

A—Z of The Death Drive

A PERILOUS ROAD TRIP THROUGH DEATH,
CELEBRITY, AND THE AUTOMOBILE.

A

AUTOMOBILE, ANGER, ACCIDENT, ACCELERATION

You are an accident waiting to happen. You are a complete wreck. What is driving you to do this? Will the automobile (a fusion of libido and machine) ever lose meaning as a sexualized instrument to be controlled and mastered? Or is it merely a transitional object such as a teddy bear, doll or soft blanket – the objects that helped us separate from our mothers? Our childhood dolls and toys survived being loved loathed and mutilated – we gave them names, personalities, made up lives for them to live on our behalf. We pulled their arms and legs off, hacked off their nylon hair, turned their heads the wrong way round. And then we cuddled and kissed them and left them out in the rain. The automobile simply can't survive this kind of behaviour. The design of your anger is as important as the design of your car. Remember, I am only a Mercedes SLS AMG. I do not have advanced emotions and I am not as attracted to you as you are to me. I do not have the capacity to feel invincible because I've overtaken a Datsun and I don't want sex with you. If you crash me you might live to see that I am only a lot of metal imported from Germany. I will be unmasked as a totally inanimate thing and you will be unmasked as someone who thought your four-wheel drive system loved you unconditionally.

“It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe.”

Albert Camus. *L'Étranger*, 1942

B

MARC BOLAN, J.G. BALLARD

Just as Marc's famous lyrics claimed, we too could ride a white swan and fly away from the parents who made us cry. Our tears were righteous, our thighs were thin. We were the children of the revolution and life too short and brutal to take any notice of the posters forbidding "petting" at the Victorian swimming pool down the road. Marc's voice was not really a voice, it was an attitude. It simpered and shmoozed, defied what the male voice was supposed to sound like and it got us through double maths. When we painted our nails green it was for him. Bolan died on September 16th, 1977 at 3.50am when his car hit a sycamore tree near Barnes Common, London. In ancient Egyptian religion the sycamore was regarded as a personification of the goddesses Nut, Isis and Hathor. Early paintings show them reaching out from a tree to offer the deceased food and water. The "death tree" on Barnes Common was made into a roadside shrine by his fans.

Ballard's post-traumatic novel *Crash* (1973) was described by its author as the "first pornographic novel based on technology." The writer Ballard stages and repeats a number of violent car crashes that always end with his wounded and bloody drivers eroticized by their own death drives. Ballard probably agreed with Freud's notion that we all take pleasure in smashing things up. He knew the car was more than a car and went into head-on collision with Thanatos and Eros until the pages of his visionary novel were heaped with body parts, car parts, blood, semen and tears. Bourgeois English literature, with its liking for Victorian bonnets and keeping the unconscious in its place (under the bonnet), was not ready for such hard truths about its own repressed desires and urges and suggested the author needed to see a psychiatrist.

"Science and technology multiply around us. To an increasing extent they dictate the languages in which we speak and think. Either we use those languages, or we remain mute."

J.G. Ballard

C

EDDIE COCHRANE, ALBERT CAMUS

Son of an Algerian cleaner, Albert Camus must have secretly punched the air (despite being a bit of a miserabilist) when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Camus was killed in a road accident in 1960 while travelling from Provence to Paris with the manuscript of his unfinished novel, *The First Man*, packed in his briefcase. His publisher was driving the car. Police noted the dashboard clock had stopped at 1.55 pm when the vehicle slipped off the wet road. Camus, who was now a tragic celebrity as well as a celebrity of political thought, was found to have an unused train ticket in his coat pocket. Whether we are inclined to make more meaning or indeed desire less meaning from the death sites of the famous, we still wish Camus had boarded that train.

Eddie Cochran (*C'mon Everybody*) is sometimes described as "James Dean with a guitar." Eddie didn't even get to crash his own car. In 1960 he travelled to the UK to tour with Gene Vincent. Early one morning in Wiltshire, England, his taxi (a Ford Consul) suffered a burst tyre, veered off the road and crashed into a lamp-post. Eddie, twenty-one years old, was thrown through the windscreen. We can be certain he did not want this kind of exit. His friend Buddy Holly had died one year earlier in a plane crash.

D

PRINCESS DIANA, JAMES DEAN

Diana is the princess who made every young girl think twice about wanting a tiara for their birthday. Princess Diana did not want to end her life in a tunnel under the Place de l'Alma, Paris. She wanted to change her life. Kenneth Anger owns a mangled piece of Dean's cursed Porsche Spyder bought for \$300. The paparazzi all own a piece of Diana. Unlike James Dean, Diana was a rebel with a cause.

E

EGO

A passenger in any sort of car needs the driver to have a strong ego. Ego in this sense does not mean someone who is insufferably full of themselves. In Freud's structure of the psyche the ego is the rational side of the mind which tries to come to terms with the fact that we can't always get what we want. Mick Jagger knew this when he sang 'No, you can't always get what you want' with Keith Richards in 1968. If you can't always get what you want, luscious lips are a blessing. Thin lips might make you look bitter and twisted. The ego on the road tries not to be bitter and twisted. It knows it has to compromise. It is in touch with the reality principle (red traffic lights mean stop) and tries to swat away the smoky voice of the Id when it tells the Ego to go faster and how about a swig of bourbon and a couple of spliffs? The Id is screaming 'I want it I want it' but the Ego is calmly explaining 'You can't have it'. These are the conflicts your driver experiences on any sort of car journey. As a passenger you have to hope your life is in the adult hands of the Ego – but if you think the teenage Id will win, better to get out fast and catch the tube, metro, subway.

It's not what you want, but it's what you need to do.

F

FAME, FIFTEEN MINUTES, FUEL

To truly understand that celebrity in the twenty first century is a human-shaped commodity is to have second thoughts about our own star-spangled dreams. Fifteen minutes is plenty of time to flirt with the fatal seduction of fame – needing your fans more than they need you is unsightly after a while. No matter how many trillions of gallons of fossil fuels are poured in to Fame, somehow its tank is never full.

G

GOD, GLOBAL POSITIONING SYSTEMS

God is a pair of (hidden) hands on the steering wheel, an ageless chauffeur driving us to an unknown destination. We will not know where the bathroom is when we arrive. God is free thought and God is a global positioning system inside us. Those of us who believe in Sat Nav (satellite navigation) have to hope that when “the voice” leads us away from the main road to a dirt track that leads to the brink of a high cliff, it knows what it’s doing.

H

HAUNT, HOROSCOPES, HIGHWAY

Fatal crashes haunt the highways of the world. Beeping police radios, twisted metal, exploded windows, the staring panicked eyes of the wounded. It doesn’t bear thinking about so we read horoscopes to know what lies on the road ahead. We want to hear the squeal of the tyres before they squeal. All highways everywhere are a wiped film.

I

ID

Id – the emotional and irrational part of the mind constantly seeking pleasure.

Like the ignition, the Id is always turned on.

J

JAYNE MANSFIELD

Nickname: Jaynie

Jayne Mansfield died in June 27th 1967 when the driver of her Buick smashed into a trailer spraying the swamps of New Orleans with anti-mosquito insecticide at 2am. Aged 35, Vera Jayne Palmer was supposed to be all washed up, burnt out, nothing but a sex bomb (“a sexual icon of the 1950s and 1960s”) past her prime, a poor man’s Marilyn Monroe. A poor man should be so lucky. During the late 1950s, the front bumpers of some American cars came with extensions that resembled a pair of large conical breasts. These were nicknamed “Jayne Mansfields.” The Buick used to be displayed at various car shows with the blood stains still splashed across the seats.

K GRACE KELLY

Alfred Hitchcock had a thing for what are sometimes called icy virginal blondes and actress Grace Kelly was one of them. Kelly starred in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and *Dial M for Murder*. Her career as an Oscar winning actress would later be forbidden by her husband, Prince Rainier III of Monaco. When Kelly married her prince, Hitchcock declared himself "very happy that (Princess) Grace has found herself such a good part." Was it a good part? Monaco is a small country where citizens love not paying taxes. Tourists are lured in to its casinos and waiters try not to scream when they carry silver platters of twitching langoustine lobster and crab to senior management pretending to be Picasso for the afternoon. Monaco is where Tintin might wear a beret on a secret assignment to find a diamond necklace hidden in a baguette. Kelly's catastrophic accident on the road between Monaco and Roc Agel in 1982 was apparently caused by failed brakes. In fact she had a stroke at the wheel of her 10-year-old Rover which eventually tumbled 100 ft down a ravine. A witness who was driving behind the princess said the car began zigzagging erratically some time before the crash happened.

L LIBERTY

"Greater liberty, greater fruitfulness of time and effort, brighter glimpses of the wide and beautiful world, more health and happiness – these are the lasting benefits of the motor-car."

Herbert Ladd Towle, *The Automobile and Its Mission*, 1913

M

MIDLIFE CRISIS

You've bought a Ferrari California, stopped shaving, started wearing jeans again and asked your PA to order you a leather jacket. You play Florence and the Machine on your multi media system (you prefer Steely Dan), connect your mobile via Bluetooth to the onboard computer, put your foot down and soar just as you're going past a camera in Camden Town. North London looks nothing like California.

N

HELMUT NEWTON

Fashion photographer Helmut Newton, who fled Germany in 1938 a month before the Nazi pogroms began, explored the death instinct all his professional life when he art directed images of power and submission with his spiky heeled dominatrix models. Newton's Cadillac hit a wall in Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood in 2004.

O

ORAL SEX

Unlike throwing the javelin or jumping the high bar, everyone can do it. No one's allotment has ever been destroyed to build a stadium for this particular sport because it often takes place in an automobile.

P

JACKSON POLLOCK

Jackson Pollock was battling with booze and depression when he remarked to a friend “I’ve gone dead inside, like one of your diesels on a cold morning.” Pollock was speeding wildly in his green Oldsmobile convertible coupé when it crashed along an East Hampton Road in 1956, hurtling him 50ft in the air. He smashed his skull on a white oak tree and was instantly killed. His girlfriend Ruth Kligman suffered a fractured pelvis but survived. Some newspaper reports at the time framed Pollock as a suicidal trickster. He could have done without this sort of thing. When Pollock laid out his massive canvasses on the floor, it was into them that he poured his life and death.

Q

QUESTIONS

What are we to do with our unconscious self-destructive impulses? The uncivilized death wish that simmers within us even though we always say please and thank you? Freud did not believe that accidents were chance events. All accidents in his view are manifestations of the death drive, the urge to walk into traffic when we cross the road or stand too near the edge of the platform when waiting for the tube. He even came to believe that to suffer from vertigo on a mountain is to suffer from the unconscious urge to throw ourselves off it.

Ballard agrees: “Deep assignments run through all our lives... there are no coincidences.” If the car offers us an instrument to play with our destructive and aggressive impulses, it’s no wonder behaviour on the roads often resembles the playground at school.

R

RIGHT HAND SIDE OF THE ROAD

About a quarter of the world drives on the left hand side, mostly the old British colonies. It was believed by the ancients that evil spirits lived on the left side of man and the gods lived on the right side. For the Romans left meant sinister and corrupt – which is probably what the colonized thought of the British.

S

SHRINES

In every pile-up we confront our own anxieties and fleetingly review the meaning of our own lives. Roadside shrines to the deceased are assembled. Car crash victims become saints. We want to know the details of the collision in order to piece the fragments together. In this sense a car crash often becomes a fiction that is of equal interest to lawyers, poets, forensic scientists and shop workers.

T

TRAUMA

To experience trauma is to have knowledge we do not want. When we repeat the details of a crash and say out loud what happened, we feel we have more control over this unwelcome knowledge. It is well known that if an aeroplane crashes, investigators search for the cockpit voice recorder, also known as “black boxes” to reveal details of the events preceding the accident. When we repeat our memories of a crash, either experienced or witnessed, we are the black box.

U

U-TURN, UNCONSCIOUS

Hansel and Gretel laid out a trail of bread in the forest so they could do a U-turn and find their way home. Birds ate the bread (road markings) and the wicked witch nearly ate Hansel and Gretel. The car is a womb to protect us from the wicked witch that lives in the forest with her green-eyed owls. Attempt to run the hag over and you will fall asleep at the wheel for a hundred years. Your dreams unfold at 3mph. Deer slumber on the roof of your Volvo. Woodpeckers bury their beaks in the wind-screen. Spiders spin webs in the wheels. If dreams are the royal road to the unconscious it doesn't matter what kind of car you drive, you will always get there in the end.

V

VOYEUR

To be a voyeur is to observe others without being seen ourselves. Sometimes it implies a clandestine sexual interest. A voyeur is “one who looks” at an intimate action without any of the risks involved with engaging directly with intimacy. Yet to observe the fallout from a car crash does have its risks. It gives us voyeuristic spectators an intimate sense of our undoing, a foreboding collision with the spectre of our own ending. As we gaze in horror at the shattered debris on the road there is often a shameful glass shard of excitement and curiosity inside us too. It is as if the crash is the final edit of the imaginative games we all played as children (faking being dead, peek a boo) to prepare ourselves for the impossibility of accepting death.

W

WARHOL, WRECK

In Warhol’s silk screen paintings of car crashes: *Green Disaster* (1963), *Orange Car Crash* (1963), *Saturday Disaster* (1964), the artist appropriated news photographs of everyday anonymous car crashes, repeating the trauma in multiple prints – as if the act of seeing them over and over numbs us to the spectacle of tragedy and death.

X

XANAX

A drug for panic disorders and anxiety.

If you are taking this medication it is wiser to sit and have a picnic in your automobile (Turkey sandwiches! Sardines! Lashings of ginger beer!) than attempt to drive in the rush hour. Alleged possible side effects include swelling of the tongue, confusion, fainting, hallucinations, muscle twitching, seizures, stammering. If Xanax appears to offer a pain free existence, it might be a thrill to have more anxiety in your existence.

Y

YAWNING

In the middle ages it was believed that the devil entered our mouth every time we yawned. A hand clapped over this hole in our face was a kind of central locking device to stop muggers getting in. In the post-industrial age we know that yawning is caused by lack of oxygen. Therefore yawning in an automobile suggests the windows should be hastily opened. Yawning is also contagious. A passenger must never yawn too near the driver.

Z SLEEP

In his essay *Le Mythe*, Camus wrote: "We value our lives and existence so greatly, but at the same time we know we will eventually die, and ultimately our endeavours are meaningless."

When we stare in morbid fascination at photographs of car crashes, particularly those involving a celebrity presence, what is it we are hoping to find? It is possible the missing person we are searching for in the pile-up is ourselves.