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Nihilist Aesthetics: The Destruction and Salvage of Meaning in the Poststructuralist Novel

Callum Howe

Drawing upon continental philosophy and literary theory of the 20th and 21st centuries, this article examines the destabilisation of textual hermeneutics under poststructuralism. As meaning in language is destabilised, a crisis occurs in which it threatens to evaporate entirely. The nihilism of Gianni Vattimo is used as a backdrop to a discussion of the nihilist implications of postmodern philosophy. Through an examination of two postmodernist texts – Crash by J. G. Ballard and C by Tom McCarthy – this article seeks to illustrate this central nihilistic crisis of the postmodern condition, as well as the affirmative responses formulated by those who choose to embrace this state of affairs, rather than deny it. Theorists such as Lyotard and Derrida give an account of the emergence of meaning within the destabilised linguistics of poststructuralism, and in doing so they display the potential for an affirmative formulation of nihilism. Through this depiction of the salvage of meaning after its apparent annihilation, this article ultimately attempts to define the key aspects of a distinctly nihilist postmodern aesthetic.

Characteristic of much of the literature of postmodernism is a radical aesthetic of transgression and destruction, irreverent of traditional social structures and norms. Themes of extreme sexuality and violence, existential angst, and the transgression of social boundaries are explored through the poetics of deconstructionism and its strange, indeterminate ontology of void and non-presence. Through a destabilisation of signification and language, deconstructionism encapsulates a key feature of postmodernity in its scepticism towards absolute truth and objectivity. Critics of the theory deride its destructive potential – fearing it undermines both metaphysics and morality – while its proponents revel in the creative possibilities which this offers. In the works of those in the latter category, we observe the emergence of a postmodern nihilism. Gianni Vattimo defines this condition in postmodern thought as 'hermeneutic nihilism'.[1] Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation and meaning, and so the nihilism of postmodernity arises from the postulation that there is no objective truth underpinning the ways of the world,

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[1] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991)

and therefore, meaning is inherently absent from all things. In a general sense Vattimo diagnoses this as a symptom of the 'death of God', an idea first proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century. This is the revelation that there is no ultimate truth to which all other lower order truths of morality, meaning and material being can be anchored, and so 'the very notion of truth is dissolved'.[2]

We find a clear intersection between this philosophical account of postmodernity and the literary theory of the period, in Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author.* The traditional arbiter of meaning (the 'Author God') is deposed from any authority over the text, and all exegetic literary practices are shown to be futile, as there is no inherent meaning to be found in the text.[3] In both cases the annihilation of a central stabilising figure – the unifying origin of all meaning – sets the precedent for nihilism. The nihilistic literature of postmodernity is realised in the deconstructionist theories which followed Barthes' essay. Characteristic of this literature is a distinct aesthetic of indeterminacy, void and absence in which meaning exists only as an illusion to be shattered and dissolved before the reader. Two texts which employ this aesthetic are Tom McCarthy's *C* and J. G. Ballard's *Crash.* Both are heavily concerned with the annihilation of meaning in postmodernity, and the implications of the resulting existential emptiness.

The literary mechanics by which illusions of meaning are conjured and annihilated in nihilist aesthetics can best be described by reference to the poststructuralist theories of Jacques Lacan. Lacan formulated a modified theory of Saussurean linguistics, suggesting that the relationship between signifier and signified is necessarily unstable, with meaning in constant slippage. Pragmatic discourse and public communication are made possible only by the formation of what he calls 'point de capiton', best translated as 'anchoring points'.

> [The anchoring point is] the point of convergence that enables everything in this discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively.[4]

These anchoring points are the contextual reference points from which language derives its meaning within the system of its utterance: the structural binds which temporarily manifest a contingent meaning by holding signifier and signified in

[2] Ibid., p.167.
[3] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* ed. by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd edn. (London: Norton, 2010) pp.1322-1326.
[4] Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses: The Seminars of Jacques Lacan,* trans. Russell Grigg, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (1981; New York: Norton, 1993) p.263.

alignment. However, this meaning is illusory in nature. Lacan is describing the formation of meaning in abstract, not actually linked to any objective reality: an indeterminate, self-suspended signification. This is evident when he states that the signifier need not 'answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever'.[5] It is this deconstructed model of language which we find displayed in the aforementioned novels. We see this in *C,* in a scene where the infant Serge, the central character, is playing with a group of blocks with pictures and symbols printed on their faces:

> Serge holds this new vertical line-up together while he contemplates it; then, deciding it's satisfactory, he removes his hand from the stack. As soon as he does, it starts to wobble, the combined weight of hippo, mud, rabbit and magician proving too much for the beleaguered cyclist, who's further let down by the soft, uneven surface beneath his wheels. As the blocks tumble, rhombi, trapezia and deltoids flash and disappear in a frantic progression, spreading out across the rug.[6]

In the formation of the tower of blocks, we see the emergence of a rudimentary sentence. Through their pictorial language, a chain of signification is constructed, momentarily 'anchored' into a sequence by the physical force of each individual block constituting the tower. Meaning emerges through the alignment and interplay of signifiers within this system of language. But McCarthy is explicit in reminding us that the unstable physical structure of this rickety tower – allegorical of the instability of signification in language – means it will inevitably come crashing down under its own weight. The blocks tumble away, back into a chaotic insignificance, and the transient illusion of meaning is annihilated. It is this deconstructionist effect which produces the strange and chaotic ontology of *C*, where illusions emerge and can only sustain themselves for a brief moment before dissipating. Thus it is revealed, as Jean-Francis Lyotard writes, that in the void ontology of nihilism 'only the transcendental illusion can hope to totalize [meaning] into a real unity'.[7] We can observe the very same effect in *Crash* in a scene where the narrator, Ballard, remembers an experience at an airport:

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[5] Jacques Lacan, 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious' in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd end. (London: Norton, 2010) pp.1169-1181 (p.1172).
[6] Tom McCarthy, *C* (London: Vintage, 2010) p.20.
[7] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* trans. Geoff Bennington, Brian Massumi (1979; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p.81.

> Two months before my accident, during a journey to Paris, I had become so excited by the conjunction of an air hostess's fawn gaberdine skirt on the escalator in front of me and the distant fuselages of the aircraft, each inclined like a silver penis towards her natal cleft, that I had involuntarily touched her left buttock.[8]

Ballard stands on a moving escalator, and as he progresses upwards a visual configuration comes into alignment from his perspective, forming a seemingly significant chain of meaning through the interplay of the separate parts. Again, we find the material conditions under which the thread of signification emerges to be unstable, in that the stairs under Ballard's feet are moving. The signification observed is ephemeral: an image manifesting for only a moment as its component parts move into alignment, before falling out of alignment and breaking the chain of signification achieved by their combination. This is a key feature of the nihilist aesthetic in postmodern literature. These texts display the mechanics by which illusions of meaning are conjured through a contingent moment of alignment in poststructuralist poetics, then ultimately annihilate them before the eyes of the reader to display the nothingness beneath, showing meaning to be a baseless, transient phenomenon.

This nihilist aesthetic is not only linguistic in nature. We also find in this literature, a moral component – or perhaps more aptly, the lack of one. Moral nihilism is the theory which recognises the dissolution of objective moral truths after the 'death of God', and so asserts that moral judgements as essentially meaningless and insubstantial. We see this represented in both the content and language of the poststructuralist nihilist text. In *C*, Serge seems to exhibit an almost sociopathic disconnection from all ethical thought or judgement, never placing moral significance in any of his actions or experiences. This is evident when he is in conversation with his university head in London:

> "I know it's difficult to readjust. [...] You've lived through war and all its horror and-"
>
> "But I liked the war," Serge tells him.[9]

[8] J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (1973; London: Fourth Estate, 2014) p.29.
[9] McCarthy, Tom, *C* (London: Vintage, 2010) p.214.

Scenes of violence and sexual deviance are presented in un-emotive language, a prose style which is evidently as disengaged from ethical discourse as the characters within.[10] Even in the plotlines of the novel, we find no ultimate moral resolution. There is no sense of closure offered, through which 'good' characters are rewarded, and ill fortune befalls the transgressors of civic or moral law. These divine judgements might have been dealt out by a vengeful 'Author-God' in historic literatures, operating within an established tradition of moral principles. But the beauty of 'good' and the ugliness of 'evil' are absent from nihilist aesthetics, as the very concept of morality is absent from the barren nihilist ontology. Events which traditionally hold so much emotional and moral significance are depicted in a disconnected way, abstracted from the impositions of any presupposed moral reality. In *Crash* we see this expressed in the extreme. The entire narrative centres on the characters' search for extreme sexual experiences, which grow increasingly violent as the novel progresses. Indeed, the novel attracted much controversy for its grotesque content upon its publication, perhaps understandably when we observe such scenes as when Ballard has sex with a disfigured car crash victim:

> My first orgasm, within the deep wound on her thigh, jolted my semen along this channel, irrigating its corrugated ditch. Holding the semen in her hand, she wiped it against the silver controls of the clutch treadle. My mouth was fastened on the scar below her left breast, exploring its sickle-shaped trough.[11]

However, this is not mere fetishism on the part of the author. The events of *Crash* are perhaps some of the most extreme conceivable, completely abhorrent and discomforting when measured against any established ethical standard. As in the extract above, they are described in minute, visual detail; charting the course of these sexual transgressions, and mapping the grotesque wounds they violate, with every sickening penetration laid before the eyes of the reader. This creates a very disturbing experience, and in this we find the true purpose of these scenes. These violent sexual acts, displaying such extremely unsettling deviancies through a clinical and graphic aesthetic, serve as the most severe transgression of sexual and moral norms: a radical act of annihilation by transgression, a shattering.[12] It is no

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[10] James Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, ch.3 'Sex' (London: Pluto Press, 1998) pp.38-57.
[11] Ballard, J. G., *Crash* (1973; London: Fourth Estate, 2014) p.148.
[12] Lars Heiler, 'The Holocaust and Aesthetic Transgression in Contemporary British Fiction' in *Taboo and Transgression in British Literature from the Renaissance to the Present,* ed. by Stefan Horlacher, Stefan Glomb, Lars Heiler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010) pp.243-259.

wonder then that Ballard equates physical annihilation with sexual transgression in his novel, through the strange sexualisation of impact and injury. The devastating car crashes of the novel serve as physical indicators of the equally destructive ideological annihilation which accompanies them. By troubling established sensibilities so severely, the frameworks of moral discourse are completely eradicated from the ontology of the novel, in a most apparent and destructive fashion. It is then clear that this amoral ontology is a space of nihilism, where moral judgements are rendered meaningless against such extreme and aggressive degradation.

Such a destructive and inherently void ideology inevitably lends itself towards extreme pessimism. These overtones are certainly evident in the theoretical writings of another poststructuralist critic, Jean Baudrillard. In his writings Baudrillard presents a philosophical treatise on the postmodern world as being constructed of self-referential simulations. These are illusory realities which are void of any objectivity, and exist suspended in their own self-reference:

> It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.[13]

This is a nihilist position in that he diagnoses a fundamental absence of objective reality in the world of postmodernity. Characteristic of Baudrillard's point of view is both a despairing nostalgia and a deeply held angst towards the present state of the world. Such sentiments are displayed quite explicitly in much postmodern literature, such as in *C* when Serge listens to the complaints of a young tourist in Egypt:

> I mean, my *grandfather* remembers seeing the Egyptian court in Crystal Palace as a child. [...] until recently you could pitch up here with a compass and a map, and your hosts would arrange for you to find- to '*find*'- [...] a tomb, which they'd prepare overnight for you, mummy and all, while you slept on Oriental cushions. It's all so ... *fake*![14]

The indignation of the young woman is reminiscent of Baudrillard's stance on postmodernity as a troubling world of simulations which exist only to conceal the

[13] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra' in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd end. (London: Norton, 2010) p.1565.
[14] McCarthy, Tom, *C* (London: Vintage, 2010) p.260.

absence of any true, authentic reality. The constructed tombs serve not to provide a convincing illusion of authenticity; rather, their apparent inauthenticity serves only to reveal that the entire tourist experience of Egypt is itself inauthentic. It then seems that the state of the world under the shadow of hermeneutic nihilism is one of despair and unease, where nothing is authentic and the ultimate end of knowledge is in this uncomfortable revelation. This point is reminiscent of the critiques of theorist Meyer Abrams against deconstruction, who states that it results in 'a ghostly nonpresence emanating from no voice, intended by no-one, referring to nothing, bombinating in a void'.[15] Indeed, it does seem that the literature of postmodern nihilism is proclaiming its self-referential despair when it wears the colours of inauthenticity so boldly. We can observe the same effect in *Crash*:

> I could see that even now Vaughan was dramatizing himself for the benefit of these anonymous passers-by, holding his position in the spotlight as if waiting for invisible television cameras to frame him. The frustrated actor was evident in all his impulsive movements, and in an irritating way pre-empted my responses to him.[16]

Ballard feels a similar discomfort in observing that the simulation presented by Vaughan supersedes reality in driving his reactions towards him. The 'irritation' described stems from this fact, and the simulation takes on an existentially unsettling character. Similarly, Baudrillard describes the simulations of the world in a way that is characteristically uncanny; hyperreal manifestations of absent realities which, in their apparently artificial representation, implicitly reveal the absence of the reality they purpose to be: 'like the faces in funeral parlours' (Baudrillard, p.1564). The simulation reveals its own paper-thin nature, and the abyss of nihilism is perceived through this translucent fabric. This tacit awareness of nihilism in the subconscious of society and the resulting neurosis is a key feature of postmodernism according to Baurdrillard. In the characters of Ballard and the tourist, these texts draw specific attention to this idea, and it is through this explicit awareness of nihilism as a spectre haunting postmodern life, that existential angst, and a scepticism towards the external world, becomes an integral part of the nihilist aesthetic in postmodern literature.

But this is by no means the terminus of nihilist thought in postmodernity, as Baudrillard and Abrams seem to suggest. Affirmative and optimistic accounts of nihilism are possible to formulate, as both Nietzsche and Vattimo attempt; the

[15] M. H. Abrams, 'The Deconstructive Angel', *Critical Inquiry* (1977) 3, p.431.
[16] Ballard, J. G., *Crash* (1973; London: Fourth Estate, 2014). p.69.

latter of whom argues that the absence of a unifying origin of meaning reveals 'the meaning and richness of proximity or, in other words, we become capable of playing those language games which constitute our existence'.[17] The possibility of a positive iteration of nihilism becomes clearer when we refer to the idea of the *postmodern sublime,* as formulated by Lyotard:

> The emphasis [of postmodern aesthetics] can also be placed on the increase of being and the jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic or any other.[18]

Here we can observe a parallel with Derrida's account of deconstruction as a theory of decentralised interplay and interpretation: unrestricted 'free play'.[19] In the annihilation of the unifying origin of meaning, and the subsequent collapse of objective signification in the theories of deconstruction, is a liberation. Without the restrictions of rigid objective signification, we then become the arbiter of meaning in our own experience. Ballard and McCarthy both recognise the potential of response to the crisis of identity which follows the dissolution of values in postmodernist philosophy. They attempt to depict the creative possibility to salvage and reshape the wreckage of such ideological destruction. Vattimo's 'richness of proximity' is the experience of the sublime: a powerful emotive reaction felt in response to our confrontation with the fundamental unrepresentability of meaning through our attempts to capture the world around us.[20] In depicting an ontology of absence and chaotic illusions, the power and beauty of the sublime is realized in postmodern literature. We see this in the previously mentioned extract from *Crash* in which Ballard stands on an escalator. He is compelled, by an intense emotive response to the ephemeral signification which manifests before him, to reach out and touch the stewardess without even being consciously aware of the situation. The power of the illusion is shown to be beyond rationality; a powerfully affective reaction to the ephemeral and unobtainable. This postmodern formulation of the sublime arises as a nostalgic response to the nihilistic void of deconstruction, and so we can see that this is the true aesthetic end of nihilism. These fertile

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[17] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991) p.177.
[18] Lyotard, Jean-Francois, *The Postmodern Condition,* (1979) p.80.
[19] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure Sign and Play', in W*riting and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (1978; London:
Routledge, 2001) pp.351-370.
[20] Will Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Postmodern Sublime*, ch.2 'Stylising the Sublime' (London: Routledge, 2006) pp.25-50.

creative possibilities are directly addressed in *C*, in a scene where Serge converses with the war artist Carlisle, who has been commissioned to perform he absurd task of painting from the passenger seat of an aeroplane:

> "Why not just paint it as you see it?" Serge asks.
>
> "Can't even do that," Carlisle wails. "The stuff won't stay still to be painted! Ground won't stay still, air won't stay still, nothing bloody stays still. Even the paint jumps from its bottles, gets all over me"
>
> "Maybe that's the art," Serge says. "I mean the action, all the mess...".[21]

Much like Ballard on the escalator, Carlisle's perspective is in motion. It is shown that objectivity and the 'meaning' derived from authentic representation are completely impossible to capture through his system of signification. But Serge suggests that perhaps the strange, abstract signification (the patterns of the spilled paint) that Carlisle produces *is* the true nature of aesthetic significance. The abstract, self-referential signification achieved through the messy and chaotic act of trying to pin down meaning in language is where we find aesthetic value in the destabilised and otherwise void ontology of nihilism. In the indeterminacy of this chaotic signification, the dissolution of any objective link between signifier and signified and the instability which is represented in this new aesthetic of flux, lies the nature of deconstructionism. The beauty of the sublime is thus realised. The world of simulation becomes not an uncanny unreality, but rather a space of exciting performative creation and potential. In this subjectivist philosophy, meaning becomes a product of artistry, rather than a derivative of objective truth. The aesthetics of postmodern nihilism lie in the appreciation of the ephemeral, the value of the illusion and the unbridled creative acts which birth it. We see such an optimistic attitude to the annihilation of meaning and its boundaries in the perverse sexuality of *Crash* and all its destructive irreverence:

> This obsession with the sexual possibilities of everything around me had been jerked loose from my mind by the crash. [...] The crash between our two cars was a model of some ultimate and yet undreamt sexual union. The injuries of still-to-be-admitted patients beckoned to me, an immense encyclopedia of accessible dreams.[22]

[21] McCarthy, Tom, *C* (London: Vintage, 2010) p.147.
[22] Ballard, J. G., *Crash* (1973; London: Fourth Estate, 2014). p.19.

The acts which annihilate the frameworks of meaning and leave behind the nihilist ontology are not met with despair, but with an enthusiastic sense of possibility. The act of destruction (the car crash) shatters Ballard's sexual boundaries, revealing the possibility of new experiences beyond them. Through these creative inventions, Lyotard's 'increase of being' occurs. A jubilant reification of the self is achieved, and in this lies a moment of aesthetic significance; the feeling of the sublime.[23] Such an optimistic sense of possibility is also expressed in the end of the novel, wherein Ballard states he will go on to continue seeking the ultimate sexual experience in his inevitable vehicular suicide, an extreme aesthetic experience achieved through his own annihilation.

It is the radical destabilisation caused by the nihilistic philosophy of deconstruction which allow for this aesthetic phenomenon to emerge from the void of meaning. The practice of deconstruction, like Ballard's car crash, is the radical act of destructive annihilation which sets the precedent for subsequent acts of creation. The motifs of chaos and destruction in this literature are conjured, through the void poetics of deconstruction, in order to explore what might be gleaned from the wreckage of meaning that is left in the wake of nihilistic postmodern philosophy. The indeterminacy of unbridled signification, divorced from objective reality, is depicted as the liberator of true creative potential. These writers tackle the crises of identity and ethics, linguistics and metaphysics, at the heart of postmodernist discourse not by rejecting and opposing the poststructuralist philosophy that brings about this destruction. Instead they explore the possibility of a subjectivist account of creativity to act as a constructive force within this seemingly ideologically barren landscape, to create new structures of meaning in the experience of the individual. The dissolution of absolute truth is therefore met with optimism, rather than despair. This is the true character of nihilist aesthetics.

[23] Slocombe, ch.5 'Postmodern Nihilism and Postmodern Aesthetics', pp.105-138.

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