

Affective Changing of Human Caused by Automobile in *Crash*

Kento YOKOYAMA

1. Introduction

In our consumer society, innovation in automobiles has created a lot of convenient social circumstances and has helped many countries develop through revolutionary technologies. Nevertheless, this breakthrough innovation also created a huge social issue, especially prevalent during the 1970s in Britain: the car accident. James Graham Ballard (1930 – 2009) included this crucial sociological problem in *Crash*. He wrote a lot of short stories and novels in his life. While the author was born and raised in Shanghai, he and his family were captured by Japanese troops during World War II. These experiences in the Asian country consequently were included and involved in his later work, as described in *Empire of the Sun* in 1984. When the war was over, they went back to Britain, and at the same time, the author acquired higher education in the country, but left the academic environment to enroll in military administration. During the experiences of training in the air force, he became fascinated with science fiction and then started career as a novelist. In 1973, J.G. Ballard published *Crash*. This paper analyzes mainly two male characters, James Ballard and Robert Vaughan who come together through their mutual desire to cause car collisions. The main character, James Ballard, a commercial producer, faced a difficult period, in which his marriage with Catharine became badly strained. One day, he was in a car accident with Ms. Remington, and they were hospitalized after the collision. In dangerous conditions, Ballard met like-minded Robert Vaughan who has an intense desire for causing car crashes. This novel reveals peculiar closeness between human bodies and automobiles. Even though both of them are completely different materials, they are described as unified objects, in the way of physical and psychological connection in *Crash*. Thus, the aim of this paper is how automobiles influence on the two male characters, and compose as unified objects. In terms of sociology, this paper attempts analyze *Crash*, focusing on *Automobilities*¹.

¹ This is a collection of academic papers, which are several aspects of automobile's functional meaning in the society. These analyses works are by some sociologists and academic researchers.

2. How the main character (James Ballard) has been affected by driving a vehicle

First of all, James Ballard was psychologically as well as physically involved with his car. The crucial influence occurred when he encountered Vaughan at a hospital after his first car crash, since that point, he was mesmerized by automobile collisions. In terms of psychological association of Ballard and his vehicle, there is a part where the car creates a critical change.

Sitting in the darkness on the floor cushions, we watched the silent impacts flicker on the wall above our heads. The repeated sequences of crashing cars first calmed and then aroused me. Cruising alone on the motorway under the yellow glare of the sodium lights, I thought of my self at the controls of these impacting vehicles. (*Crash*, 43)

In this description in the beginning part of *Crash*, it is clearly seen that Ballard was calm at first in his vehicle, but was provoked in a short while when he was in the cushion of his car. Just by being in the car, his emotions drastically changed. From this scene we can see the automobile as a factor that influence and alter human emotion, though both of them are individual organisms. It is because of an invisible connection between human and product. In addition, he actually develops an addiction to collisions ever since the first encounter with Vaughan. In order to examine the psychological unification between the human and the automobile, a sociological approach will be useful perspective from *Automobilities* that include several sociological analyses of automobiles by some scholars.

More and more aspects of everyday driving becomes a mediated process in which technology ceases to be a visible tool or technique, but becomes a world in which the boundaries and interfaces between humans and technological systems become blurred, refigured and difficult to disentangle. (*Automobilities*, 10)

Everyday, driving involuntarily constructs an environment in which a boundary-less world between human and technology is possible. Automobiles are supposed to be controlled by humans as products that can be manipulated; however, it becomes directly opposite in this novel. Automobiles are not only objects to be controlled by humans. They actually turn into part of human bodies. As the above sociological claim, driving cars is a crucial factor in order to involve people and control. The psychological unification of them appears from *Crash*. Thus, from this story, both the integration of Ballard and his vehicle, and the author's idea of the unification of the two different materials can emerge from his novel. From the above two observations, automobiles have an influence on humans in a meaningful way through the psychological phase, such as evoking excitement or calm. Moreover, the perfective of driving cars builds an emotional fusion among the technology

of vehicles and human; these psychological factors are described in the novel.

3. Unification of two types of physical expression.

According to this novel, not only the psychological integration between human and automobiles, but also the physical fusion can be recognized through the description of the *Crash*. Each human body and automobile parts are described contrastingly within a paragraph then causes a phenomenon that indicates the same physical parts. Although one of the materials is biological and another is mechanical, their shape and role in the bodies signify common physical parts. There are basically four parallel expressions of the automobile's equipment and the human's physical expressions.

The bones of my forearms formed a solid coupling with the shift of the steering column, and I felt the smallest tremors of the road-wheels magnified a hundred times, so that we traversed each grain of gravel or cement like the surface of small asteroid. The murmur of the transmission system reverberated through my legs and spine, echoing off the plates of my skull as if I myself lying in the transmission tunnel of the car, my hands, taking the torque of the crankshaft, my legs spinning to proper the vehicle forwards. (*Crash*, 481)

Ballard's physical expression "The bones of my forearms" and equipment of his vehicle, "the steering column" imply a unification due to their similar appearance. Historically, the steering column was equipped as a fundamental part of cars from the 1970s, which is to operate the lights or wipers. The different type of materials indicates a same element due to their similar shape, despite the contrasting expressions of the character's arms and the automobile equipment. Secondly, there is a relationship between "the transmission system" and "my legs and spine". The equipment generates a vehicle's speed that drivers want to make, and it adjusts the number of rotations in the engine for the speed of automobiles. The control of the machine is at the central part of automobiles, conveying power toward to tires. Actually, this is the necessary function in order to that can run. From the view of the human body, "my legs and spine" is as same as the equipment of the automobile. "Legs" refers to the tires of cars, and "spine", the centered supports structure of the human body, has the same function as the transmission system because the central part of human body controls the act of people. Hence, both the mechanical parts and the human organism have a close structure in terms of operation and manipulation. Besides, they are described contrastively in this novel. Thirdly, "echoing off the plates of my skull" and the car's "the transmission tunnel" parallel each other. The transmission tunnel is a cover of the transmission system that has been mentioned previously. This automobile's equipment controls the direction or speed of the vehicle much like the brain that is covered by a

transmission tunnel. It indicates the physical part of a human body in the novel that is “my plate of skull”. Both of them are materials for covering up crucial parts of their “body”. Although one’s body is a biological composition and another is a mechanical object, the described parts signify an equivalent material. Covering up another object is common theme between the “transmission tunnel” and the “plate of my skull”, so the paralleling expression of two different materials involve in the novel. Finally, “my hands, my legs” and “torque of the crankshaft” can be analyzed from the text. The crankshaft is an internal part of a car’s engine, which makes explosions inside the engine and generates power for moving cars. The generated power conveys it toward the hands and legs of the car that are the four tires, and enable forward and backward movements. Thus, from this condition, paralleling the physical parts of a human and the mechanism of a vehicle are included on purpose by the author. Even though these two materials are completely different structures as biological and mechanical objects, they indicate the same physical parts because of the similar shape.

4. Ambiguity unification human and automobile

Another unifying factor between the main character and his vehicle can be recognized in *Crash*. As analyzed above, the gradual psychological and physical unification between Ballard and his vehicle can be seen through the novel, becoming more deeply related than previous unification while the story progresses. A deep unification from psychological and physical is clarified from a description way clarify in the novel; here is the illustration from *Crash*.

I (Ballard) was sure that their metal bodies were only fraction of a degree below their melting points, held together by the force of my own vision, and that the slightest shift of my attention to the steering wheel would burst the metal films that held them together and break those blocks of boiling steel across our path.
(*Crash*, 482)

There are two fundamental factors to solidify the consolidation of James Ballard and his vehicle. One of the fact of the unification is both the main character and his vehicle’s existence achieve a “melting point”. Indicating that although his biological body and a metal body differ according to sections of organisms, the act of driving unifies them. They reached to a point that to become one object, and it is the clear evidence of their unification. Another relevant factor to analyze the unification is Ballard’s sight, which links up two existences. As the character feels in the car, the melting point is held by his own vision, so it means that what he sees through car’s front glass occupies his viewpoint as if the continual sight is only his world. The two above phenomenon is the factor to

illustrate their unification. Thus, it reveals that his vehicle absorbed the main character and also turned him into a part of the vehicle. The absolute imperative for unification is the above two factors, which is described as "the slightest shift of my attention to the steering wheel would burst the metal films that held them together and break those blocks of boiling steel across our path." It implies that he accords with his vehicle completely, and is not allowed pay to attention to anything other than a handling of the vehicle. If he concentrated on other things, their unification would be broken. Lastly, "break those blocks of boiling steel across our path" is a metaphysical expression of his car, and the potential condition of the character in the future. The boiling steel reveals the situation of the main character and his vehicle's unification that expresses "melting points" as mentioned above. However, the break those blocks and the across our path indicates not only he cannot move forward anymore, but also his unification with the automobile might be unlinked.

In order to approach the phenomenon, Daniel Miller², a sociologist claims the unification phenomenon between human and cars stated above, is expressed as an "automobilised person". The scholar approaches the subject from the viewpoint of the automobile's existence in modern society, and it influences on metal products. In a chapter of "Automotive Emotions Feeling the Car", the sociologist argues how automobiles are involved naturally in human society as an enormously common object, and innovate the concept of the "humanized car" to "automobilesed person". The meaning of modern society is marked with the key word "hybridization":

In this complex hybridization of the biological body and the machine body, new terms of kinship are elaborated, 'linking animate qualities to machines'. When the quasi – biological car as cyborg becomes deeply intertwined with the sensory evolution of the human, it not only supports human kinship practices, but it has also become kin – the 'humanized car' meets the 'automobilised person' and discovers they are cousins. (*Automobilities*, 232)

This sociologic perspective can be applied to previous quotes from the story. This unification is intimately connected with automobiles, which is a hybridization of both human and automobiles. In general, people drive cars. This means that they control and manipulate this machine products. However, this quote indicates the reverse of this subordinate relationship between drivers and cars. The reversed relationship defines the automobilised person who are ironically controlled and manipulated by their sophisticated technologies. Moreover, it is important to note that the relationship between the

² An anthropologist who studied the relationship between our society and consumption.

automobilised person and the humanized car is co-occurrence. That is, when people cannot launch a safety drive without disciplined rules, the produced machine relatively begins to give a command to them. This new established social configuration reverses the hierarchy between human and automobiles. While technology of automobiles progress in a very short period of time, these products develop the convenient and powerful ability to control humans such as automated driving, automatic brake and quality GPS. It provides an environment in which people cannot go everywhere without these technologies. In the description of *Crash*, it also happens that the produced equipment which is invented for convenience constructs more disciplined and automobilised people. In other words, Ballard's disciplined body is inseparable from his "humanized car" which gives him relief. The reason why the main character unified with automobile by the way of psychologically and physically is because of the relationship with his wife. As clearly described in the story, their conjugal life had been unstable; both of them cheat on each other and act independently. So the automobile is the only thing that he can control and be satisfied since his wife is independent though they are married. The relationship between Ballard and automobiles is getting closer as the story goes on. Even though the novel's era is the 1970s Britain, and automobile's equipment was not as sophisticated as nowadays, deep the function of human and automobiles in modern car society can be recognized through the attitude of the main character.

5. Speed of automobile generates affect of man.

Another crucial character in the novel, Robert Vaughan whose relationship with the automobile dangerous has personality, and at the same time, his way of driving automobiles connects with his. He has an intense fetishism for car crashes and causes that his sexual emotion would not be aroused except through car crashes, which influence in the case of the central character. Throughout analysis of Vaughan's driving habits, it is obvious that acknowledgement of his personality and the speed of the automobile alter the man:

Vaughan swerved on to the verge and struck a large mongrel dog. The impact of its body, like a padded hammer, and the shower of glass as the animal was carried over the roof, convinced me that we were about to die in a crash. Vaughan never stopped. I watched him accelerate away, his scarred face held close to the punctured windshield, angrily brushing the beads of frosted glass from his cheeks. (*Crash*, 50)

Vaughan's car has an important role of indicating his potential violence, since despite the fact that he killed a large mongrel dog by running him over and smashed the windshield of his vehicle, then continuing to accelerate. His automobile is used as his weapon, which he

expresses his internal ferocity by driving. It implies his insane concupiscence, but he kills the large mongrel dog instead of humans because running down to kill people is a prohibited act. Automobile is an object that makes him to be satisfied. In terms of analysis of his driving, a sociological viewpoint from *Automobiles* would be qualified, and Vaughan can be categorized as one type of driver based on a quote from the article.

They are willing to expose themselves and others to risk, under the illusion that they can overcome any obstacle. While we can all potentially switch between these positions, the 'daring drivers' category would seem to be more closely linked to some type of car crashes. (*Automobilities*, 15)

Through the above reference, Vaughan would be classified as a "daring driver", because he is in an illusion where he is able to overcome any obstacle. At the same time, he pursues thrills by driving an automobile. As a result, this category of car drivers (daring drivers) is closely connected to car collisions as the above article mention, and is described in *Crash*. It clarifies that automobiles not only supplement and extend the ability of human body by mechanical speed, but also affects their emotions, encourage them to be aggressive, which potentially raises the possibility of car collisions in the society.

6. Analysis of Vaughan by the aspect of his automobile.

In the process of examining Vaughan's driving habits, it can be seen that his vehicle caused emotional change via the function of the automobile, generating his ferocity. Likewise, a delineation of the character's driving significantly parallels the process of Vaughan's life in the novel. "The way Vaughan handled the car set the tone for all his behavior – by turns aggressive, distracted, sensitive, clumsy, absorbed and brutal. The Lincoln had lost the second gear of its automobile drive – ripped out... "(*Crash*, 210) The character owns a Lincoln continental³, and his eventual purpose in the story is an accident death with an actress, Elizabeth Taylor. To analyze the character's behavior toward his vehicle, which is his life in the novel, the adjectives such as "aggressive", "distracted", "sensitive", "clumsy", "absorbed" and "brutal" need to be analyzed. Firstly, "aggressive" clarifies his potential on violence as previously analyzed. Secondly, "distracted" indicate his disarray mental condition since his final desires to make a car collision is for dying with Elizabeth Taylor, which is an unreal idea. This is a reason why the adjective appears the way of his treating the car. Thirdly, "sensitive" expresses a closeness relation between his body and the automobile, which is recognizing that the vehicle is a physical part of him as

³ A product of Ford Company since the 1930s. 1963 Lincoln Continental Convertibles is a vehicle which appears in *Crash*.

he senses the automobile closely. His violence reaction toward to everything is expressed as “clumsy” in the novel. Furthermore, the “absorbed” indicates the eventual his situation that the character become a part of his vehicle. Finally, it can be clarified from the “brutal” that he will die in a cruel car collision. Obviously, the order of these adjectives reveals his life in the book. Through the influence of the automobile, he becomes aggressive, absorbing and unifying with his car and eventually disappears form the world. In addition to as the same above factors, lack of his automobile, which is eliminating the second gear from his vehicle expresses his aggressive and ferocity personality as above previous adjectives. The automobile’s function (second gear) familiarizes as automatic transmission system around the 1960s in the U.S, and this functional part is actually crucial in order to make the speed of cars smoothly. However, the character twisted it off from his car. It indicates his insane purpose that he wants to be in blazingly fast speed as soon as possible to get pleasure feeling. So his attitudes, removing the second gear, illustrate the character’s peculiar aggressive personality.

7. Conclusion.

In conclusion, physical and psychological unification between human and automobiles can be analyzed in *Crash*. Through the attitudes of two main characters, it is observed unification of human and automobiles in the novel. In addition, several sociological approaches, *Automobilities* adapt to analyze the unifications from J.G Ballard’s work. It can be assumed that the author expected the social circumstance, which is increasing existence of “automobilised person”. For instance, due to the development of AI technology, automobiles might control human society. As several sociologists argue products can be defined as emotional-changing materials. Unification between human and cars in this novel represents the actual problem of people in contemporary society. Not just in this novel, the unification between human and car would be increased in our society whereas automobile technologies drastically developed in near the future. It is because; this is the fact that the psychological fusion is unconsciously generated in our society through car driving, as the characters in *Crash* demonstrate. It may be of concern that unifying with vehicles would increase since the technology of cars is becoming way sophisticated in a short period of time since the nineteenth century. Cars have extremely evolved in around 150 years, and have become machines that have power to control humans. Being controlled by technology, as cars control the characters in *Crash*, is a very real possibility in the near future. Be affected and controlled by other organisms might be happened as characters in the novel.

Bibliography

- Ballad, James, Graham. *Crash*. Fourth Estate An imprint of Harper Collins, 1973.
- Benford, Gregory. *Buicks and Madmen*. The New York Times. 1988.
- Featherstone, Mike, Nigel Thrift and John Urry. *Automobilities*. SAGE Publications. 2005
- Frick Thomas. J.G. Ballard, *The Art of Fiction* No.85, 1984.
- Noble, Kathy. *Crash: Homage to J.G. Ballard*. Gagosian Gallery. 2010
- Sellars, Simon, Dan O'Hara. *Extreme Metaphors, Selected interviews with J.G. Ballard, 1967-2008*.
- Fourth Estate An imprint of Harper Collins. 2012.
- Adams John. *Risk in a Hypermobile World*.
[<http://www.john-adams.co.uk/2009/11/05/seat-belts-another-look-at-the-data/>]
- Frost Andrew. *Crash and the Aesthetics of Disappearance*, 22 Oct. 2013,
[<http://www.ballardian.com/crash-and-the-aesthetics-of-disappearance>]
- Gearhead 101: *understanding How Your Car's Engine Works*, 15 October 2015.
[<http://www.artofmanliness.com/2015/10/15/how-a-cars-engine-works/>]
- Sandhu Sukhdev. J.G Ballard: *a love affair with speed and violence*. The Telegraph
[<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/sukhdev-sandhu/5213710/JG-Ballard-a-love-affair-with-speed-and-violence.html>]
- Smith, Zadie. *Sex and wheels: Zadie Smith on JG Ballards's Crash*. The Guardian, 2014,
[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/04/zadie-smith-jg-ballard-crash>]
- Taking the Top off his skull: The Genesis of J.G. Ballard's Crash*,
[<http://www.ballardian.com/taking-the-top-off-his-skull-the-genesis-of-j-g-ballards-crash>]
- The art of Manliness
- Transmission Tunnel Construction*
[http://www.hotrodscustomstuff.com/OLD_SITE/baracuda-16.html]
- Universal Science Compendium. *Automobile Transmission System (Part1)-Types And Operations*.
[<http://usciencescompendium.blogspot.com/2014/12/automobile-transmission-system-part-1.html>]
- ウンベルト・エーコ編著、植松靖夫監訳、川野美也子訳。『美の歴史』 東洋書林、2004年
- 桂木洋二、『欧米日・自動車メーカー興亡史』。グランプリ出版、2004年
- 原邦彦、『進化する自動車』。岩波書店、2005年