham, "Vehicles of Desire," p. 6.
25 J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, p. 97.
26 Ibid., p. 21.
27 Pedro Marques, "The Once New Worlds of Charles Platt." Available at pedromarquesdg.wordpress.com/2011/11/02/the-new-worlds-of-charles-platt. Platt's work includes the celebrated illustrations for Ballard's condensed novel "The Summer Cannibals," published in *New Worlds*, no. 186 (January 1969).
28 J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 189.
29 For Vaughan in *Crash*, "the smallest styling details contained an organic life as meaningful as the limbs and sense organs of the human beings who drove these vehicles." See J. G. Ballard, *Crash*, p. 169.
30 J. G. Ballard, "The Innocent as Paranoid," in *A User's Guide*, p. 91.
31 Ibid. Ballard's interviews shed light on his thinking around these issues. Two examples: "Nothing is spontaneous, everything is stylised, including human behaviour. And once you move into this area in which everything is stylised, including sexuality, you're leaving behind any kind of moral or *functional* relevance," and "The psychological landscape is going to be somewhat like the physical landscape of the moon. ... Does that appeal to me? Yes it does, because I think people will have more freedom there. I mean the freedom of isolation, the freedom of complete choice in one's behaviour. ... I think one's moving into a realm where everything will become increasingly stylised." See "1970: Lynn Barber. Sci-fi Seer" and "1974: Carol Orr. How to Face Doomsday without Really Trying," in *Extreme Metaphors*, p. 34 and pp. 69–70, respectively.
32 J. G. Ballard, *The Kindness of Women* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p. 226. For a transcription of the original text, see Simon Ford, "A Psychopathic Hymn: J. G. Ballard's 'Crashed Cars' Exhibition of 1970." Available at www.slashseconds.org/issues/001/001/articles/13_sford/index.php.
33 "Speculative Illustrations," p. 164.
34 Ibid., p. 165.
35 Something like this is enacted in the bedroom scene at the end of *The Kindness of Women* when Cleo shuts away the multiple mirror reflections. See pp. 322–323.
36 J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, pp. 56, 60, 42.
37 Ibid., p. 42.

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