



Crash: 1973 and the Crisis of Representation¹

Philip Ursprung¹ (ETH Zürich)

In May 2011, we invited Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi to ETH Zurich for a dialogue about their relation to each other and their relation to the historical events of the 1960s and 1970s. When Stephan Trüby, who moderated the dialogue, presented a slide depicting the development of the exchange rates after 1971, the two architects were stunned. The diagram shows what happened in the realm of exchange after Richard Nixon took the dollar off the gold standard in 1971. He thus ended the agreement of Bretton Woods, which had installed fixed exchange rates among the major currencies, triggered the deregulation of the financial and labor markets and, in some way, paved the way for the globalized economy of our own present time. The US Dollar – represented on the horizontal line in the diagram -- remains the leading currency. However, the stability was gone. Deutsche Mark, Swiss Franc and Yen were gaining in value during the 1970s, declined in the first half of the 1980s and rose again during the late 1980s, while the British Pound continuously lost its value. The intertwined lines recall diagrams of earthquakes, or

¹ The text is based on the paper presented at the conference "Around 1973: Historicism, Self-Cause, Popular Culture", initiated by Pedro Dolabela Chagas at Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart on 17 June, 2011. Another version of the paper was presented under the title "Crash: Life and Death, circa 1973", at the conference "Vitality", organised by the Philosophical Reading Group of Stanford University directed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Robert Harrison on 22 February, 2012. A version of the text appeared in German under the title "Krisen der Repräsentation und Kriege der Bilder", in *Arch +*, Zeitschrift für Architektur und Städtebau, 204, October 2011, pp. 18-21. My thanks go to Vittoria Borso, Pedro Dolabela Chagas, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Jean-Baptiste Joly, Robert Harrison.

meteorological events. Seen from a distance, they resemble a kind of mysterious landscape, a mountain range with valleys and slopes. Each peak stands for a radical change, a crisis.

I could see that Koolhaas and Tschumi looked at this diagram with fascination. I felt that in their eyes the seemingly neutral recording of the uncontrolled, raw force of the market in the early phase of deregulation turned into a spectacle. It was evident that they took aesthetic pleasure in observing this spectacle, which, in some way, had constituted the very horizon of the socio-economic landscape where their careers had begun. The two architects who looked with fascination at the diagram on the wall reminded me of the enthusiasm of 18th and 19th century artists and poets admiring the spectacle of Nature. Is there a connection between the fascination of Koolhaas and Tschumi for the silhouettes of volatile exchange rates and, say, John Ruskin's fascination for the clouds of a tempest in the Swiss Alps? Can one admire a "data-scape" - to remain in the vocabulary of Dutch late 20th century architecture - in the same way as a natural spectacle?

Ruskin had made many journeys to the Swiss Alps and had recommended to his reader to remain for a day on a good viewpoint in order to observe the changing weather. In **Modern Painters** he describes a tempest with the following words:

And then you will hear the sudden rush of the awakened wind, and you will see those watchtowers of vapour swept away from their foundations, and waving curtains of opaque rain let down to the valleys, swinging from the burdened clouds in black bending fringes, or pacing in pale columns along the lake level, grazing its surface into foam as they go.²

Ruskin's description of a tempest is deeply rooted in the tradition of the Sublime. English landscape architects and artists referred to this concept, which had been used in Antiquity since the 18th century. They considered sublime these phenomena, which eluded traditional concepts and dimensions, which were potentially harmful but could be perceived esthetically. Objects of the sublime could be dangerous, large animals, immense mountain ranges, mighty waterfalls, or, as mentioned, a mountain tempest, in other words everything that had the power to destroy a human being yet was observed from a safe distance. Besides natural phenomena, also manmade objects such as machines, factories, or

² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 1, Chapter IV, "Of truth of clouds: Thirdly, of the region of the rain-cloud", paragraph 36, London, Smith, Elder and Cok. 1846 (quoted after Project Gutenberg's *Modern Painters Volume I (of V)*, by John Ruskin (2009), p. 263.

weapons can also produce sublime effects. William Turner considered the mixture of smoke and vapor stemming from engines as sublime. The visitors of Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace built in 1851 for the Great Exhibition in London, perceived the enormous hall of the building as sublime. And up to present, the sight of heavy industry in decay can cause a shiver down one's back – here Bernd and Hilla Becher's **Hannibal**, 1973, as long as one does not have to work in the factory oneself.

The esthetic pleasure in the sublime draws thus on the fact that the viewers witness how the known categories collapse due to an unheard of event and remain at a safe distance as well. Like Ruskin could only enjoy the tempest as long as he did not get wet himself or hit by lightning, the spectacle of the volatility of the markets are only enjoyable for those who have not lost their job or house. From the perspective of a typical European Welfare State like Holland, Koolhaas could sublimate the economic chaos of the early 1970s and the manifestations of the raw force of capitalism during the 1980s with concepts such as "Bigness" and books such as **Delirious New York**, or **S, M, L, XL**. But, so I want to ask, would this perspective have worked in England while it was under the shock of deindustrialization as well? What would someone like Rayner Banham, or Cedric Price have said in view of the diagram?

The image of the untamed power of the markets can be historically localized. According to David Harvey, the end of the Gold Standard is not only the beginning of the deregulation of the labor markets and the financial markets, but it also marks a general crisis of representation. In his words: "The breakdown of money as a secure means of representing value has itself created a crisis of representation in advanced capitalism"³. Based on this thesis, we can ask if the sublime always comes into play when one tries to deal with such as crisis, make it tolerable, naturalize it, so to speak. Could it be that the transformation into an image of something that cannot be adequately represented – because it eludes the existing system of representation – is itself a process of sublimation? Does the transformation of the smoke of an engine into a quasi-natural image make the shock of industrialization more tolerable? Do curves, diagrams and statistics make the irrationality of capitalism more human, more coherent?

³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990, p. 298.

If we look at the artistic reception of the crisis of representation in the early 1970s, we can, in fact, identify two tendencies: On the one hand the trend to sublimate the crisis and naturalize it in guise of sublime imagery; on the other hand the trend to analyze it and to articulate precisely the discontinuity of time and space that the crisis produced. The most influential interpretation of the crisis was that it was about a “break” between two periods, namely the modern and the postmodern period. This thesis was often based upon, or illustrated by, examples from the realm of architecture and urbanism. Most successful was Fredric Jameson’s narration deriving a theory of postmodernism from observations of spatial change. For Jameson, the visit in the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, built by John Portman between 1974 and 1976, triggered his theory of the postmodernist “hyperspace.” The Westin Bonaventure was, in his view, a typical example for the incapacity of the subject to grasp the new spatiality: “I am tempted to say that such space makes it impossible for us to use the language of volume or volumes any longer, since these are impossible to seize. [...] You are in this hyperspace up to your eyes and your body”.⁴

For Jameson, this “immersion” was typical for the new spatiality. He described the experience as a “milling confusion”, and “something like the vengeance this space takes on those who still seek to walk through it”.⁵ In his words:

Postmodern hyperspace has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mapable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment ... can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational networks in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.⁶

There is hardly a model of Postmodernism more influential than the one by Jameson. I myself find it extremely useful even two decades after the book was first published. However, I would argue, that his evocation of the “hyperspace” operates within the terrain of the Sublime. His emphasis on the individual losing its sense of orientation recalls Ruskin

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

and the reactions of the visitors of Crystal Palace. The crisis of representation is “naturalized” by declaring it a shift between to periods. It is more than an anecdotal coincidence, in my view, that Jameson’s experience happens in the lobby of a luxury hotel. Once again, like in the case of the well to do traveler Ruskin, Fredric Jameson, member of the academic jet-set, is not really in danger to get lost. The body of the narrator might be “immersed”, but the immersion takes place in the air-conditioned atrium of a hotel lobby in downtown Los Angeles. It is symptomatic for the analytical problem of the dualistic model theorized by Jameson and others, that it never really succeeded precisely in the realm of the architectural discussion.

I am therefore more interested in modes of representation which do not tend to overcome the crisis by naturalizing, interpreting, or explaining it, but who simply try to articulate the new reality it produced. I am interested in modes that challenge representation as such by disruption the very structure of language and images – such as Jean-Francois Lyotard’s book **Libidinal Economy** (1974) where he asks: “What have we to cure? I do not exactly know, but at least and first this: the disease of the will to cure.”⁷

I am thus interested in attempts that do not intend to merely depict the crisis from the outside, but try to articulate it from the inside. From **Libidinal Economy** to J.G. Ballard’s novel **Crash** (1973), Francis Ford Coppola’s film **The Conversation** (1974), Terence Malik’s film **Badlands** (1973), Gordon Matta-Clark’s architectural performance such as **Bronx Floors** (1973), Thomas Pynchon’s novel **Gravity’s Rainbow** (1973) to Smithsons drawings of **Entropic Landscapes** (1971) and **Land Reclamation Projects** (1973) there is an large group of texts and artworks produced mostly in 1973, and 1974 that allow us to perceive the collapse of the traditional order of space and time – or, again in David Harvey’s terms, the “space-time compression.”

The most drastic example is the late J.G. Ballard’s novel **Crash**, published in 1973. It was Ballard’s second novel after **The Crystal World** (1966) and it ousted him from the realm of high literature and science-fiction as well for almost two decades. It became famous mainly through the film **Crash** by David Cronenberg (1996). The characters in the novel can achieve sexual fulfillment only in relation to car crashes. Their actions, their daydreams all revolve around the question about how the compressed metal surfaces, the broken

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, **Libidinal Economy**, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 27.

windshields, the torn vinyl surfaces of destroyed cars can unite with their wounds and how their orgasms coincide with the split-second moments of collisions between cars. They are obsessed by the idea that their bodies become machine-like. And they have to destroy precisely the machines that are supposed to move, protect, surround their bodies in ever-more brutal scenarios. In order to be able to perceive their own corporeal presence, they are forced to autodestruct their bodies in a spiral of violence which mutilates their bodies and eventually leads to their death.

Vaughan, a TV-moderator who lost his job after being disfigured in a motorcycle accident and who rides a Lincoln Continental, the same model as the one John F Kennedy was assassinate in, is obsessed with collisions.

For Vaughan each crashed car set off a tremor of excitement, in the complex geometries of a dented fender, in the unexpected variations of crushed radiator grilles, in the grotesque overhang of and instrument panel force on to a driver's crotch as if in some calibrated act of machine fellatio. The intimate time and space of a single human being had been fossilized for ever in this web of chromium knives and frosted glass.⁸

Ballard's novel is a continuous description of deformed spatialities. The narrator depicts the personnel of the novel in a highly abstract, stereotype mode. Much more detailed are the descriptions of the changing spaces of streets, urban landscapes, machinery, cars, and human and artificial surfaces. Ballard chooses an inside-perspective. He allows the reader to remain exposed to the various forces twisting, bending, tearing the human body. In other words, he never chooses the distanced perspective, never the perspective of the sublime. When the hero, named James Ballard – only to make even clearer the intention to give an inner-perspective excluding any distance - returns from the hospital after a frontal collision, he immediately goes to the junk yard in order to find his wrecked car which promises to give him back his shattered spatial identity.

I eased myself into the dusty vinyl seat, tipped back by the bowing of the floor. The steering column had reared forward six inches toward my chest. I lifted my nervous legs into the car and placed my feet on the rubber cleats of the pedals, which had been forced out of the engine compartment so that my knees were pressed against my chest. In front of me the instrument panel had been buckled inwards, cracking the clock and

⁸ J. G. Ballard, *Crash*, London, Fourth Estate, 2011, p. 5

speedometer dials. Sitting here in this deformed cabin, filled with dust and damp carpeting, I tried to visualize myself at the moment of collision, the failure of the technical relationship between my own body, the assumption of the skin, and the engineering structure which supported it.⁹

Jean Baudrillard wrote an essay about **Crash**, in 1974. He stresses the point that Ballard does not see technology as a mere extension of the human body such as, for instance Marshall McLuhan or the theoreticians of cybernetics. According to Baudrillard, Ballard interprets technology not as an extension to the human body, but as an extension of death. He calls the perspective of Ballard “hyperrealistic”:

In **Crash**, no more fiction or reality, it is hyperreality that abolishes both. Not even a critical regression is possible. This mutating and commutating world of simulation and death, this violently sexed world, but one without desire, full of violated and violent bodies, as if neutralized, this chromatic world and metallic intensity, but one void of sensuality, hypertechnology without finality - is it good or bad? We will never know.

The closest to Ballard is probably Jean-Francois Lyotard’s book **Libidinal Economy**, 1974, which I already mentioned. He outlines his critique of critique as follows:

No need to do a critique of metaphysics (or of political economy which is the same thing), since critique presupposes and ceaselessly creates this very theatricality; rather be inside and forget it, that’s the position of the death drive, describe these foldings and gluings, there energetic vections that establish the theatrical cube with its six homogenous faces on the unique and heterogeneous surface.¹⁰

Ballard’s descriptions of crushed surfaces, Matta-Clark’s building dissections, Coppola’s narration which tries in vain to uncover various layers of meaning are condensed in the opening paragraph of Lyotard’s book:

Open the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces: not only the skin with each of its folds, wrinkles, scars, with its great velvety planes, and contiguous to that, the scalp and its mane of hair, the tender pubic fur, nipples, nails, hard transparent skin under the heel, the light frills of the eyelids, set with lashes – but open and spread, expose the labia majora, so also the labia minora with their blue network bathed in mucus, dilate the

⁹ Ibid., pp. 52-53.

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, **Libidinal Economy**, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 3.

diaphragm of the anal sphincter, longitudinally cut and flatten out the black conduit of the rectum, then the colon, then the caecum, now a ribbon with its surface all striated and polluted with shit; as though your dress-maker's scissors were opening the leg of an old pair of trousers, go on, expose the small intestine's alleged interior, the jejunum, the ileum, the duodenum, or else, at the other end, undo the mouth at its corners, pull out the tongue at its most distant roots and split it, spread out the bat's wings of the palate and its damp basements, open the trachea and make it the skeleton of a boat under construction, armed with scalpels and tweezers, dismantle and lay out the bundles and bodies of the encephalon; [...] And this is not all, far from it: connected onto these lips, a second mouth is necessary, a third, a great number of other mouths, vulvas, nipples. [...] Don't forget to add to the tongue and all the pieces of the vocal apparatus, all the sounds of which they are capable, and moreover, the whole selective network of sounds, that is, the phonological system, for this too belongs to the libidinal 'body'.¹¹

Can we apply the thesis of the crisis of representation to other moments in history than 1973? Can we localize such as shift during the Great Crash of 1929, for instance, and distinguish between various strategies of representation, such as the **Chien Andalou**, 1929? Can we localize it during the establishment of the so-called New World Order after the collapse of the Soviet Union by George Bush Senior in 1991; after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001; during the Jasmine Revolution in the Arab countries? Are the images taken on Tahrir Square in Cairo by the Egyptian artist Ahmed Basiony who was killed in January 2011 and who featured at the Venice Biennale 2011 more than an impressive art work, but a sign of a new iconic realm? Or are these still after-waves of the shock of 1973?

¹ Philip URSPRUNG, Prof. Dr.
Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich
Department of Architecture
philip.ursprung@gta.arch.ethz.ch

Recebido em 01/07/2014
Aprovado em 20/07/2014

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1-2.