

Document Citation

Title	Crash
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1996 May 20
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Crash, Cronenberg, David, 1996

CRASH

(CANADIAN)

A Fine Line Features release (in U.S.) of a Jeremy Thomas and Robert Lantos presentation of an Alliance Communications production in association with Telefilm Canada and the Movie Network. Produced by David Cronenberg. Executive producers, Lantos, Thomas. Co-producers, Stephane Reichel, Marilyn Stonehouse. Co-executive producers, Andras Hamori, Chris Auty.

Directed, written by David Cronenberg, based on the novel by J.G. Ballard. Camera (Deluxe color), Peter Suschitzky; editor, Ronald Sanders; music, Howard Shore; production design, Carol Spier; art direction, Tamara Deverell; set decoration, Elinor Rose Galbraith; costume design, Denise Cronenberg; sound (Dolby), David Lee; stunt coordinator, Ted Hanlan; assistant director, David J. Webb; casting, Deirdre Bowen. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 16, 1996. Running time: 98 MIN.

James Ballard	James Spader
Helen Remington	Holly Hunter
Vaughan	Elias Koteas
Catherine Ballard	Deborah Unger
Gabrielle	Rosanna Arquette
Colin Seagrave	Peter MacNeil

A forbiddingly frigid piece of esoteric erotica, David Cronenberg's "Crash" goes all the way with a sexual obsession that few people will turn on to. Faithfully adapted from J.G. Ballard's 1973 cult novel and directed with precise control, this attempt to transform a fetish for automobile accidents and bodily injury into a

metaphor for human adaptation to the technological age remains an exceedingly intellectual work of cold sensuality, with even theoretical appeal only to the most specialized audiences. A few hardcore adherents may surface, but this outre exercise in rigorous personal cinema will be lucky to match even the meager business of the director's dazzling "Naked Lunch," and will likely run into ratings problems in the U.S. and censorship problems in some other territories.

Although the ostensible subject of the picture is the erotic appeal of car crashes and how a surrender to their influence can effect "the reshaping of the human body by modern technology," pic is loaded, first and foremost, with sex that is initially rather compelling in its weirdness but which finally becomes borderline laughable. Cronenberg is a master of creating and sustaining a mood of insinuating cool and dark allure, but while the director remains firmly behind the wheel for the first hour or so, he cracks up toward the end with sequences that send the film and the audience into a ditch.

Cronenberg lays his cards on the table in the opening scene, which has gorgeous blonde Catherine Ballard (Deborah Unger) becoming turned on by flesh-to-metal contact before being approached from behind by a man. At the same time, her husband, James (James Spader), has sex with a woman at work, and their follow-up relating of their experiences to each other establishes a heady world of rarefied complicity and the urge to explore the unknown.

A bad auto accident puts a banged-up James in the hospital with a severely broken leg, and kills the man in the other car. The dead man's wife, Helen Remington (Holly Hunter), suffers only moderate injuries, although their shared experience leads them, when they meet later, into a spontaneous and very hot sexual relationship.

A strange scientific researcher from the hospital, Vaughan (Elias Koteas), provides their entry into the nether world of the automotive turn-on. One night, James and Helen attend a kinky event hosted by Vaughan — a restaging of James Dean's death in a horrible car crash. Vaughan, impersonating Dean's German mechanic, rides in an open Porsche along with a stuntman portraying the actor, while another man drives the car that will hit the Dean car. All ride without seat belts or any other protection in a desire to duplicate the accident precisely.

After the re-enactment, James and Helen join the others at the stuntman's home, where they meet Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette), a foxy lady whose damaged leg in no

way interferes with her sexual appetite. A sort of group grope ensues, and it becomes clear that these folks are way, way out there when they discuss their next project, a re-creation of Jayne Mansfield's fatal car wreck.

Vaughan, who drives around in a black 1963 Lincoln convertible in homage to JFK, is the prime mover of the group, the pathfinder who believes in pushing the envelope of danger and sex to arrive at a new physical, psychological and sexual plateau. A veritable sexaholic, James keeps things going with

- Catherine, Helen and Gabrielle, and his new link with Vaughan leads to
- their having their wounds tattooed, followed by a bout of nasty sex.

James ultimately draws his wife into the violent circle in an attempt to restore their marriage, but pic takes an abrupt detour into a nearly risible lesbian encounter unmotivated by anything other than a desire to complete the circle of sexual links, then concludes on a quasi-redemptive note that just doesn't cut it.

Still, the mood is gripping for a while, established by the highly specific sexual interests and the actors' hushed, deliberate way of speaking, which rarely rises above a whisper. Although they are defined exclusively in terms of their erotic obsessions, the characters become more intriguing once they are initiated into the auto club in that they become fearless about pursuing their interests. But any grander psychological or philosophical territory remains unexplored.

Characters also lack any meaning or connection with one another except in their pushing of sexual limits. Before long, it becomes clear that nearly every encounter is meant to lead to sexual coupling, whereupon it's on to the next meeting, in which a fresh assault on a physical frailty or damaged spot will build to an identical result.

Sex scenes are clear about what's going on, even if below-the-belt nudity is only fleeting. Virtually every linkup is a rear entry, which creates the unwanted impression of a running gag after the first few sessions. This goes uncommented-upon, so it remains a mystery whether this sexual approach is intended as a parallel to the many scenes of cars ramming others from behind. Nothing here is remotely a turn-on from an audience p.o.v.

Set largely at night in Toronto, impeccably composed pic is dominated by blues, grays and purples, which accentuate the feeling of utter cool. Technically, film is superb, with the machine-tooled precision of Cronenberg's craftsmanship creating its own steely pleasure. Gleaming lensing by Peter Suschitzky, ultra-tight editing by Ronald Sanders and Howard

Shore's metallic score contribute mightily to sustaining the intensely muted tone.

Thesps work within narrow parameters, although they gamely go wherever their directors wants them to. Spader is fine as the young man exploring the outer limits, and Koteas projects a subtle sense of being rather further over the edge. Hunter also gets in the proper mood, although her character mysteriously disappears from the action in the middle going, only to strangely resurface toward the end. Of all the thesps, Unger, as the eyes-wide-open wife, perhaps most perfectly personifies the film's prevailing sense of composure and daring.

It remains highly questionable whether Ballard's "Crash" was an appropriate or adaptable book for the screen, not for cinematic reasons, since the result is highly visual and frostily sensual, but because its concerns are so peculiar, remote and, to the great majority of people, off-putting. The boundaries being pushed here just aren't of great relevance or interest.

—Todd McCarthy



SPILLS 'N' THRILLS: Deborah Unger and James Spader play a couple who get their kicks in unusual ways in David Cronenberg's "Crash."