



Crash Test

By Brian D. Johnson

IT WAS A CLOSED SET. Which seemed odd considering that the set was, more often than not, the open tarmac of Toronto's road system. *Crash* was filmed mostly in the middle of the night, mostly on generous stretches of expressway that David Cronenberg had somehow persuaded the city to shut down for nights on end last fall so he could make a movie about people who are sexually aroused by car wrecks.

A driver picked me up around midnight under the Gardiner Expressway. A cop opened a barrier blocking an entrance, waved us through, and we drove up a ramp onto a dark, completely deserted stretch of highway. The *Crash* crew was set up near the Don River overpass, preparing to shoot the movie's climactic post-accident scene. Four wrecked cars were artfully strewn along the roadway, doors buckled, windshields smashed, engines crumpled. The pavement glittered with crushed glass and twisted metal. The centerpiece of the scene was a bus with a black Lincoln Continental jammed right into its side, tires sticking out, like a giant beetle pinned on its back. It was as if the two vehicles had died mating. Above us, the guard rail of the elevated east-bound lane was shredded, making it look like the Lincoln had torn through it and nose-dived into the bus.

"Welcome to my playground," said Cronenberg, who looked thrilled to be there. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Well, yes. The set amounted to a vast art installation, a tableau of fastidious wreckage laid at the feet of the city. The whole scene has an eerie, post-apocalyptic glamour—the orange expressway lights reflected in the murk of the Don River; the constant screech of starlings, thousands of them nesting in the expressway's tattered Stonehenge pylons; the downtown skyline standing as bright as an open fridge in the background. A scene, you might say, from a Cronenberg movie.

By the time I saw *Crash* unveiled at the Cannes Film Festival last May, I was certainly primed for it. I had read the book (the coldly provocative cult novel written by J.G. Ballard in 1973). I'd also spent a couple of hours interviewing Cronenberg in Toronto. Even then, the movie came as a shock. It was like watching a foreign film from my own country, a brilliant but forbidding film about characters whose emotions are frozen in a kind of narcotic code, and who try to overcome a pathological sense of disconnection by literally ramming each other.

In Cannes, many of those who walked into *Crash* cold felt they had been blind-sided. It was an accident waiting to happen, a collision between an audience who has no idea what to expect and a director who had thrown the rules of the road out the window. It is still hard to say what



a controversial film containing more sex scenes than any mainstream movie in recent memory. The reaction was wildly mixed. Boos, scattered bravos, stunned silence. Some people were alarmed to find themselves turned on by the dispassionate sex; others were dismayed to be so turned off by it. But two days later people were still talking about it. And in the end, a bitterly divided Cannes jury (led by Francis Coppola and including Atom Egoyan) recognized the impact of *Crash* by inventing a

prize for it—one that praised its "daring, audacity and innovation." The French critics, meanwhile, championed the film, and in July it opened in France as a number one box-office hit.

Crash has some obvious commercial allure. It is, after all, about cars and sex, but not in the usual combination. And while the car crash may be one of Hollywood's most rudimentary clichés, the collisions in *Crash* are not typical. "They are shot with no slow motion whatsoever," Cronenberg points out. "They're shot in real time, very brutal and very short. Because it's really the aftermaths that interest me. In the book there's a great, cold sensuality about the crashes, the detail of the vinyl and the blood and the smashed glass and instruments. That's quite different from what you see in a car-chase movie."

The narrative centres on an alienated couple—an advertising executive named James Ballard (James Spader) and his wife, Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger)—who openly

(At Cannes) some people were **alarmed** to find themselves turned on by the **dispassionate** sex; others were dismayed to be so turned **off** by it. But two days later people were still **talking** about it.

happened at the point of impact. Premiering on the final Friday of the Cannes festival, *Crash* was the most keenly anticipated movie of the competition. Here was a highly respected auteur, making his first official appearance with

practice a bored promiscuity. After barely surviving a car accident that kills the other driver, James meets the man's widow, a doctor named Helen Remington (Holly Hunter) who seems oddly unaffected by his death. Through her,

James and Catherine are drawn to an auto-motivated cult of fetishists who derive erotic thrills from car crashes—from being around them, being in them and reliving them. Their spiritual leader is a vulturish photographer and scientist names Vaughan, played with intricate obsession by Montreal actor Elias Koteas (*Exotica*). Vaughan is a crash connoisseur. He likes to restage legendary road accidents, such as the ones that killed James Dean, Grace Kelly and Jane Mansfield. James develops an infatuation with Vaughan, an attraction that drifts across the white line dividing the auto-erotic from the homoerotic. He also gets entangled with kinky Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette), a crippled accident victim in leg brace bondage. As the sex games shift into overdrive, with the characters longing for the sacramental commingling of sperm and engine coolant, the question “Can I give you a lift?” becomes a loaded question.

This is the ultimate unsafe sex movie. Eventually everyone fucks everyone, although no one seems to be getting off. Staging a head-on collision between Eros and Civilization produces its own brand of performance anxiety. The uncertainties of the human condition, the existential roadblock at the intersection of sex and death, keeps getting in the way. According to the rules that drive this particular fetish, anything short of self-destruction is just going through the motions. And in the end, the

characters are in bondage to metaphor—which is, after all, the paradox of fetishism.

Crash is the kind of movie that demands an explanation. And no one explains Cronenberg better than Cronenberg, who (unlike many artists) seems to take delight in deconstruction his own work. He says he understands why some people find his film hard to watch. When he first picked up Ballard's novel, he found it hard to read. “It was cold, very obsessive and had zero sense of humour,” he recalls. “I read half of it and put it away for six months. I said, ‘There's no way I'd make this.’ Then I picked it up again and finished it, but still never occurred to me to make it into a movie. Later I found myself talking to [producer] Jeremy Thomas while we were making *Naked Lunch*, and I said, ‘I think the next thing we should do is *Crash*.’ I really surprised myself when I said it. And he said, ‘It's amazing you should say that because I optioned *Crash* when it first came out.’”

Cronenberg says his script for *Crash*, unlike his loose adaptation of *Naked Lunch*, “became a distillation of the book.” But while remaining faithful to the novel, the movie also improves on it, as Ballard himself has acknowledges. Cronenberg has customized the slim, severe and unrelentingly bleak novel with a sly wit. The jokes are not set up, and barely break the surface of the



James Spader and Holly Hunter



James Spader and Elias Koteas

film, which is immaculately controlled; they just slide by. There is a sublimely deadpan scene of Hunter and Arquette sitting around watching crash-test-dummy videos. A reenactment of James Dean's death-by-Porsche plays as a deft parody of the drag race in *Rebel without a Cause*. And a mischievous scene in a Mercedes-Benz showroom, has Arquette's character trying to maneuver her disabled body into a car seat and snagging a metal hook of her leg brace on the leather upholstery. The brace is a positively mediaeval contraption, reminiscent of the gothic gynecological instruments that Cronenberg devised for *Dead Ringers*.

One of the most disturbing aspects of *Crash* is its surface resemblance to pornography—as a movie full of sex that is both calculated and alienating. Unlike porn, however, it is not designed to titillate. “The movie starts with three sex scenes in a row,” notes Cronenberg, “and in a preview screening someone wrote on a card, ‘A series of sex scenes is not a plot.’ My answer is, ‘Why not? Who says?’ In most movies, sex scenes are a lyrical opportunity for montage and music showing you that these people really do fuck each other, and then we get on with the real movie. But with *Crash*, it's more like the sex in *Woman of the Dunes*. This is the movie. It's telling you everything.”

Crash redefines the concept of viewer discretion. When I talked to Cronenberg before leaving for Cannes, he correctly predicted my response to the film. “I'm not sure you're going to like anybody in *Crash*, in the sense that

you're going to empathize with them,” he told me. “The characters are, as in the book, difficult to access—that's the term I've heard. But is it not possible to observe something from a distance and still be fascinated by it? The whole identifying thing is very shackling.” In formula Hollywood movies, he adds, “you know which buttons you're supposed to push, and if you're professional enough to push them well, you get the required response. Here I'm pushing buttons that nobody knew they had before. And I'm groping in the dark for those buttons. I'm not sure which ones I'm pushing. What excites me is that even people who don't like *Crash* have said, ‘I've never seen anything like that before.’ Maybe having people say, ‘I liked your movie’ is not what I want. It's something more complex, more ambiguous.”

In Cannes, Cronenberg certainly got his wish. And after *Crash* received a bumpy ride at two press screenings, he and his cast showed up to face the music at the obligatory press conference. They were prepared to be attacked. “We were pumped,” the director recalls. “It was like we'd smeared black grease paint on our faces.” But hostile critics remained silent. I posed the only remotely provocative question, and I *liked* the film. I asked why, in such an unconventional movie, there is such a conventional ratio of nudity—why do the women get more naked than the men? Cronenberg explained in some detail that this was never an issue. Then Spader, seizing an opportunity, butted in. “I'd like to say something here,” he offered, a little too eagerly. “It is a question of geography...

“Maybe having people say,
‘I liked your movie’ is not what I want.
It’s something more complex, more ambiguous.” – Cronenberg

when you’re fucking, you don’t see the penis.” That brought down the house. I joined in the laughter, deciding this was not the time to ask, “What about hand jobs?”

During the press conference, Cronenberg made an interesting observation. “It’s not an accident,” he said, “that the automobile and the cinema are exactly the same age. They have both compressed our understanding of time and space.” In fact, the car and the camera are the consummate achievements of pre-digital technology. With both devices, the world comes at us as a moving picture, framed by the widescreen and by the windscreen. The camera and the car both transport us en masse—in an audience or a stream of traffic—yet both are intensely private experiences. As passengers, we watch the road through the driver’s lens. The driver directs; the director drives. And the camera, like the car, allows us to penetrate the world with an obsessive focus. Yet, even as it compresses distance, it puts distance between us and the world.

Of all our machines, the car is the most sexualized. It is the machine we wear, a steel cocoon that serves as armour, and as a voluptuous second skin. In *Crash*, it is not just a place to *have* sex, the vinyl boudoir, but a sex toy on wheels—the ultimate strap-on. From the opening shot, which shows Unger touching her exposed breast to the cold fuselage of an airplane in a hangar, the film explores the idea of sex between man and machine, between flesh and metal, the violent desire to penetrate and penetrated by the enameled hardness of technology. “The car crash is a fertilizing rather than a destructive event,” declares Vaughan, the scarred scientist/photographer, who spells out the credo of film perhaps too literally, as “something we are all intimately involved in—the reshaping of the human body by modern technology.”

Cronenberg’s films have consistently been devoted to technological mutations of the flesh: in *Videodrome* a television screen became a carnal predator; in *The Fly*, Seth Brundle turned his body into a laboratory construct; in *Naked Lunch* a typewriter secreted orgasmic juices. Treating human sexuality as an invention in progress, Cronenberg was morphing the human body long before computers got into the act. Warped flesh was his original metaphor for the unbridled libido, the plastic-fantastic other. In *Shivers*, *Rabid* and *The Brood*—horror stories of scientific accidents—the id literally exploded from the body in grotesque creature-form. And in *Dead Ringers* and *M. Butterfly*, tragedies of sexual identity, it imploded with suicidal consequence.

With *Crash*, Cronenberg’s view of human sexuality as a scientific accident comes full circle. He portrays the automobile as a foreign body with vital juices, an insectile shell that can surround and invade the human body—a carapace. The insect imagery is a subtle joke, a reminder that we are in a world that seems familiar because it is so strange, so Cronenbergian. We see the insect in the armature of a convertible roof that insidiously looms up to enclose the characters, like a praying mantis, as they prepare to have sex in a car wash. And we see it in the final crane shot, as we look down on a human form trying to extricate itself from a wrecked car inch by inch, like a larva jack-knifing out of a chrysalis.

It is a haunting image. And in Cannes, as I watched Cronenberg and his cast try to explain the special bond they formed while shooting *Crash*, it occurred to me that the director has enclosed his cast in protective cocoon, a carapace all his own. Actors love working with Cronenberg—which is odd, considering his film appear more focused on images and ideas



Holly Hunter

than on character and performance. But each of the stars of *Crash* raved about the experience of working with Cronenberg, expressing a loyalty and devotion to him that would be cult-like if it did not incorporate the consensus that he is a nice guy with a great sense of humour who is open to suggestion and doesn't have a tyrannical bone in his body. "He's enormously relaxed on the set," Spader told me. "He's light-hearted and funny and smart. And he has the confidence to be able to say 'I don't know.' That's not just rare. That's non-existent in my experience of making films."

Holly Hunter agrees. "I love his loyalty to his own beliefs and his own doubts," she says. "Doubt is one of the motivating factors behind his work—I always feel his movies are a little whimsical. He has things to say that are personal. His ideas are cultivated. They incubate in David and no one else." Vancouver actor Deborah Kara Unger, who plays in the most sexually exposed scenes in the film, recalls that the script "felt like a mind rape when I read it; I was not predisposed to the subject." But she grew to appreciate it, and calls Cronenberg "one of the most

elegant and trust-inspiring men I've ever met. He's gentle, he's precise. You could always get terrified that you're not going to hit the specific note he's aiming for as a conductor. But there's a calmness and wit about him. He's not abusive."

Earning the trust of his actors is a huge priority for Cronenberg. "It starts with the budget and the schedule," he says. "They know I have final cut. They know it's my movie. They know that I have the time to do it right because I've budgeted it and scheduled it. I know it sounds like a very dry, strange thing to talk about acting that way. But it comes down to what I can give the actors on the set, and what I can do is give them a very protected environment. When you're doing sex scenes, that's a crucial element. The actors have to feel safe with each other and with you." One way he put the actors at ease was to allow them to review their takes on videotape. "I made sure I had the best colour monitor possible, and any time they wanted to see what anything looked like, I said, 'Have a look.' There were no surprises."

"[It] felt like a mind rape when I read it;
I was not predisposed to the subject."

— Deborah Kara Unger

Deborah Kara Unger and James Spader



Was the sexuality on the set ever anything other than simulated? "Spader says he's never aroused on set, ever," replies the director. "Then there are other actors—I know Jimmy Woods is always aroused on the set, even when he's not doing a sex scene. I remember [in *Videodrome*] Debbie Harry saying, "Just strap it down!" And what is Cronenberg's own response to filming sex scenes? "In a sense, a director is a voyeur," he says. "And there's a deliciousness in ignoring it, in having that professional, technical distance. But even when there is no overt sexuality on camera, a film set is a very sexualized place. To me, art and sex and movies and sex are inextricable. You're never surprised that strange people have affairs on your set.

Because you're constantly pushing yourself emotionally, aesthetically and visually in every possible way. On a good film set everybody is interesting. You're just as likely to want to have sex with the props person as with the leading lady. And one does. And later you realize that these are not things that necessarily should be acted upon."

What is controversial about *Crash* is not the explicitness of the sex, which often seems more cerebral than physical, but the idea that being in a road accident is erotic. "We had a screening in L.A.," says Cronenberg, "and apparently a guy came out yelling and waving his arm, which was in a cast, and he said, 'I like Cronenberg's film, but I think he's gone psycho with this one. I've just been in a motorcycle accident and there was nothing sexy about it.' Well, I think he totally missed the point, because I've been in a motorcycle accident and think there was something sexy about it." Cronenberg goes on to talk about scarification, tribal mutilation and the pleasurable pain of body building—"another example of humans transforming themselves into a conceptual thing."

But sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. And for all its metaphoric permutations, *Crash* also taps into a universal form of voyeurism, the one that makes people slow down at an accident scene. "There is a car crash aesthetic, which



people understand but don't want to be too conscious of," says Cronenberg. "People are really fascinated by what they look like when they're dismantled, by what happens when the body comes apart. You could say it's ghoulish, but then everybody's a ghoul. If you turn away, that's one thing. And if you avidly watch, that's another. But you can't be neutral."

The same can be said of watching *Crash*. It is interesting that Cronenberg, this stubbornly Canadian director, has taken the car crash, a ritual of Hollywood action/adventure, turned it over and dissected it, in the belief that the aftermath is more compelling than the event. Curiously, Atom Egoyan, another Canadian director who has a clinical fascination with the underside of human complicity, is preparing to follow up *Exotica* with a movie based on *The Sweet Hereafter*, a novel by Russell Banks. It is about the aftermath of a fatal school bus crash. If Canadian cinema keeps this up, the road movie may never be the same.

Brian D. Johnson is the senior entertainment writer and film critic for Maclean's magazine. He is the author of three non-fiction books: Railway Country: Across Canada by Train (1985), The XV Olympic Winter Games: The Official Commemorative Book (1988) and Brave Films, Wild Nights: 25 Years of Festival Fever (2000). In 1994, he published a critically acclaimed novel, Volcano Days. This article is reprinted from Take One No. 13, Fall 1996.

"If you turn away, that's one thing.
And if you avidly watch, that's another.
But you can't be neutral." - Cronenberg