

## Screening Reports

The weekly screening reports are a challenging assignment I borrowed from my colleague, Doug Park, who also teaches film in the English Department. The assignment, which is two to three pages in length, asks students to do three things: gather their most important impressions, ideas, and questions about the film; include a technical analysis of a specific scene; and use that scene to demonstrate how film technique contributes to form and meaning. Students are required to make three detailed points supporting their analysis. We encourage them to read the films thematically, but to do so in the context of media-specific analysis, which foregrounds film meaning within systems of visual and technological representation.

### Sample Student Screening Report

#### Screening Report on *Crash*, by Ian Shuler

Based off the cult sci-fi novel by J.G. Ballard, David Cronenberg's *Crash* explores the relationship between humans, human sexuality and technology. While the film has been banned and censored for being pornographic, implying that the sole purpose of the film is to create sexual arousal, the fear surrounding the film is psychological. As Cronenberg has said, the film does not create a "cinema of comfort." Through sexual acts in cars and car crashes, Cronenberg directs us to consider philosophically and theoretically where we as humans become intimate with and operate like machines, where in cyborg culture we must redefine our ideas of love, emotion and death, and the dangers of disconnecting and losing human will through the romanticization of technology.

Cronenberg parallels the exhilaration of sexual pleasure to car crashes. We are introduced to the metonymy between humans and technology in the emblematic first three scenes of the film, all of which are sex scenes. In the opening scene we follow a tracking shot through a private aircraft barn. The way the camera glides over and around the polished surface of the airplanes is Cronenberg's technical direction in shooting human-made machinery like a body, thereby establishing a link between humans and technology. The camera finds Catherine Ballard and we watch as she becomes intimate with the airplane, pressing her nipple to the wing. When a man approaches her from behind we see her re-cover her breast, as if he has interrupted the intimacy of the moment. Even as they have sex it is the plane that she drapes her arm across and kisses. In the reflection of the metal we see her face, and on her face we see the reflection of the blue-gray of the plane. This shot not only associates humans and technology, but demarcate the colors as a symbol of her apathy and disconnection from human reality.

James Ballard is a television commercial producer, and the second scene of the movie shows him "on the job." James is having extramarital relations in the camera room, which is a predecessor and substitute metaphor for sex in cars. The connection between sexuality and technology through cars is alluded to when a television prop steering wheel and dashboard frames the initial shot of this scene. "There's a whole generation of Americans spawned in the back of '55 Fords," Cronenberg said. "Cars always represented sexual freedom for those who could afford them." Being on a studio set, the spectator makes a subconscious association between the prop as an appendage to the camera, and the car as a human appendage. Through the car dashboard, the audience is sutured into the perspective of a machine, viewing both as a camera apparatus and a vehicle. The camera frames an indoor hallway with closed doors at the end, thus foreshadowing that although there is nowhere to go but forward, crashing is inevitable.

In French, a term for orgasm is *le Petit Morte*, "the little death." In the third scene, James and Catherine are talking on the deck of their apartment. She stares blankly into the blue tinted web of highway below as he leans against the sliding door behind her. (Later we see them making love inside their apartment, yet through the window the night reflection of the city of Montreal is superimposed on their bodies.) At this point, traffic is light, but the frequency of cars increases with the action and pace as James and Catherine become more entwined with the car crash subculture. Their conversation during this sex scene is a direct parallel to their conversation at the end of the film, which unites the thrill of orgasm with the thrill of death. In this scene, post-sex with other people they ask each other, "Did you cum?" When James tell her that they were interrupted, she tells him, "Poor darling, maybe the next time." By the end of the film, we see that their sexual excitement has taken the form of car crashes. After he has knocked her off the road James parks and walks down to her. His first reaction, however, is to observe the damage to the car, not to Catherine. Finally he asks, "Are you hurt?" She thinks she is alright, to which he responds, "Maybe the next time, darling." Like the movies

stars that fatal car accidents have claimed, Catherine has made an icon of death, as the next level of human sexuality. She had taken off her seat belt like one disrobes for sex. Her expression is a blank stare of dissatisfaction. Her position in the grass after the collision, however, is still sexual, and when they make love halfway under the toppled, blue-smoking car—halfway human, halfway mechanical—she grabs hold not of him, but the door frame of the gray car. It is not the "fertile collision" that James and Helen experienced, getting hurt and seeing someone die..."maybe the next time..."

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