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Crashing Out

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CRASHING OUT

It is now four years since the considerable crisis that pervaded British cinema politics finally juddered to a halt as David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) was released at last to the screens, uncut as an '18'. The controversy lasted exactly a year. In June 1996, Alexander Walker published his condemnation of the film in the London *Evening Standard*.ⁱ Following a longish pause, the *Daily Mail* – from the same publishing stable – took up the cause, albeit much more crudely, and mounted a steadily intensifying campaign to block the film's release.

Repeated front-page banner headlines combined with attempts to use MPs and other political figures as opinion conduits, approaches to every local authority in the country seeking action against the film, led on to journalists door-stepping individual examiners from the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC).

Although in the end their campaign failed, the toxins they implanted were mightily effective. *Crash* did very badly when released. In many places, multiplexes booked the film, probably hoping that the controversy would have stimulated a perverse wish to see it. When the opposite happened, the *Mail* claimed a kind of victory. The British public, about whose vulnerability they had been panicking for a year, suddenly proved to have the 'commonsense' necessary to reject the film.

In late 1996, with two colleagues, I won an ESRC grant to study the campaign, how it was organised discursively, how it impacted on audiences' expectations and, once they saw the film, in what different ways people responded to it. The main findings of our research are being published this autumn.ⁱⁱ I want here to reflect on some uncomfortable questions the research

raises for film studies itself, and not least for the role of a journal such as *Screen*.

Our research showed that the *Mail* was able to dominate almost entirely the manner in which the film was debated. The terms of reference which the *Mail* established (even more, in fact, than Walker's own) drove the film's defenders to answer in *its* terms, to their considerable weakening. How did this happen? Largely, I am arguing, because there were too few voices willing to bring to the film other ways of talking about it, other clear and comprehensible lines of understanding. A small number of media academics (most notably Julian Petley) spoke up during the controversy ... a very small number. But unless I am very mistaken, there was not one specifically film academic among them. Why? Where were we all? The sheer overwhelming silence is so striking – it surely invites consideration of the public position of film theory and research.

It is an irony that the last twenty five years have seen film studies in the UK largely dominated by a claim that film analysis is inextricably political. To analyse films is to bring to light, variously, ideological formations or spectatorial positionings with cultural, social and political resonances. Films embody culturally significant representations. To analyse films is to explore forces functioning to form cultural identities. Make your choice among these, it hardly matters – all these are bids for the wider political significance of film studies. Yet faced with a *real* political controversy lasting a full year, it seems we had nothing to contribute. How do we explain this?

Of course many explanations are possible. It might simply have been nervousness and unease at speaking out in public – although film studies itself generally disallows personalised explanations of this kind. It might have been a

belief that the crisis would soon blow over, or that the BBFC would surely come out right in the end – a tough one, that, given the depth of suspicion of ‘institutions’ in our field. It might have been a case of ‘over-specialisation’, a sense that (as one colleague honestly put it to me) this isn’t ‘my kind of film, my area of film studies’. It might of course be unease at the film, at its particular cinematic examination of sexuality. Any or all of these may be true. But I am most interested in another and more disturbing possibility – that film studies was disabled from speaking on the issue because its dominant conceptualisations effectively *collude* with the position taken by the *Daily Mail*.

What was the *Mail*’s argumentative framework? That films are a particularly powerful form of culture because they are so *visual*. This makes cinematic display of sexuality particularly dangerous because it can bypass our rational veneer. That the emotional arousal, or ‘heat’, this generates is dangerous just because it is ‘hot’, arousal – and the effort put by defenders in the UK to prove how ‘cool’ the film was, thus reveals its discursive dependence. That this means that there will be some – vulnerable, immature, partly-formed – who will be especially vulnerable to the ‘messages’ contained in what the film *shows*. We don’t need ever to *find* such people – we are entitled to impute their possible existence and draw word-cartoons of them. That this will work if these viewers are led to *identify* with these degraded characters. That ‘we’, the educated, the well-informed, the ones with insight, cannot shirk our duties to display what we can see but they cannot: the messages which subvert; the subtexts which influence even as they are not seen. In various ways, and with inputs from some ‘experts’, the *Mail* argued all these – or, interestingly, in the case of the dangers of the ‘heat’ of films did not need ever to argue it explicitly, yet the film’s defenders ‘knew’ to deny it by asserting *Crash*’s coolness, its

iciness. If semiotics can teach us anything, it is to detect the force of unstated yet acknowledged discursive meanings.

Now, bowdlerising just a little, what are the current presumptions of much film studies? That films are primarily *visual* exercises – hence all the talk of ‘point of view’, of spectatorship, or the problems of visual pleasure, and so on? A vast diet of film analysis has presumed that our visual relationship to films simultaneously positions us and enmeshes us. It is this belief which grounds the supposed *persuasiveness* of films, their capacity to engage our ‘identities’, to act as mirrors (again the ‘looking’ involved) back to our forming selves. It is through such mechanisms that the symbolic formations of films, their subtexts, their ‘messages’ are conveyed to those primal parts of our minds which operate behind and below the ‘rational’ levels. The term most used for this process of engagement and entrapment? ‘Identification’. And even from time to time comes the acknowledgement that the only ‘safe’ films, those which will engender critical reflection and distance, are those which refuse identification, remain ‘cool’, deny pleasure. The match, to me, is very striking. How did this all work with *Crash*?

Screen published five articles on *Crash* during and after the controversy. One was essentially a descriptive recounting of the controversy.ⁱⁱⁱ The others were pretty typical examples of ‘film analysis’. That is, they set about searching for a meaning and significance in the film, deploying for this purpose sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit concepts and methods.^{iv} Two of them did note in passing that there was indeed a controversy – but that was all. Film analysis has other priorities. These were: to use the special expertise of film analytics to prise out the subtexts, and perhaps even to ‘name’ who might be influenced – and thus to judge the film. Whatever the differences from the *Mail* in other

respects, in one crucial respect at least there was real commonality: in the will to operate with untested 'figures of the audience', to claim the power to know how audiences *must* respond to the film because the analyst – who has not of course responded in this way at all – nonetheless has the power to *impute* these responses to those who will not be allowed to speak for themselves.

In a controversy piece, with a word-limit, I can only partly demonstrate my case. I have chosen just one of the four analyses to illustrate my point. Fred Botting & Scott Wilson deconstruct *Crash* mercilessly. As they put it: '*Crash* combines the stylized ennui of a seventies German urban alienation film with the grainy, low-tech, humourless repetition of a seventies German porn film.' This scorning of the film should, one might suppose, lead to its dismissal – a film this poor surely can't merit much attention? Its distinguishing feature must surely be its failure to signify very much at all. Not so: *Crash*'s very poverty made it part of a (Foucauldian) nightmare. Its cold address to sex thus signalled a disciplinary regime – put the plebs off their sex, so that they learn to police themselves: 'the increasing juridical, governmental and corporate concern [...] with unauthorized incursions into the "personal space" of employees (particularly sexual harassment) has, in common with *Crash*, the close identification of work and *jouissance* and an interest in intensifying sex, and the social activities around it, as something that may seriously damage your health – or psyche.' Here the sexual alienation becomes symptomatic, a marker of a desire to control and snuff out presumably otherwise resistant desires.

How did they know this? What warranted this move? The concept that does the work for them is, no surprise, the concept of 'identification'. Yet the concept is used quite weirdly. Here is the first main use: 'Elias Koteas's

performance of Vaughan as the dangerously charismatic, virile American is so excessive [...] as to successfully hint at the deficiency that determines his obsession. Far from being the intoxicating, sinister figure he appears to be for Helen Remington and the Ballards, he merely evokes incredulity, and fails to provide the point of identification that could enliven his project for a cinema audience.' So, the 'audience' is here 'known'. 'They' will fail to identify. But in that case we are back with the paradox: if it fails to provide such a point of identification, and 'identification' is understood to be the means by which signification is 'transferred' from text to audience, how on earth can it achieve meaningfulness?

The answer lies in a further stage of imputation: the audience who 'fail to identify' are thus left walking around with their needs for identification left unfulfilled. The vessels were not left empty, but rather seething. 'As scar-screens, the empty units of visual identification ("characters" is too strong a word) are marked by the traces of an unspeakable automotive *jouissance* unavailable to a human culture determined by the restricted economy of the pleasure principle. [...] Without any privileged place of identification, the film is plotted along a chain of scars signifying the displacement of the fetish from its "original" location as the substitute for maternal lack, to a fetishistic repetition and universalization of lack: all figures are all-too-obviously castrated.'

The logic of this complaint fascinates me. The *Mail* and its sympathisers saw the problem in *Crash* as its potential generation of 'heat': arousal in some people somewhere of a combination of 'perverse' sexual arousal and excitement at car crashes. In response, the film's defenders argued that the film was 'too cool' to arouse, to evoke the kinds of 'identification' that could enable this.^v Now along come film analysts turning the *failure* to produce

'identification' into another species of harm. The common threads? That untested notion of 'identification', which hangs on in there within film studies as a hardly-considered, never-tested bogus necessity.^{vi} And those imputations about some never-identified, never-researched – indeed, just never asked – 'audience' – who are never the analysts, who have risen above such vulnerability, and thus speak from a pastoral position.

So what is this 'figure of the audience'? Cinema-goers may have *thought* they go to see *Crash* for all kinds of reasons (to check out the latest Cronenberg film, to find out what the fuss was all about, to make their own minds up, to see if it could help exorcise memories of an actual car crash, and so on – these are among the many real reasons we encountered in our research). But according to this reading, what actually drives the encounter with the film is a search for 'identification'. Having gone with deep needs requiring attention, what they got instead was 'castrated' characters, fetishistic fantasies, and frustrated desires. *Actual* audiences may have told us that they became richly engaged, that they found the film thrilling, inspiring, liberating; but film theory knows better.

Of course there are differences between the *Mail* and film academia. These are easy to point to. But they should not conceal from us the similarities, both in concepts deployed and, in the end, judgements arrived at. And the disturbing silence of film academics in this most important controversy is my strongest justification for issuing this challenge. One of the most important findings, perhaps, of our research into the *Crash* controversy was about the ways in which within the UK there is an unspoken but powerfully operative set of assumptions about the proper functions of film. British filmic culture is built around a very narrow image of what films are *allowed* to do, and *Crash* clashed

head-on with that image. It is sad to find film academia complicit – and unaware of its complicity – in that narrowness.

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- i Alexander Walker, 'A movie beyond the bounds of depravity', *Evening Standard*, 3 June 1996.
- ii Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs & Ramaswami Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy: Film Censorship and Audience Reception*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2001).
- iii Annette Kuhn, 'Crash and film censorship', *Screen*, vol. 40:4, no. (Winter 1999), pp. 446-51. The strange thing, though, is how disconnected this essay is from Kuhn's previous, superb work on the discursive formations of film censorship, in her *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality, 1909-1925*, (London: Routledge, 1988).
- iv Barbara Creed, 'Anal wounds, metal kisses', *Screen*, vol. 39, no. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 175-9; Michael Grant, 'Crimes of the future', *Screen*, vol. 39, no. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 180-5; Scott Wilson & Fred Botting, 'Automatic lover', *Screen*, vol. 39, no. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 186-92; and Marq Smith, 'Wound envy', *Screen*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Summer 1999), pp. 193-202.
- v See, for instance, Lord Birkett, 'President's Introduction', *Annual Report*, London: BBFC 1996/7; Alastair Dalton, 'Crashing bore is all talk, no action', *The Scotsman*, 20 March 1997; and Lesley Dick, 'Review of *Crash*', *Sight & Sound*, June 1997, p.34.
- vi The unwillingness of most film scholars to test or even critically examine the claims implicit in the concept of 'identification' is really striking. The most important work on this within film studies is undoubtedly Jackie Stacey's (*Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, (London: Routledge, 1993) – but even Stacey resists abandoning the term, even after she has effectively demolished its unity and explanatory power. Murray Smith has recently tackled the concept from the point of view of cognitive film theory (see his *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), but strangely appears to see no need to submit a series of claims about 'audiences' to the test of *actual* audiences.