

"Cronenberg's Monster"

Martin Amis's 1996 Review-Essay on J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash* and David Cronenberg's film adaptation (from the *Independent on Sunday*, 10 November 1996: 8-9)

I reviewed *Crash* when it came out in 1973; and, as I remember, the critical community greeted Ballard's novel with a flurry of nervous dismay. But of course reviewers do not admit to nervous dismay. Nervous dismay is a response that never announces itself as such, and comes to the ball tricked out as Aesthetic Fastidiousness or Moral Outrage.

Crash provoked much fancy dress. Some reviewers reached for their thesauri and looked up "repellent"; cooler hands claimed to find the novel "boring." I'm not sure if anyone else adopted the disguise I wore: sarcasm. Haughtily (and nervously), I sent *Crash* up. I was 23. Later that year my first novel appeared, and, like Ballard, I stood accused of displaying a "morbid sexuality." In comparison, though, my sexuality--and my novel--were obsequiously conventional.

If you wanted to banish *Crash*, there was an obvious place to banish it to: a neo-Sixties avant-garde associated with confrontational theatre, conceptualist painting, installationist sculpture, experimental fiction, and the ICA. Originally a proponent of hard sci-fi (and, in this country, its brightest star), Ballard was convulsing into maturity and freeing himself from the genre--was on his way, in fact, to becoming sui generis. Emerging from a background of surrealism, cultural activism, hyper-permissiveness and lysergic acid, *Crash* formed part of Ballard's traditional concrete- and- steel period, as did *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), whose sections bore such evocative titles as "Why I want to Fuck Ronald Reagan," "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race," and, indeed, "Crash!"

After its publication *Crash* settled down to being a cult classic. Ballard was in any case a cult author. And it was a cult I belonged to. Assembled votaries would spend whole evenings guiding one another round Ballard's beautiful, excessive, schematic and preposterously unsmiling universe. It is perhaps instructive, here, to distinguish the Ballard buff from the mere admirer. While sharing in the general reverence for the *Empire of the Sun* (1984), the true cultist also felt minutely betrayed by it. Not because the novel won a wide audience and punctured the cult's closed circle. No: we felt betrayed because "Empire" showed us where Ballard's imagination had come from. The shaman had revealed the source of all his fever and magic.

It seemed to be an appropriately Ballardian development: *Crash* was being brought to the screen by the notoriously unsqueamish -- and cultish -- David Cronenberg, who made the equally unfilmable *Naked Lunch*. Cinematically, though, the "Burroughs" is full of exuberant possibilities, unlike the hard stare of *Crash*, which is about the sexuality of road accidents and doesn't blink once in 225 pages.

The argument of the book gets going with a head-on collision between the narrator (called, uncompromisingly, James Ballard) and a woman doctor. The crash kills her husband. In the film, he goes out through one windscreen and comes in through the other; in the book he is content to die on the bonnet of Ballard's car. The two survivors stare at each other.

He encounters her again -- at the hospital, at the police pound. Grief, guilt, aggression, the shared sensitivities and deadnesses of various contusions and scars: all this leads, with disquieting plausibility, to an affectless (and car-bound) love affair. Round about now the figure of Vaughan looms in on the novel -- Vaughan, the "hoodlum scientist", the "nightmare angel of the expressways", his leathers reeking of "semen and engine coolant". At this point *Crash* bids farewell to plausibility and disquiet, and embraces unanimous obsession. Under the sway of a "benevolent psychopathology," a "new logic," the entire cast surges eagerly towards an autogeddon of wound profiles and sex deaths.

Cronenberg had to take this vision and submit it to the literalism of film. He has also chosen to transport it through time: close to a quarter of a century. And it seems to me that all the film's dissonances arise from that shift. In 1973 the automobile could be seen as something erotic, conjuring up freedom and power. In 1996 the associations point the other way, towards banality: car pools, leadless fuel and asthma. Nowadays the poor old jamjar conjures up nothing more than a frowsy stoicism. Cronenberg might as well have gone with tail-fins, flared trousers, mini-skirts and beehives, so remorselessly does the piece insist on its historical slot. The sex feels pre-Aids; the work-shy sensualism feels pre-inflation; even the roads feel pre-gridlock. These cavils may seem pedestrian -- but car culture feels pedestrian, too, as the millennium nears.

On the other hand it feels delightfully nostalgic, and triumphantly retro, to sit in a theatre watching an intelligent and unusual art movie. Cronenberg has somehow found the cinematic equivalent of Ballard's hypnotic gaze: the balefulness, the haggard fixity. By excluding all common sense (and therefore all humour), obsession invites comedy, and *Crash* is almost a very funny film. By a similar logic, the monomaniacal interestingly frail. Cronenberg's ending isn't there in the Ballard; it achieves a tragic modulation among all the gauntness and passivity.

Unlike the film, the novel is indifferent to the passage of time, and has lost nothing in 25 years. It is like a clinic-al case of chronic shock, confusedly welcomed by the sufferer. Prose remains the stronger medium for the glare of obsession. It's not so much what you can put in: it's what you can leave out. Ballard's rhythms control everything: the crowds, the weather, the motion sculpture of the highways. Only in the stories collected under the title of *Vermilion Sands* (1973) did he duplicate this glazed and creamy precision.