

The End of the Road
David Cronenberg's
Crash
and the
Fading of the West

"A point is that which hath no parts, or which hath no magnitude"

Euclid

"... Shall he drive
His horses upward, bring again the day?
It will but rise to die"

Seneca, *Thyestes*

In *Crash*, David Cronenberg negotiates our ambivalent attitudes toward death and destruction on the roads, as well as the attractions of car crashes, using the car and the architecture of contemporary road systems as symbols of the convergence between humanity's unconscious desires and its technological artifacts. Cronenberg's film, like Ballard's novel, is an exploration of the ambiguous fascination and excitement of the car crash and the latent identity of the machine. This exploration re-examines the contentions of some basic genres. It is a "road film" in the sense that it's an eccentric examination of the cult of adventure, journey, and discovery that has animated that form. Ballard is British and Cronenberg Canadian, but *Crash* seems peculiarly American since its narrative deals with the exhaustion of the civilizing process, and of the final expenditures of the horizontal, forward-moving momentum that drove this enterprise. It is energy incipient to the western, the biker film, and all manner of male-oriented identity that affirms the potency of a burgeoning society. In *Crash*, the traditional journey of discovery becomes a downward spiral, a frustrated, ever-circling implosion of the defeated bourgeois self at the end of the millennium.

Although the film was condemned in England as "a movie beyond the bounds of depravity"¹ (Walker 36), Cronenberg's film does not fit well within the traditions of pornography. Clearly, sexual arousal in its audience is not the primary motive of the film, and, more significantly, none of the characters seem able to relate to one another in an emotional way. For this reason, in part, Cronenberg himself has described the film as "anti-pornographic" (Mendik 17). Arousal can hardly be on the agenda since Ballard, faithfully adapted here, has long been concerned with the "death of affect," a concept now basic to postmodernity that has been applied by Ballard in various locations to describe, rather moralistically, the depletion of bourgeois life. Cronenberg's evocation of sex seems iconic; Deborah Kara Unger leans on a balcony, pulling aside her gown to expose her bare buttocks as if to quote fashion photography, or Dali's "Young Virgin Auto-Sodomized by Her Own Chastity." Pornography is employed here as the end product of the culture of representation that has dissolved all lived experience through the filters of mediation.

Other critics, picking up on the film's sense of surgical precision and its fascination with technology, attempted to locate Cronenberg's *Crash* in the tradition of science fiction. Many of Ballard's novels, including *Crash*, certainly adopt a number of sci-fi formations, including the metaphysics and biophysics of time and space-time paradigms and the ontologies of psychic realities. Unlike Ballard's novel, however, Cronenberg's *Crash* deals with the technology of the present rather than that of the future, and, in fact, is interested in the future only as a perspective from which to understand the current moment. It has been observed that the movie "looks and feels as if it were made long, long ago in a parallel universe," (Rodley 6), a reference to its *mise en scène* of pillars and pylons, crash barriers, disused hangars and gas stations, dumped cars and

derelict parking lots. This is no sci-fi dystopia, but a coruscating vision of the horror that is to be found in the bleak everyday of contemporary life.

Indeed, if Cronenberg's *Crash* fits into a tradition at all, it is that of the road movie—albeit in the form of a hardcore, apocalyptic, end-time variant. As Cronenberg makes explicit, the car crash is to the traditional road movie what the sex scene is to the classical romantic comedy—the unspoken culmination, the hidden act toward which all others tend, the secret, implicit, concealed finale. In effect, Cronenberg's *Crash* is the terminal form of the genre. Its obsession with the aftermath of car accidents vivifies the pathological truth of all previous road movie cycles—that our obsession with the automobile is, in fact, an obsession with atrocity and disaster.

As in all road movies, the road in *Crash* functions on many different levels. Among other things, it serves as a metaphor for the cultural condition of western civilization—in this case, a bleak, gaping expanse of vacancy. This is explicit in scenes where James Spader—the actor who represents blank yuppie-dom par excellence—surveys traffic-clogged highway webworks from his terrace. A representative of “spectator culture,” Spader muses anxiously about the increased number of vehicles on the roads, which would serve to disturb him after a disabling car crash, yet he and his wife yearn for “the next time,” as their dream of perfect orgasm is conflated with death in the final fusion of eros/thanatos in the technoscape. The character is still able to enjoy orgasm even as his emotional life is arid, evidenced best by the chill grey-blue and amber twilight that saturates the film. Sex is arousing chiefly because it becomes associated with self-annihilation, and with urban-primitive cultism, replete with tattoos and talismans, of the crash re-enactors organized by renegade researcher Vaughan (Elias Koteas). The cult recapitulates a humanist theme that Cronenberg asserts, albeit half-heartedly, in all of his major works, as the characters' panicked pursuit of meaning and coherence tends to recoup dead belief systems that ultimately hasten dystopia and provoke the holocaust. As in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the pursuit of the death wish has reduced the self to the base material of the repetition compulsion. In *Crash*, as in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, the repetition compulsion takes the form of an inability to be still, a kind of circling insomnia reminiscent of Spengler's “organicism” view of a “denatured” culture gradually winding itself down. Of course, as Freud reminds us, the repetition compulsion is essentially a means of both repeating and avoiding the initial trauma—which, in the case of *Crash*, is bourgeois life itself. In this way, perhaps, Cronenberg's film can be regarded as a mournful, anti-illusionist, anti-Brechtian version of Godard's bourgeois road fantasy, *Weekend*.

Those who choose to defend Cronenberg against the charge of nihilism do so by drawing attention to the way in which he often attempts to uncover new unifying principles, new myths in the modern technological landscape. It has been argued that the fetishization of the car accident in *Crash* triggers the emergence of both a new sexuality, and a new form of creativity and imagination. In other words—for all its dangers—the techno-sex of *Crash* bestows a certain radical potential on humanity by allowing us to jettison bourgeois notions of “appropriate” sexual encounters.² In Cronenberg's script, for example, the renegade scientist Vaughan—in a line straight out of Ballard—claims that the car crash should be seen as a “fertilizing event,” not a destructive one. By describing the car crash as “the marriage between sex, the human organism and technology” (Pringle xxix), Ballard seems to be suggesting that such “fertilizing events” can provide people with some kind of collective liberation from their repressed existences. Yet the notion of the car crash—and sexual pathologies in general—as liberatory seems undercut by the gloom of the film, especially in the primal moment when the Spader and Unger characters couple on a piece of roadside wasteland after a near-deadly car crash.

Cronenberg's new unifying myths seem peculiarly appropriate to the postmodern scene. His earlier films have often been analyzed in terms of their presentation of a series of irresistible transformations, wherein the boundaries between Self and Other dissolve, annexing identity. Sometimes this transformation takes the form of the abandonment of self to a collective urge or gestalt (*Shivers*, *Rabid*); sometimes it takes the form of a merging between two beings (*Dead Ringers*, *The Fly*, *M. Butterfly*), sometimes in the surrender of independence to enlistment in conspiracies almost beyond human comprehension (*Scanners*, *Videodrome*, *Naked Lunch*) (Smith 14). Like *Scanners* and *Videodrome*, *Crash* contains a cult-like group that attempts to reinvigorate society (or, at least, a marginal sector of society, since in Cronenberg larger social transfor-

mation seems impossible) through the creation of a new mythology appropriate to a secular, post-industrial environment. As noted, it becomes clear that the group's plan is bankrupt, and speaks merely to the panic of a postmodern setting that has exhausted all belief systems. Yet Cronenberg's narratives involve a traditional sacrificial ritual with propitiatory victims (Vale and Revok in *Scanners*, Max Renn in *Videodrome*, Vaughan and possibly the main character in *Crash*). This radical, futuristic construction of Self and Other in these films has been read in relation to Richard Slotkin's concept of "regeneration through violence," the magic potential of destruction and the will-to-myth (the will to read experience mythically through the apparatus of victimization), reviving old mythologies, or creating new ones more befitting to the contemporary wasteland.

In Cronenberg's *Crash*, however, none of these previous models or paradigms have any real application. Something of a departure for Cronenberg, *Crash* is a film whose apocalypticism is conservative, rather than regenerative. This is a film in which the symbiosis and dispersal of Self produce a terminal, degenerative state of isolation and estrangement. In effect, the destruction in *Crash* is neither magical, nor sacrificial, nor regenerative, but pure suicidal immolation in the failure of collective philosophies. The protagonists of *Crash* lack any sustaining faith in mythical or spiritual belief systems previously supplying consensus to society. The film's apocalyptic spirit is profoundly secular and pessimistic, reflecting the postmodern refusal of both sacred and ideological conceptions of reality, depicting a culture totally cut off from its mythic past. *Crash* is a film about the impulses of western consciousness toward the worship of catastrophe and self-annihilation. It is a disaster story, though with none of the frantic, panicky overtones of the usual disaster story, since the catastrophe needed to provoke revelation never comes.

Instead, the attention of the audience is focused on a small group of rather calm, detached, sexually promiscuous though emotionally barren people, James Ballard (Spader), his wife Catherine (Unger), and the defiant, compulsive Vaughan (Koteas). As in much self-consciously decadent art, the sexuality of the protagonists is closely bound up with the notion of surplus violence—the need to prove one is alive by lacerating the flesh. And, as René Girard explains, "violence, if left unappeased, will accumulate until it overflows and contaminates the surrounding area" (Girard 10). Moreover, in relation to the sexual violence and promiscuity of this distant triad, Cronenberg himself has pointed out that the film's showcasing of rear-entry and anal sex is meant to express its practitioners' disconnectedness from and defiance of the world (Grundmann 27),³ evoking Puritan notions of anality as death, waste, the *cul de sac* of experience. As an act of paraphilia, anal sex is a metaphor for a profoundly degenerate attitude toward human life. The pursuit of satisfactions in *Crash* is the pursuit of a Sadean void; as in Pasolini's *Salo*, anality becomes an emblem of the transmogrification of transgressive sexuality. Although *Crash*, unlike *Salo*, doesn't associate anal sex with tyranny and sadism, it does liken this taboo—almost as a pun—to the dead end of human experience. The metaphor of anal sex also suggests the peculiar paucity of accumulation and the violation of taboos, a succinct summation of bourgeois life.

In the traditional road movie, the road functions as a metaphor for the path of history, the impetus and trajectory of human civilization. In his 1895 work, *The Law of Civilization and Decay*, historian Brooks Adams analyzed the relationship between intellectual tendencies and the economic laws governing the movements of the material universe, concluding that human society must pass through a number of distinct intellectual phases in its oscillations between barbarism and civilization. According to Adams, when any human race reaches the limit of its material energy, that energy becomes surplus, and needs to be dissipated through economic competition. When surplus energy accumulates in such bulk as to preponderate over productive energy, it becomes the controlling social force, "and energy vents itself through those organisms best fitted to give expression to the power of capital" (Adams, viii). In such highly civilized and centralized societies, according to Adams, the imagination slowly fades and eventually falls into contempt, whereas "the economic intellect" grows gradually "less tolerant of any departure from those representations of nature which have appealed to the highly gifted of the monied type among successive generations" (Adams 294). In the end, this loss of energy is manifested by a gradual dissipation of capital, which, at last, leads to disintegration: the pressure of economic capitalism has exhausted the energy of the race. "Consequently," writes Adams, "the survivors of such a race lack the power necessary for renewed concentration, and must probably remain

inert, until supplied with fresh energetic material by the infusion of barbarian blood" (Adams 294).

Adams's doleful, apocalyptic interpretation of history is an interesting way of making sense of the entropy and mythic dysfunction of Cronenberg's *Crash*—an elliptical, interiorized film with no final narrative release, only dissolution and disintegration. Here, the recognizably postmodern (yet actually rather Puritan) theme of the downfall of civilization lacks any restorative mythic dimension. James, Catherine, and Vaughan are the survivors of a declining civilization in the decadent stages of late capitalism, whose excess economic energy has been sublimated into a universalizing death-drive. Their descent into barbarism is willed, either consciously or unconsciously, by each of them, suggesting an acknowledgment of the failure of myth to revitalize society, to generate consensus, and to give energy to the construction of a new order. These are characters who do not hesitate to embrace the revelations about themselves and their sexuality that technology has made possible. Cronenberg argues that the Darwinian verison of evolution having to do with survival is anachronistic within a capitalist society:

What I think has happened is that we have seized control of evolution without being aware of it. Survival of the fittest as a principle—one now has to say, what does "fittest" mean? It might be the guy who makes money the best in a capitalist society. There are cultures which embody the notion of suicide within them. . . . [I]f you can get enough people to will it along with you, it is the reality. . . . (Cronenberg, cit. in Smith, 18)

The logic of the film unfolds in accordance with the economic system that makes such a narrative possible, vivified most clearly by the alienating effect of its depicted technology (the camera gazes fetishistically over bent fenders, crutches, stretchers, the brushes and levers of the car wash), the lifeless intensity of its *mise en scène* (street lights are reflected hazily in windscreens, wet roads, and the hoods of cars). The dolorous, liturgical tone of the film and the distant, laconic interactions of its characters are Cronenberg's attempt to depict the dehumanized eroticism of late capitalism, the failure of the imagination characterized by Adams.

A movie about the end of the historical road, Cronenberg's *Crash* is set on the downward edge of the historical cycle. The film explores the contradictions of a decadent capitalist system out of control, as well as the psychological consequences of this superproductive consumer society. These consequences include not only the failure of the imagination and the descent into barbarism, obsession, pathology, and collective rage suggested by Adams, but also the forceful desire to tear society apart, to "throw stones at the Crystal Palace," as Dostoyevsky puts it. As a consequence, the destroyed commodity becomes part of a nostalgic reliquary for lost ritual and consensus built around shared myth and language systems. In *Crash*, the particular commodity facing ritualized destruction is that most symbolic artifact of American consumer culture—that wasteful, aggressive, violent totem of western civilization: the car.

The obsession with technology in *Crash* is not—as it is elsewhere in Cronenberg—an attempt to create new meanings from the minglings of flesh and machine, but to reflect an increasing preoccupation amongst commercial designers and architects with the relationship between the technological environment and the design, gestures and contours of the human body. This commercial relationship between human and machine reaches a perverse fruition in the car crash, with its "blood-soaked instrument panels, seat-belts smeared with excrement, sun-visors lined with brain tissue... The intimate time and space of a human being... fossilized forever in this web of chromium knives and frosted glass" (Ballard 12). Ballard's perception that "the precise make and model-year of my car could have been reconstructed by an automobile engineer from the pattern of my wounds" (Ballard 28) has nothing to do with what *Videodrome* describes as the "new flesh," but is rather a symptom of immanent apocalypse. It is a symbolic representation of a society obsessed with violence, brand names, destruction, machines, time, boredom, and repetitive sex, a society on the cusp of collapse into nihilistic dereliction and disaster.

One of the most symbolic constructions of capitalism is the notion of celebrity. Celebrity is only possible within the framework of a consumer culture, which provides the economic forces necessary for the formation of the public relations and the motion picture industries. Writer Jay McInerney claims that it's an indication of a collapsed value system when the "great chain of being" seems to be defined by our distance from these empty luminaries, or our connection to

them, however vague. Only in a particular kind of consumer culture could the highest rung on the social ladder be occupied by people who are "essentially not anything." This is because the celebrity is, essentially, an ego ideal. Our fascination with celebrity death is a vicarious extension of our own death drive, and its endless cycle of the repetition compulsion. The dead celebrity stands for the surrogate propitiatory victim, the "mirror image" whose failed sacrifice serves only to highlight the miserable charade of commodity culture. Consequently, the public death of a celebrity has become one of the most horrifying and fascinating taboos that can be transgressed in our time.

Part of the horror of such a death is the fetishized body's sudden loss of revelatory power. The celebrity body, once so expressive and so intensely scrutinized, is abruptly transformed into a limp marionette, the strings suddenly cut that once attached it to the complex and hidden mechanisms of media relations and industrial investment. If death itself has become fetishized within capitalism, the celebrity death has become so much more symbolic, the object of so much violent eroticism, voyeurism, and obsessive curiosity. This notion of celebrity death is always present in the background of Cronenberg's *Crash*, whose clinical atmosphere evokes the tone of news reports and other accounts of disasters. In the film's cold landscape, private terrors merge with public possibilities, personal nightmares with the nightmare of history, and the inner spaces of psychoses with imaginable large-scale disasters.

In Ballard's novel, Vaughan becomes obsessed with the death of Elizabeth Taylor and takes to following her home from the film studios, hoping to engage her in a violent, frenzied, sexual collision. In his attempts to induce the actress's death by automobile, Vaughan himself is finally killed—"his only true accident"—while Elizabeth Taylor escapes unharmed. Taylor is not mentioned in Cronenberg's film—perhaps for legal reasons—but other celebrities are equally fetishized. Vaughan, who in the novel "dreamed endlessly of the deaths of the famous, inventing imaginary crashes for them" (Ballard 15), in Cronenberg's film becomes a crazed impresario, restaging his own performances of such celebrity accidents as James Dean's "death by Porsche." In the small, floodlit stadium, Vaughan relates all the details of the crash to his audience of midnight connoisseurs, including the date (September 9th, 1955) and the "performance cast." Dean, played by the psychotic stuntman Seagrave, will slam his new Porsche Spyder into the side of the Ford driven by college student Donald Turnupseed, who, according to Vaughan, was very important. "The two would meet for a moment," Vaughan shouts gleefully to his fans on the bleachers, "a moment that created a Hollywood legend. I myself will play engineer Rolf Wutherich from Zuffenhausen, Germany..."

In Cronenberg's film, Seagrave meets his end by re-enacting in drag Jayne Mansfield's fatal crash of 1967, around which he has built "an abbatoir of sexual mutilation" (Ballard 135). Seagrave's highly detailed and authentic re-enactment dispels the myth that the truck under which Mansfield steered her car decapitated her. Seagrave gets it right. After the crash, his wig is stuck on the same door as had been Mansfield's, which led the first eyewitnesses to the crash to conclude that the actress had been decapitated (Grundmann 25).⁴ This connection between death, celebrity, and the automobile embodies the totemic iconography of all crash vehicles and other dysfunctional commodities in Cronenberg's *mise-en-scène*, and is reinforced by the fact that Vaughan himself roams the freeways in a car which itself has mythic dimensions—a black 1963 Lincoln Continental convertible, the model in which Kennedy was assassinated. Indeed, in a piece of dialogue taken directly from the novel, Vaughan proposes the Kennedy assassination as "a special kind of car crash" (Ballard 183).⁵ In the novel, James Ballard, confined to his apartment, fantasizes about the injuries of film actresses and television personalities, "whose bodies would flower into dozens of auxiliary artifices, points of sexual conjunction with their audiences formed by the swerving technology of the automobile" (Ballard 180). If the obsession with celebrity is a by-product of capitalism, then the obsession with the celebrity car crash is a fantasy of literalization: the final and much longed-for union between the celebrity and members of their audience.

The traditional road movie is often regarded in psychoanalytic terms as a story of birth and regeneration. The car can easily be read as a symbol of a claustal (womb-like) environment, within which its driver feels safe and secure, and from which, at the same time, he experiences

an ambivalent urge to escape. If the classical road movie deals with birth and regeneration, however, then *Crash* is a narrative of abortion.

In psychoanalytic terms, the car accidents depicted by Cronenberg (both "live" and televised in the Swedish crash-test films screened by Vaughan)—especially those in which a figure is projected through the windscreen—suggest a number of parallels with the forcible expulsion from the womb and the anxiety associated with birth trauma, or stillbirth. The obsession with car accidents shared by the characters in *Crash* suggests the death wish underneath much apocalyptic thought, and resonates closely with a number of psychodynamic constructs that psychoanalyst Henry Murray describes as "anti-claustral complexes." These include "cathection of claustra"—strong emotional investment in claustral enclosures such as the car, feelings of chaos and lack of control, and a violent terror of suffocation and confinement.

Sexuality in *Crash* does not lead to birth and renewal, but instead represents an emblem of chaos and alienation. Vaughan and Seagrave's compulsive sexual desire to both observe and re-enact crashes in which a figure is forcibly ejected from the car seem to suggest, among other things, an "egression complex"—an anti-claustral tendency associated with active attempts to separate from the mother's body. In most cases, this yearning to escape from the womb is associated with strong desires for autonomy and the establishment of an independent identity. Birth traumas are usually re-enacted in order to master the anxieties associated with the birth process. In the case of *Crash*, however, the magic of birth no longer has any regenerative function, because what is at stake here is stillbirth. No creation comes out of this chaos. In the crashes enacted by Vaughan and Seagrave, the forced ejection of a body from the car results not in the establishment of an independent identity, but in sudden, violent, and premature death.

"In *Crash*," writes Fritz Leiber in his review of Ballard's novel, "geometry is king." Leiber argues that in this novel, "Ballard is seeking to satisfy a compulsion or an imperative" which manifests itself in the form of "a delirium of Euclidian eroticism" (Leiber 129-30). In his film of Ballard's novel, Cronenberg realizes this imperative by configuring the traditional horizon of the classical road movie as circular, leading endlessly back on itself, as empty and as meaningless as a Euclidian dot. The horizon in *Crash* is like Vaughan's ill-lit, clandestine racetrack where cars pile into one another pointlessly, chaotically—as Ballard puts it, "cars meeting head-on in complex collisions endlessly repeated in slow-motion films" (Ballard 8).

Consequently, unlike most road movies, there is no real sense of narrative form in *Crash*; the plot is merely a gateway to a certain cultural, historical, and psychological locale in which the power of myth has given way to a barbarism whose violence lacks any restorative or regenerative function. Repetitive and insistent, Cronenberg's film is like a piece of newsreel footage being played over and over again, a circular re-run of obsessions, a pointless, elliptical quest to find interconnections between apparently inexplicable phenomena. Where the traditional road movie follows a linear horizon, Cronenberg's regressive fantasy is vertiginous and entropic, giving its audience a sense of queasy dislocation and foreboding.

Crash is a compulsive nightmare, a film about the end of culture and of history, the road movie of the apocalypse. It is full of those "premonitions of disaster" that James Ballard senses as he sits at home on his verandah, watching through his binoculars the traffic move along the motorway, "determined to spot the first signs of the end of the world by automobile" (Ballard 50).

Mikita Brottman
Shippensburg University

Christopher Sharrett
Seton Hall University

Notes

¹ Alexander Walker, in *The London Evening Standard* of 3 June 1996, describes the film as containing "some of the most perverted acts and theories of sexual deviance I have ever seen propagated in mainstream cinema." In the 9 November issue of the 1996 *Daily Mail*, critic Christopher Tookey added his voice to the outrage, declaring that

Cronenberg's film promulgates "the morality of the satyr, the nymphomaniac, the rapist, the pedophile, the danger to society," and marks "the point at which even a liberal society would draw the line." As evidence of the director's allegedly perverted morality, the reader's attention is drawn to the fact that "the initially heterosexual characters lose their inhibitions [and] they experiment pleasurably with gay sex, lesbian sex, and sex with cripples."

² Grundmann points out that "the sexual encounters featured in *Crash* challenge notions of who has sex with whom, in what kind of environment, in what manner, and for what purpose."

³ Grundmann goes on to point out that "[t]hey don't seem to fuck each other so much as they fuck the world from which they're alienated. As rear-entry sex involves a refusal to face the sex partner and to confront his or her humanity, the film uses it as a close analogy to the cult members' practice of crashing one another's cars. This practice, too, involves a calculated refusal to see the crash partner as a human being."

⁴ Grundmann points out that "[t]he lowly Seagrave is to Vaughan what Renfield is to Dracula. Seagrave is Vaughan's assistant in all important affairs." He also discusses "the Dean intertext of Fifties drag strip races, teen rebellion and car sex," which "suggests the close link between the sexual revolution and the car culture," giving "the fetishistic techno-play" of the film's characters some historical grounding.

⁵ In the novel, Vaughan also refers to "[t]he special involvement of at least two of the Kennedys with the automobile."

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