Document generated on 04/13/2025 6:11 a.m.

Transcr(é)ation

# Reading Humor in David Cronenberg's Crash
# Lire l'humour dans Crash de David Cronenberg

Myrto Petsota

Volume 4, Number 1, 2024

David Cronenberg, Adaptateur
David Cronenberg, Adaptator

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110837ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5206/tc.v4i1.17200

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Western Libraries, University of Western Ontario

ISSN

2816-8895 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Petsota, M. (2024). Reading Humor in David Cronenberg's Crash. *Transcr(é)ation*, *4*(1), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.5206/tc.v4i1.17200

Article abstract

David Cronenberg's statement that "The film is funny, the book is not very funny" (1997) presents a captivating paradox regarding his adaptation of J. G. Ballard's Crash. This statement reveals Cronenberg as both an insightful and superficial reader of Ballard. His film adaptation chooses to remain faithful to many aspects of the source material and retains the subtle undercurrents of humor found in the book, often overlooked and unrecognized by both the director and audiences, as well critics. Paradoxically, the film's reception has further obscured this aspect of his work. The paper delineates the mechanics of humor in Crash, applying Freudian and Bergsonian theories linking humor to anxiety relief and behavioral correction. It spotlights Ballard's absurd character speculations and detached narrative voice juxtaposing poetic violence, while Cronenberg conveys humor via affectless performances, anti-climactic sex, and self-referential jokes exposing cinematic artifice. Further analysis explores Ballard's satire through the parody of melodramatic tableaux versus Cronenberg's meta-cinematic parody of Hollywood and the road movie genre, noting that the adaptation compresses the novel's sociopolitical critique but expands its intertextuality. The article challenges assumptions that humor must be light or affirming, arguing that the unsettling, avant-garde laughter in Crash (1973, 1996) compels reflection on technology's impacts on identity. Ultimately, recognizing the dark comedy in Crash and its adaptation illuminates their lingering cultural commentary on dehumanization rather than celebrating the pathology of the characters.

© Myrto Petsota, 2024

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

# Reading Humor in David Cronenberg's *Crash*

**MYRTO PETSOTA**

*Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3*

## ABSTRACT

*David Cronenberg's statement that "The film is funny, the book is not very funny" (1997) presents a captivating paradox regarding his adaptation of J. G. Ballard's* Crash*. This statement reveals Cronenberg as both an insightful and superficial reader of Ballard. His film adaptation chooses to remain faithful to many aspects of the source material and retains the subtle undercurrents of humor found in the book, often overlooked and unrecognized by both the director and audiences, as well critics. Paradoxically, the film's reception has further obscured this aspect of his work. The paper delineates the mechanics of humor in Crash, applying Freudian and Bergsonian theories linking humor to anxiety relief and behavioral correction. It spotlights Ballard's absurd character speculations and detached narrative voice juxtaposing poetic violence, while Cronenberg conveys humor via affectless performances, anti-climactic sex, and self-referential jokes exposing cinematic artifice. Further analysis explores Ballard's satire through the parody of melodramatic tableaux versus Cronenberg's meta-cinematic parody of Hollywood and the road movie genre, noting that the adaptation compresses the novel's sociopolitical critique but expands its intertextuality. The article challenges assumptions that humor must be light or affirming, arguing that the unsettling, avant-garde laughter in* Crash *(1973, 1996) compels reflection on technology's impacts on identity. Ultimately, recognizing the dark comedy in* Crash *and its adaptation illuminates their lingering cultural commentary on dehumanization rather than celebrating the pathology of the characters.*

***Keywords:*** *Crash · James Ballard · David Cronenberg · humor · adaptation*

Petsota, Myrto. 2024. "Reading Humour in David Cronenberg's *Crash*." *Transcr(é)ation*. Vol. 4 (Winter 2024): 1-28. https://doi.org/10.5206/tc.v4i1.17200. © MyrtoPetsota, CC BY-SA 4.0.

## Introduction

Reporting on the reception of *Crash* (1973), Roger Luckhurst stresses the ongoing debate concerning James G. Ballard's novel. Hailed by some as a cautionary tale for the incisive nature of its prose and its formal breakthrough, *Crash* has also been abhorred and dismissed for its amorality or even its immorality[1]. Jean Baudrillard's enthusiastic response to the novel in his *Simulacra and Simulation* made *Crash* a landmark in postmodernist circles due to its ground-breaking depiction of the human condition in late capitalist society[2] (an academic appropriation of the book that horrified Ballard[3]). Further shock and controversy came with David Cronenberg's adaptation in 1991, which received a Special Jury Prize "For Originality for Daring and for Audacity" at Cannes, while some judges were absent or left prematurely. The film rated NC-17 in the U.S. and 18 in the U.K. and faced distribution delays. The phrase "beyond psychiatric help" emerged from a publisher's rejection letter addressed to Ballard, while "beyond the bounds of depravity" headlined Alexander Walker's critique in the *Evening Standard*. *Crash* (Cronenberg, 1991) became controversial for its lack of a moral framework[4] and its depiction of a bleak, everyday life[5]. Cronenberg himself described the film as "anti-pornographic[6]," focusing more on the themes of the "death of affect[7]" and the

---

[1] Luckhurst, Roger, "J. G. Ballard: *Crash*," *A Companion to Science Fiction*, Seed, David (ed.), Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005, pp. 512-14.

[2] Baudrillard, Jean, "Crash," *Simulacra and Simulation*, Faria Glaser, Sheila (trans), Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 111-119.

[3] Ballard, J. G., 'A Response to the Invitation to Respond.' *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 18, n°3, "Science Fiction and Postmodernism," Nov. 1991, p. 329. In his response, Ballard decries the intellectual over-analysis afflicting science fiction, arguing this once "exhilarating and challenging entertainment" has been diminished into a heavily scrutinized academic discipline—a transmutation he likens to the "apotheosis of the hamburger" (*ibid.*). While acknowledging the brilliance behind Baudrillard's other critically acclaimed postulations, Ballard admits his disinterest in postmodern musings on his novel, charging postmodern theory with imperiling science fiction's essence—its theoretical imposition overcomplicating and threatening the vital core of the genre.

[4] Jones Irwin suggests Cronenberg's vision diverges from traditional moral narratives. He sees his work as amoral or non-moral, as opposed to Burroughs's "impassioned moralism" or Ballard's "cautionary tale." This distinction is termed as "bloodless agnosticism" (in Riches, Simon (ed.), *The Philosophy of David Cronenberg*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012, pp. 197-215).

[5] Brottman, Mikita, Sharrett, Christopher, "The End of the Road," *Car Crash Culture*, Brottman, Mikita (ed.), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 126-132.

[6] As defined in Sontag, Susan, "The Pornographic Imagination," *The Partisan Review*, vol. 34, Spring 1967, pp. 181-212.

[7] "The peculiar reversal of values, where sensation ruled and sensation was all that mattered, led to what I called in *The Atrocity Exhibition* the death of affect, the death of feeling. Nothing mattered

depletion of bourgeois life than on sexual arousal. The film's portrayal of sexuality intertwined with themes of self-annihilation, reflecting the decline of the civilizing process and the failure of myth-making mechanisms in late capitalist society. *Crash* is, to a certain extent, a film about the end of culture and history, a narrative of stillbirth rather than regeneration in a society obsessed with catastrophe and self-annihilation (Brottman and Sharrett, 2002).

Visually, *Crash* is Cronenberg's most minimalist and "high modernist" film, with its polished look and precisely composed shots[8]. Ballard's novel has an unmistakable storyboard quality and reads as if it were meant to be adapted, yet it seems so difficult to film[9]. In both Ballard's novel and Cronenberg's adaptation, the narrative centers around a protagonist named James Ballard (James Spader), who survives a catastrophic car crash. This event awakens an obsessive fascination with the eroticism and violence of car accidents. The protagonist's life becomes entangled with several key figures: Vaughan (Elias Kosteas), a charismatic individual orchestrating re-enactments of famous car crashes; Dr. Helen Remington (Holly Hunter), the widow of the man killed in the protagonist's crash, with whom he forms asexual relationship; Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger), the protagonist's wife, who becomes drawn into this world of eroticized car crashes—James tries to initiate his wife Catherine into this world by crashing her car; and Colin Seagrave (Peter MacNeill), a stunt driver involved in Vaughan's dangerous re-enactments. These characters form a nexus of relationships fueled by their shared fixation on the destructive and erotic nature of car accidents. Their interactions explore the boundaries of conventional sexuality, meshed with themes of technology, violence, and desire, painting a provocative and disturbing picture of human obsession.

In a talk with Vigo Mortensen at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), Cronenberg made a distinction between the tone of the novel and the

---

as long as it generated a powerful, galvanic response, sent a surge of current through the public sensorium." ("In Conversation with J. G. Ballard," *Writers in Conversation with Christopher Bigsby*, vol. 1, Norwich: EAS Publishing, University of East Anglia, 2000, pp. 72-86). The "death of affect" echoes Frederic Jameson's critique of "postmodern culture's emotional distancing and depthlessness, elevating surface over substance"—central to Jameson's analysis of postmodernism's impact. See Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [1991], Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

[8] Beard, William, *The Artist as Monster—The Cinema of David Cronenberg*, Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2001, p. 380.

[9] Sinclair, Iain, *Crash. David Cronenberg's Post-mortem on J. G. Ballard's Trajectory of Faith*, London: BFI Publishing, 1999, p. 8.

adaptation regarding humor[10]. He mentioned that when he first read the novel, he found it quite disturbing as it had "zero humor" and no self-awareness. (Cronenberg 2019, 13'32"). This statement reveals Cronenberg as both an insightful and superficial reader of Ballard. His film adaptation remains faithful to the source material, retaining the subtle undercurrents of the humor found in the book, often overlooked and unrecognized by both the director and audiences, as well as critics.

In the context of art criticism, humor is analyzed not only for its entertainment value but also for its ability to provide insights into the human condition, social norms, and cultural contexts. Among the numerous theories of humor, I will engage with the three that have been most influential in art criticism and analysis: the Relief Theory[11], the Superiority Theory[12] and the Incongruity Theory[13].

Christian Metz posits that film privileges the syntagmatic, or horizontal axis, which deals with the flow of images and scenes in time, over the

---

[10] Cronenberg, David, "Viggo Mortensen & David Cronenberg on CRASH," *Youtube* uploaded by TIFF, March 31st, 2019, https://youtu.be/f5r9Xi7OZ1w?si=4_Mqv0GeZKjx3CX7, (accessed Jan. 2024).

[11] Sigmund Freud's Relief Theory posits that humor and laughter are ways of releasing pent-up nervous energy and providing relief from behavioral constraints, providing psychological comfort and relaxing social norms. Freud, Sigmund, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" [1905], *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 8, Strachey, James; Freud, Sigmund (eds.), London, Vintage Publishing, 2001.

[12] First expounded by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651), this theory argues that laughter stems from the following phenomenon: "*Sudden glory*, is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves" (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 38). This theory was expanded on through empirical studies of laughter by Charles Gruner, who provided psychological evidence to argue that finding humor in others' failings communicates feelings of power, superiority, and mastery in the laugher. See *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*, New Brunswick: Transaction, 1997. Together, the seminal analysis by Hobbes and the experimental data of Gruner reinforced the concept that apprehending contrast between people underlies the humor and comedy associated with the Superiority Theory tradition.

[13] It was first elucidated by Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer. In his seminal *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant theorized that our perception of humor is kindled in moments when strained anticipations abruptly give way to naught but air, underscoring the primacy of surprise and cognitive turnabouts. See *Critique of Judgement*, London: Macmillan, 1914. Expanding upon Kant's notions, Schopenhauer argued that such comic moments arise from perceiving fundamental incongruities between our abstract conceptions of a thing and its actual existence in reality. See *The World as Will and Representation* [1818-9], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

paradigmatic, or vertical axis, which involves the selection of signifying elements that could potentially replace each other within the narrative[14]. As the analysis will confirm, in literature, humor can be deeply intertwined with the narrative and character development, relying heavily on the paradigmatic choices of language and narrative style. Film, however, conveys humor through the syntagmatic progression of visual and auditory elements, including timing, physical comedy, visual gags, and dialogue delivery.

The purpose of this essay is, first, to reveal the mechanisms that make reading the humor in both works challenging. Secondly, it will present and analyze the different approaches to humor and how they relate to questions of genre and medium in the novel and Cronenberg's adaptation. Finally, it will consider the implications of re-reading humor in the two works in a contemporary context.

## The Challenge of Reading Humor in *Crash*

The reception of Ballard's novel and Cronenberg's adaptation clearly indicate a reluctance or a resistance to see humor in them. Ballard uses satire, clashes of tone and content, and exaggerations of violence and sexuality to provoke dark, unsettling humor. The clinical prose and poetic style add to the absurdity of the first-person narrative. But why has reading humor in *Crash* (both the film and the adaptation) proved so challenging? Is it because of their content? Or because the authorial moral intention has, in both cases, been carefully concealed, suppressed, or wiped out? Many interpretations of the novel and the film[15] over-emphasized the literal collusion of human bodies and technologies[16] and failed to point out that they also function on a symbolic level, borrowing from

---

[14] Metz, Christian, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

[15] Christine Cornea, for instance, argued that "the audience is discouraged from attempting to find underlying symbolism, metaphorical meaning, or psychological subtext: the metaphors have been literalized and are simply there to see" Cornea, Christine, "David Cronenberg's *Crash* and Performing Cyborgs," *The Velvet Light Trap*, n°52, 2003, pp. 4-14.

[16] Cronenberg, David, "Braking and Entering: Director David Cronenberg on His Austere and Unnerving J. G. Ballard Adaptation, *Crash*," *Filmmaker Magazine*, Winter 1997, https://filmmakermagazine.com/110818-david-cronenberg-crash/ (accessed Nov. 2023). Cronenberg's interpretation aligns with this idea, as suggested by his interview published in the *Filmmaker Magazine* shortly after his film was released: "the film works on such a non-literal level that it is really irrelevant. What Ballard is saying is not that car crashes are sexy. It's that there is a deeply hidden erotic element to the event of the car crash. I believe that is true, and that is what we are talking about in the movie" (np).

the strategies of hyperrealism[17]. Readers find it difficult to come to terms with the novel, probably because of its central metaphor—that of the car as a means of sexual fulfillment[18]. The characters fetishize[19]; they literalize the metaphor and become trapped in reproducible images. While the affectless interactions that occur between the characters have abundantly been discussed, it has not been pointed out that it is possible to understand the body-car collusion as a literalization of pathological thought processes.

If we start by taking a Freudian approach[20] to humor, it is possible to find examples both in the novel and its adaptation of how humor works as a coping and protective mechanism for dealing with its disturbing themes. In Chapter 20, for instance, the narrator describes how Vaughan humorously speculates about the sexual preferences and habits of famous figures:

> "...Monroe masturbating or Oswald saying left- or right-handed, which would you guess? And what instrument panels? Was orgasm reached more quickly with a recessed or overhanging binnacle? Vinyl colour-contouring windshield glass these are factors. Garbo and Dietrich there's a place for the gerontological approach. The special involvement of at least two of the

---

[17] Baudrillard's notion of "hyperreality" (1994) examines how fastidiously simulated realities reach such meticulous fidelity that they become indistinguishable from the real world. With experiences and images substitutional yet seemingly more veracious than truths themselves, hyperrealism catalyzes the erosion between reality and artifice. Reflecting postmodernism's mediating techno-cultural milieu, the concept outlines an order wherein simulations hold more ontological weight than nature itself. In this analysis, media technology has profoundly reshaped perception, understanding, even our basic ability to differentiate real from replica.

[18] Gasiorek, Andrzej, *J. G. Ballard*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 83.

[19] Boyne, Roy, "Crash Theory: The Ubiquity of the Fetish and the End of Time," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 4, n° 2, 1999, pp. 41–52. Using Ballard's *Crash* as a key example, Boyne analyses how the present moment becomes fetishized in modern society and explores the relationship between fetishism and historical understanding, arguing that modern society's focus on the present impacts our perception of history. He also discusses how the future is rendered spectral or ghostly in the context of contemporary culture and technology. This analysis resonates with Jameson's critique of the postmodern condition, where history is seen as a series of disconnected images or spectacles, contributing to the "death of affect" and a "depthless culture."

[20] Samuel Francis elucidates Ballard's fusion of psychoanalytic principles and geometric constructs in his literary works. He highlights Ballard's use of Freudian concepts to explore sexuality, psyche, and human-technology interaction, positioning his fiction as a response to Freud's theories within science fiction. This underscores Ballard's innovative narrative approach and engages with the broader discourse surrounding psychoanalysis, situating his works as an intersection of psychological theory and literary imagination. See "'A Marriage of Freud and Euclid': Psychotic Epistemology in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*," *Humanities*, vol. 8, n°1, May 2019, pp. 93-107.

Kennedys with the automobile…" Always he deliberately side-stepped into self-parody (p. 151).

Such playful and absurd speculations, augmented by the narrator's pointed emphasis, do provide a momentary Freudian relief from the novel's otherwise dark and heavy content. Cronenberg does not fail to notice that and features several moments in the adaptation where tension is purposefully relieved. When Ballard and Helen first have sex, Helen must get rid of a cigarette butt and then struggles to wriggle herself into position in the car for a sex act that lasts a few seconds (23'11"). The awkward and banal elements of the scene make it anticlimactic before it cuts to another sex scene between Ballard and his wife, which, in the comfort of their home, seems much more satisfying (24'53").

Henri Bergson's perspective on humor and comedy (belonging to the incongruity tradition) is intricately woven into the fabric of social functionality, necessitating an inherent adaptability to the ever-evolving tapestry of societal contexts. Bergson identifies "mechanical inelasticity" or rigid and repetitive behavior, as central to humor, contrasting with classical theories that saw comedy as ridiculing supposed inferiors[21]. In his typology, the main varieties of the comic involve repetition[22], inversion[23], and reciprocal interference of events or ideas. He links humor more to the notion of incongruity when behavior fails to adapt to norms of social interaction.

In the novel, the disconnection between the horrific subject matter and the blasé prose creates a darkly humorous incongruity, abundant throughout. Characters have emotionless sex at crash sites amid impassive crowds (Chapter 18), while the narrator provides oddly specific details and absurd stereotypes[24]. This incongruity arises because the narrative's mechanical and emotionless description clashes with the reader's expectations of a more empathetic or horrified response to such situations. In the film, most sex scenes verge on the

---

[21] Bergson, Henri, "Laughter" in *Comedy*, Sypher, Wylie (ed.), Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956.

[22] Vaughan rehearses his own death in various car crashes, which are described as elaborate and varied in nature. This obsession not only serves as a key narrative element but also echoes the concept of the comic through excessive repetition of an act to the point of absurdity.

[23] One key phrase in the opening paragraphs of the novel, "For him these wounds were the keys to a new sexuality born from a perverse technology" (p. 7) reads as an inversion of the following: "For him these wounds were the keys to a perverse sexuality born from a new technology."

[24] In Chapter 1: "I think of the absurd crashes of neurasthenic housewives returning from their VD clinics, hitting parked cars in suburban high streets. I think of the crashes of excited schizophrenics colliding head-on into stalled laundry vans in one-way streets; of manic-depressives crushed while making pointless litmus on motorway access roads" (p. 7).

comic effect, as they are performed mechanically without intimacy or aborted mid-act. Two other examples highlight "mechanical inelasticity." First, when James accompanies Helen to Seagrave's squalid and gloomy apartment. Along with Vaughan, Vera (Cheryl Swarts) and Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette), they are sitting in the living room watching a safety video about car crashes as they become aroused (48'02"). At one point in the video (49'08"), the image freezes. Vaughan moves on to talk about the material he is accumulating for his book on car crashes, but Helen is clearly distressed. She stands up abruptly, pushing the table in front of her, and the cutlery falls to the floor. She starts looking for the remote control and says, "Where is it? I'm sure we see this again in slow motion, closer I mean. In detail" (49'39"). The character has trouble coping with the interruption, finding solace only when the video resumes. The humor of the scene is amplified by the other characters' reactions to her discomfort, which they clearly find excessive. Notably, Helen does not display any distress in the previous scene when sex with James is interrupted in the car park (47'03"). Second, when James takes Gabrielle to the annual auto show (1h11'56"-1h14'09"). Gabrielle, who is physically disabled due to a car crash and wears steel braces that restrain her movement, uses her maimed body to unsettle the salesman (Judah Katz). The scene humorously underscores the salesman's inability to adapt to Gabrielle's unconventional interaction with the cars. James and Gabrielle are amused at his awkward attempts to assist, despite her deliberate provocations. At the same time, the concept of "mechanical inelasticity" becomes ironic and ambivalent, as the characters are eager to adapt to the car and fuse with technology.

Chapter 23 concludes with the narrator spreading his semen on crashed cars at a wrecking yard. A solemn, symbolic, and yet bizarrely transgressive act, due to the extreme juxtaposition of human intimacy with the cold, mechanical nature of wrecked cars. This adds an irrational and humorous element to the narrative: by placing human sexual expression in a context of destruction and decay, it challenges the sanctity often attributed to it. Similarly, in Chapter 12, the narrator and others engage in mechanical and unfeeling sex as crash test dummies, which mix absurdism and humor. Semen, as a filmic element, is often not shown and is used as a symbol of the unwatchable[25]. However, Cronenberg turns this into a scene in which Ballard, after having sex with Vaughan (1h18'06"), goes to a crashed car, gets in, and puts his hands on the steering wheel, arousing himself (1h20'51"). Suddenly, Vaughan crashes his car twice, interrupting him almost as a joke (1h22'56").

[25] Harpold, Terry, "Dry Leatherette: Cronenberg's *Crash*," *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 7, n°3, 1997.

Bergson maintains that laughter serves as a societal corrective, but both works provocatively lack that clear moral scope. Freud's relief theory of humor suggests that humor should introduce a certain level of comfort for the reader or audience. But this is certainly not the dominant type of humor in the two works, and while Ballard has wielded a broader tonal palette in his œuvre, Cronenberg has made discomfort one of his artistic traits. The novel transitions from disgust to humor in a grotesque manner. Humor in the novel arises from the coexistence of incongruous ideas, with disgust serving as a gateway to comedy[26]. This mode is Cronenberg's artistic territory, which is why his public comments overlooking humor in the novel seem so curious. When he released *Crash*, he was already

> [k]nown as a master of comically grotesque horror films that delve deeply into paranoia, technological obsession, and the impasses of gender difference, Cronenberg's films have almost always involved the suspension of ordinary reality, usually occurring when a fantastic or impossible physical aberration, abnormality, or alien presence invades human life[27].

In their joint interview after the film's release, Cronenberg invites Ballard to comment on his description of the book as "a cautionary tale" in the preface to the French edition[28]:

> I mean, it's one of those where the writer, or the filmmaker, plays the devil's advocate, right? And completely adopts this, you know, what seems to be an insane or perverse logic in order to make a larger point. Swift did it in "A Modest Proposal[29]" (8'18").

Satire and the Superiority Theory share a bond through mocking perceived flaws to spark amusement. As conceptualized by Hobbes, finding humor in an inferior target's deficiencies mirrors satire's scornful parody unveiling absurdities. However, Swiftian satire aims to foster wisdom in readers, not just attack targets[30]. It uses parody as an element of satire in a destructive/constructive double movement (Suarez, 2003, p. 115-116). Two main forms of parody can be

---

[26] Kavanagh, Ciarán, "Categorically Grotesque: Ballard, Bodies and Genre in *Crash*," *Open Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, n°1, 2019, pp. 456-468.

[27] Dunlap, Aron; Delpech-Ramey, Joshua, "Grotesque Normals—Cronenberg's Recent Men and Women," *Discourse*, vol. 32, n°3, Fall 2010, p. 321.

[28] Ballard, "Introduction to the French Edition of *Crash*" [1974], *Crash*, London: Triad/Panther Books, 1985, pp. 5–9.

[29] "Cronenberg and Ballard: Talking Crash 1996," The Guardian interviews, *Youtube*, Aug. 22nd, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fALlOTzAzM0&t=2770s (accessed Jan. 2024).

[30] Suarez, Michael F., "Swift's Satire and Parody," *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, Fox, Christopher (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 112.

highlighted: "transplanting" source material to alter meaning[31], and "imitation" to exaggerate flaws[32]. In addition, Swift's fictional personas and parody display the opposite of truth, forcing readers to remain vigilant against deception and gullibility (*ibid.*, p. 121-123). Swift also parodies himself, calling his own authority into question (*ibid.*, p. 125). The novel and the film's ambiguity surrounding the object of parody, contrasted with Swift's directness, stems from their layered meanings and subtle critiques. Their layered irony demands discernment to unravel the parodic web, compelling broader engagement.

The novel embraces celebrity culture, technological obsession, and media sensationalism to an extreme extent. Chapter 10 mocks the arrogance of intellectuals through Vaughan's bizarre surveys, while Chapter 14 ridicules celebrity culture and obsession with public death through Vaughan's aim to fatally crash with Elizabeth Taylor. Cinema's role in shaping personal and societal identity is pivotal. As Scott Bukatman has argued, "cinematic style [has] become a part of social and gestural rhetoric, an integral part of the presentation of self in the era of terminal identity[33]." Ballard and Cronenberg take a core metaphor and make contemporary assumptions about selfhood, sexuality, and technological relationships into the realm of a disturbing, philosophical humor. In doing so, they position *Crash* as a thought experiment exploring the limits and essence of the *terminal identity* proposed by Bukatman. Both works ask what the absolute ends of this trajectory are. In taking ideas to outrageous conclusions, they use metaphysical humor to probe ideological infrastructure.

---

[31] This suggests that parody, in its transformative nature, can overlap with adaptation, especially when it involves the transformation or reworking of an existing work. Linda Hutcheon also discusses the interaction of parody with other forms like satire, emphasizing the need to consider the entire enunciative act in any consideration of parody. Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 23). This approach to understanding parody in relation to other forms might similarly apply to adaptations, as adaptations also involve re-contextualizing and transforming source material. This does not mean that there is a satirical intent in Cronenberg's adaptation of Ballard.

[32] "Transplanting" involves taking text *verbatim* from another source but placing it in a new context, while "imitation" mimics the style and rhetoric of another text but distorts it by over-emphasizing.

[33] Bukatman, Scott, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 43. Bukatman introduces *terminal identity* to characterize a new individuality emerging at the intersection of technology and culture within postmodern science fiction. It signifies the decline of conventional humanist topics and the rise of a novel, blended sense of self combining human and technology aspects. *Terminal identity* refers to "an unmistakably doubled articulation in which we find both the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer station or television screen […] the human is configured as a 'terminal of multiple networks'" (*ibid.*, p. 78).

Overall, humor in both works serves to underscore the surreal and disturbing nature of the story rather than provide light-hearted relief. The plural approach to humor within the works accounts for the difficulty to identify it. Additionally, the repetitive and monotonous quality of the novel's narrative has a numbing effect, and the reading experience, subsequently verges on boredom. The adaptation is more ambiguous. On the one hand, as Terry Harpold has argued, it showcases a "formalist sexual monotony [that] is obviously intentional" (1997). On the other hand, Cronenberg uses a strategy more akin to parody, and especially parody of the cinematic tropes of Hollywood, which contributes to the distinctive humor of the adaptation.

## Different Approaches to Humor: The Questions of Genre and Medium

Incorporating Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody into the comparative analysis of the novel and its adaptation could provide a nuanced understanding of their differing approaches to humor, which could in turn help distinguish a more satirical touch in Ballard and a more parodic one in Cronenberg. Hutcheon insists that satire operates under the premise of disapproval, seeking to expose and correct the follies and vices of society through caricature and ridicule[34]. Conversely, parody, while also engaging in critical distancing, does not inherently carry a negative judgment of the texts it contrasts (2000, p. 54). Parodic art is characterized by its deviation from and simultaneous inclusion of the aesthetic norm it references, suggesting a more nuanced, reflective form of critique that is not necessarily derogatory. In Hutcheon's framework, irony is pivotal as a nuanced rhetorical tool in both parody and satire, facilitating a complex intertextual dialogue rather than straightforward critique (*ibid.*, pp. 31-32). This stands in contrast to Northrop Frye's interpretation, where irony, especially in satire, is deployed more aggressively to underscore and correct societal follies[35]. Hutcheon posits irony as a marker of difference, essential for the ambivalence and reflective critique inherent in parody (*ibid.*, p. xii). Thus, while Frye emphasizes irony's corrective purpose, Hutcheon highlights its capacity to foster a dialogic relationship between texts, underscoring the dynamic interplay between creator intent and audience recognition essential for the genres' evolution. On this aspect, my approach is more indebted to Hutcheon, who sees irony and satire as

[34] *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 54.

[35] Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* [1957], Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 223.

intrinsically connected. Satire, she argues, requires irony at its core. For her, satire is itself an ironic form, using irony as its central rhetorical and linguistic strategy.

The novel and its adaptation focus on the interplay between genre and medium, particularly how visual culture's language intersects with cars as cultural symbols. Ballard portrays characters whose desires and perceptions are shaped by an intense engagement with images, both real and imagined, suggesting a construction of identity through manufactured images and simulacra. Photography and cinema mediate their crash experiences, creating bodily identification with images. For instance, Vaughan's analysis of crash victims' photos in Chapter 11 reflects a psychological and physical connection to crash imagery, mirrored in his driving and social interactions. This chapter also covers a film shoot of crash scenes, where makeup simulates injuries, juxtaposed with a make-up artist's "reassuring sense of humor" against the backdrop of casualty ward realism (p. 87). This dark humor underscores the blending of reality and fiction, emphasizing cinematic crash portrayals' impact on real-life crash perceptions. By this process, "[t]he human is turned inside out, merging with the inorganic, the material. But in doing so, in exploding the human image, Ballard suggests that we are fashioned out of the images we make[36]." The narrator often visualizes and aestheticizes scenes of violence with intense visual detail, immersing himself in imagined *tableaux*.

Ballard's novelistic use of the *tableau vivant*, blending cinematic aesthetics with literary tradition, marks a morbid, humorous contribution to social commentary. Traditionally, *tableaux vivants*—staged frozen pictorial moments[37]. By referencing or imitating the *tableau vivant* in a narrative, authors can enhance character development, emphasize thematic elements, or create symbolic resonance that reverberates throughout the text. The use of *tableau vivant* in literature enables exploration of the boundaries between visual and textual storytelling. This engages readers in a multisensory interpretation that combines the immediacy of visual art with the depth of narrative. Ballard draws from and subverts the tradition of the *tableau vivant* as used in melodrama to construct his own brand of disturbing *tableaux*. Melodramas utilized *tableaux*[38]. Rather than dominant melodramatic themes of injustice, domesticity, or trauma, Ballard

---

[36] Boxall, Peter, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman," *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 138.

[37] MacLeod, Catriona, "Still Alive: Tableau Vivant and Narrative Suspension in Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*," *Dutsch Vierteljahrsschr Literaturwiss Geistesgesch*, n°80, 2006, pp. 640–665.

[38] Williams, Carolyn, "Tableaux and Melodramatic Realism," *English Literature*, vol. 6, December 2019, pp. 101-124.

aestheticizes wounds, machinery, and corpses. He also extrapolates the tendency of *tableaux* to make inner psychic content visible by projecting his characters' technological fantasies and damage onto exterior *tableaux* (Williams, p. 116). In terms of narrative form, while melodramatic *tableaux*[39] (*idem.*), in the novel, they fragment coherence and reason, deliberately clashing with readers' moral expectations. By warping a key melodramatic device to surreal, transgressive ends, Ballard signals his satirical critique of mediation, progress, and selfhood in late capitalist society. The characters pose in perverse "living-dead pictures," like Vaughan's staged car crash events. These events parody amateur *tableaux vivants*[40]. Lifeless mannequins are described with visual aroused admiration (Chapter 12), subverting the conventional function of *tableaux vivants* to idealize living subjects. Car crash wounds and corpses are aestheticized as grotesque paintings, distorted through a series of juxtapositions and image fragmentations, undercutting notions of beauty, composure, and propriety associated with *tableaux vivants*. Once again, the overabundant descriptive language contrasts with the macabre *tableaux*, which are broken down to lurid details, like "photographs of grotesque wounds in a textbook of plastic surgery" (p. 1). Ballard parodies the media's sensationalist fixation on violence through a vivid portrayal that constitutes an ironic mimicry, reflecting society's morbid obsession with disaster, suggesting that in an image-saturated culture, reality itself becomes a distorted parody.

Mélanie Boucher provides a nuanced framework that can enhance the analysis of the different approaches to humor in the novel and its adaptation, based on the question of the medium[41]. Her examination of *tableau vivant* as a medium that oscillates between motion and immobility, and its ability to evoke the uncanny, aligns intriguingly with Ballard's subversion of narrative suspension. One could therefore argue that Ballard's depiction of car crashes as static yet dynamically charged moments mirrors the contemporary art *tableau*'s blend of historical reference with personal narrative, thereby amplifying the uncanny humor in the novel. This underscores the transformative potential of

---

[39] *Tableaux* punctuate the dramatic action, interrupt and sum up the plot, create suspense, and allow the audience to interpret significant moments.

[40] It seems obvious that Cronenberg identified the narrator's emphasis on the element of parody in certain scenes, which is repeated several times in the novel. Chapter 1: "The broken postures of his legs and arms, the bloody geometry of his face, seemed to parody the photographs of crash injuries that covered the walls of his apartment" (p. 2). Chapter 10: "Gabrielle walked in the centre, her shackled legs in a parody of a finishing-school carriage" (p. 83).

[41] Boucher, Mélanie, "Facteurs d'inquiétante étrangeté dans les tableaux vivants de l'art contemporain. L'apport du récit littéraire," *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, vol. 44, n°2, 2019, pp. 183–198.

*tableau vivant* in literature, highlighting how Ballard's novel utilizes these static moments of violent beauty not just for narrative pause but to explore technology, sexuality, and human vulnerability. When comparing Ballard's use of t*ableaux* to Cronenberg's, it is possible to examine how the director translates these static—yet dynamic—moments into film. Cronenberg captures the essence of Ballard's *tableaux* through meticulous *mise-en-scène*, framing crashes and their aftermath as visually arresting, almost painterly compositions that evoke a similar sense of uncanny beauty and horror. This cinematic technique reflects the novel's combination of motion and stillness, using the film's visual language to further explore the interdependence between humans and machines. In doing so, Cronenberg not only pays tribute to the novel's thematic complexity but also takes advantage of the film's unique abilities to enrich the viewer's experience of these crucial moments, resulting in an adaptation that is a captivating examination of the translation of literary techniques into visual storytelling.

For Cronenberg, this creates a differently layered intertextuality within the history of its own medium, and his observations take on a more diachronic approach. The *tableau vivant* has a significant position in the history of cinema as an intermedial representation, fulfilling several roles. Early cinema used frontal framed *tableau* shots as a means of condensing story[42]. *Tableaux* are used in mainstream Hollywood films for ornamental or rhetorical/ideological purposes, whilst art films exploit them in a self-reflexive manner to challenge traditional narrative structures (Peucker, 2007). But the *tableau vivant* originates in pornographic staging, which "figures the introduction of the real into the image—the living body into painting—thus attempting to collapse the distance between signifier and signified" (Pethő, 2015, p. 53). However, Ágnes Pethő sees the "tableau vivant as a reversal of this process, […] in which embodiment is not erotic in nature […] or, at least, not in its conventional sense, but can be related to what Mario Perniola described as 'the sex appeal of the inorganic'" (*idem.*) resulting in a fascination with the image itself: not with painting viewed in the form of "real," living, breathing bodies, but with bodies objectified as paintings. To back her analysis, Pethő adds that "[t]he *tableau vivant* is in fact a temporary cadaver, a presence which has petrified into object" (Satz, 2009, p. 56). Cronenberg's adaptation masterfully explores this, particularly in the scene where Vaughan, Ballard, and his wife witness a car crash, which turns out to involve Seagrave, who has died in the re-enactment of Jayne Mansfield's car crash (58'51"). They walk

[42] Brewster and Jacobs, 1998, quoted in Pethő, Ágnes, "The Tableau Vivant as a 'Figure of Return' in Contemporary East European Cinema," Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, *Film and Media Studies*, vol. 9, n°1, 2015, p. 52.

around the scene, half-tranced; Vaughan is taking pictures of the victims and the car, while Catherine has a cigarette as she sits next to one of the crash victims, who then turns around, looking almost directly into the camera (1h01'01"). There is a thematic significance of stasis in *Crash* as emblematic of a "still life" or death, rather than merely a narrative event. This perspective underscores the scene's resonance, aligning with the novel and film's exploration of the entwined relationship between technology and mortality. The *tableau vivant* serves as a mediator between life and death, capturing a moment of suspended animation that reflects the characters' existential and ontological dilemmas.

In the adaptation, Cronenberg inevitably compresses and omits certain elements of the novel, including its humor, and may appear, at first sight, to recoil from the novel's most radical aspects. Ironically, despite the hysteria it was received with in the UK and partly in the US, the film does retreat from the novel's most graphic, violent, and sexual content, partly due to its highly stylized, modernist aesthetics[43]. On a more practical level, the film avoids showing certain elements simply due to censorship and the constraints of commercial cinema (Harpold, 1997). Stylistically, *Crash* compares to the modernist cinema of Antonioni and Bresson in its visual precision and emotional coldness. The film's transgressive content strains against its aesthetic perfectionism, reflecting Cronenberg's pessimism about liberation through abjection (Beard, 2001, p. 415-419). Ian Sinclair argues that these stylistic and narrative choices subtract the sharper political and cultural critique from Ballard's satire, making the film version feel more passive, elegant, and resigned compared with the novel (1999, p. 57). The visual style of the film is clean, cold, and elegant, lacking the "faecal mess" (*ibid.*, p. 105) and grotesque imagery of the novel, thus aesthetically transforming the pornography into something "safe" (*ibid.*, p. 57). Sinclair suggests that the film's flat affect and detached tone are a reduction of the manic energy in Ballard's novel (*ibid.*, p. 106). According to him, Cronenberg's adaptation "depoliticizes Ballard's frenzied satire. He makes the pornography safe and elegant" (*ibid.*, p. 122). If we stick to the psychiatric lexicon, the "flattened affect" can be understood as a negative rather than a positive symptom produced by the same diseased culture and casting choices regarding humor.

Harpold has pointed out that "[l]ike much of Cronenberg's work, *Crash*'s narrative structure is determined more by the conventions of cinematic form than by its subject matter," but adds that "this is one of its weaknesses, but for reasons other than monotony" (1997). I would like to keep this formal observation but

[43] See Grundman, Roy, "Plight of the Crash Fest Mummies: David Cronenberg's *Crash*," *Cinéaste*, vol. 22, n°4, 1997, pp. 24-27.

attempt a different evaluation and highlight how Cronenberg takes in Ballard's novelistic incarnation of visual culture and turns it into meta-cinematic humor. "We're about ready to go here" (4'40"): the first line of dialogue in the film occurs after the first scene, showing Catherine having sex in an airplane hangar with a stranger (2'55"). The scene is interrupted and cuts to the set of a car commercial shoot. The assistant director shouts, wryly: "Has anybody seen James Ballard. You know who I mean, the producer of this epic?" (4'04"). This sudden shift from an intimate, private act to the mundane, commercial world of filmmaking is jarring and unexpected, creating humor through contrast. In other words, the humor also comes from the incongruity of the situation, playing with the audience's expectations and the norms of cinematic narrative (the most important being that the sex scenes do not merely punctuate the plot, they constitute it). Furthermore, through the ironic use of the word "epic," Cronenberg indulges in self-referential humor, commenting on the industry's tendency to aggrandize or dramatize for effect. While his crew is looking for him, Ballard is having sex in a room with a camera girl (4'58"). The scene is interrupted (5'24"), cutting to Ballard meeting his wife back home, where she inquires about his adventure: "What about your camera girl, did she come?" to which Ballard replies, "We were interrupted" (6'10"). The film repeatedly cuts sex scenes, and there is humor in Cronenberg's manipulation of chronology and temporality and in the strategic and anticlimactic nature of sex scenes—an implicit critique of the commodification of sex in cinema.

In addition, the dual reference to "James Ballard," the character and the author of the novel the film is adapted from, blurs the line between the film's narrative world and the real world of the audience. However, in their joint interview, Ballard comments on Cronenberg naming the character "Ballard" in the film adaptation instead of "Cronenberg." Ballard expresses amusement and a hint of missed opportunity for Cronenberg to imprint his own humor to the adaptation. Ballard jests about filmmakers often disregarding the authors of the original material, though he quickly adds that Cronenberg achieved it in every other respect due to the brilliance of the film (Ballard and Cronenberg, 2021).

In this context, the film also deserves to be discussed as an "end-time variant" of the road movie genre, subverting its conventions and focusing on decay rather than adventure or travel (Brottman and Sharrett, 2002, pp. 118-119). *Crash* inverts the civilizing momentum and horizontal trajectory of traditional road films and westerns, transforming it into a downward spiral showing the implosion of bourgeois selves (pp. 121-123). Although Mikita Brottman and Christopher Sharrett never explicitly state that *Crash* is a parody of the road film, the analysis of how the film inverts, subverts, and exhausts road movie

conventions clearly suggests this and deserves to be spelled out in the context of elucidating humorous strategies in Cronenberg's adaptation[44]. *Crash* also offers a broader commentary on Hollywood. For instance, it does not indulge in the conventional resort to slow-motion to film action[45]: all the car crashes happen very fast. The novel mentions this use of slow-motion on several occasions[46] and Cronenberg has also commented on it in one of his interviews:

> I really wanted to avoid the cliches of an action picture, so there are no slow-motion shots and you don't see everything repeated from five different angles. One of the conceptual problems in making this film was dealing with action-movie logistics without making an action movie. I had to do the hard part without getting the goodies. I still had those 35 stunt drivers and hard to choreograph them but also say, "I don't want the car to flip. I don't want to film it flying in slow-motion in the air and then explode." And even just where I put the cameras on the cars — I mean, two of the most photographed things in the world must be sex and cars (1997, np).

One of the most meta-cinematic moments in the film is the Seagrave accident. The scene is lit by projectors, and the car crash is revealed to the audience as a shooting set. Vaughan acts as a director and photographer, moving Catherine around and having her pose in one of the crashed cars (1h1'55"). In addition, as Christine Cornea argued, Cronenberg's *Crash* foregrounds issues of performance, with characters self-consciously shaping their realities through "performance art" (2004, p. 9). This meta-cinematic dimension constitutes a strong element of directorial interpretation that affects not only the aesthetics but also the politics of the film, and it is also related to Cronenberg's unique brand of humor. The "neat" and polished visual style of the film, contrasting with Cronenberg's choice of acting style, introduces a "sense of surface, of superficiality" and lacks emotional depth or subtext (*ibid.*, p. 4). This "vacuous quality" may grant the director more freedom to impose meaning or encourage more critical viewing as the film

---

[44] Brottman and Sharrett's primary focus is on the film's symbolism, narrative structure, and thematic content, particularly its commentary on modernity, technology, and human desire. But the analysis of the road movie can be extended to some formal cinematic aspects.

[45] Slow motion is a technique that gained popularity after the 1960s and has become a ubiquitous element of modern film language. Slow motion is often used to intensify scenes of violence or spectacle, among other canonized applications. See Detig, Cameron, "Slow Motion in the Age of Intensified Continuity," *Film Matters*, vol. 12, n°1, March 2021, pp. 7-16.

[46] "In his vision of a car-crash with the actress, Vaughan was obsessed by many wounds and impacts–by the dying chromium and collapsing bulkheads of their two cars meeting head-on in complex collisions endlessly repeated in slow-motion films" (p. 1); "Vaughan screened slow-motion films of test collisions that he had photographed with his cinecamera" (p. 3)

parodies and extrapolates tendencies of Method acting which aim for psychological realism (*ibid.*, p. 6-8). Furthermore, the blank, distanced acting resonates with shifts from depth to surface in postmodern culture described by Fredric Jameson[47]. The use of *tableau vivant* in both the novel and the adaptation is ironic as it transforms static images into dynamic sites of both narrative progression and obstruction. This parallels the juxtaposition and the complex interplay between Method acting's emotional depth and the characters' often detached affect from the carnage they are involved in; a cinematic technique that Cronenberg employs to create a visual irony. The tension between the visceral and the cerebral in Ballard's narrative is reflected in this dynamic.

Having explored the complex interplay of humor with irony, satire, and parody in both Ballard's novel and Cronenberg's adaptation, I shall now consider some aspects related to the reception of the two works decades after their publication and release.

## Re-Reading the Human in *Crash* through Humor

Recent re-evaluations of both works reveal new paradoxes in their reception. An over-emphasis on the initial *Crash* controversy can give the wrong impression: both Ballard's novel and Cronenberg's adaptation are now seen as canonical, extensively analyzed in academic and critical circles. They are frequently discussed in literary and film studies; Ballard's novel is widely taught; Cronenberg's adaptation was added to the *Criterion Collection*, and it was re-released in 2020. As Luckhurst pointed out, the successive controversies that have kept renewing critical discourse going about the novel have "either [been] forcing a moral commitment on it or falling into involuntary repetition or discursive mimicry" (2005, p. 519). To escape this deadlock, he recommends acknowledging the avant-garde traditions that both Ballard's text and its critical interpretations participate in, particularly in their effort to transform science fiction from a pulp genre[48] into one of the most significant literary forms of the century. He also urges

[47] In his book, Jameson devotes a substantial section (pp. 155-180, p. 385) to analyzing Ballard's work, indicating a thorough and detailed examination of his contribution to the cultural era. Interestingly, Ballard's work is linked to the film theory concept of the "persistence of vision" and its application to the experience of the world and its multiple realities, especially in times of crisis and breakdown (pp. 176-178).

[48] In the well-known preface to the 1974 French edition, Ballard made a case in defense of the genre as follows: "The split of science fiction into a separate and somewhat disreputable genre is a recent development. It is connected to the near disappearance of dramatic and philosophical poetry and the slow shrinking of the traditional novel as it concerns itself more and more exclusively with the nuances of human relationships. Among those areas neglected by the traditional novel are, above

a return to the novel's historical and cultural context for a more nuanced understanding, by moving beyond the text's surface-level provocations to explore its engagement with the socio-technological landscape of its time. In the last two decades, however, literary criticism has merely added new theoretical frameworks to the "discursive mimicry" of the past. *Crash* has therefore also been studied from the point of view of trauma[49], or the combination of Marc Augé's theory of non-place and Michel Foucault's heterotopias[50]. I would argue that the humor of Ballard's novel and Cronenberg's adaptation contributes significantly to the question of genre (not only science fiction) in both media.

Peter Bradshaw reviewed the film in *The Guardian* in 2020, when it was re-released and made two claims I would like to discuss. First, that "in the 21st century, the press appetite for denouncing shocking films just seemed to vanish;" second, that "The controversy has aged badly, but *Crash* itself holds up well. But it is still deeply strange and risky; particularly, it risks being *laughed at*[51], and there is a definite, tiny grain of Razzie absurdity that is a part of its weirdly hypnotic high-porn torpor." In her review of the novel, which introduces newer editions, Zadie Smith highlights new possible misreadings. I would like to contrast them with Bradshaw's assertions (as some of these cross-over with the reception of the film as well) to nuance and partly challenge them:

> I was in college when the *Daily Mail* went to war with the movie, and found myself unpleasantly aligned with the censors, my own faux-feminism existing in a Venn diagram with their righteous indignation. We were both wrong: *Crash* is not about humiliating the disabled or debasing women, and in fact the *Mail*'s campaign is a chilling lesson in how a superficial manipulation of liberal identity politics can be used to silence a genuinely protesting voice, one that is trying to speak for us all. No one doubts that the abled use the disabled, or that men use women. But *Crash* is an

---

all, the dynamics of human societies [the traditional novel tends to depict society as static], and man's place in the universe. However crudely or naively, science fiction at least attempts to place a philosophical and metaphysical frame around the most important events within our lives and consciousness" (p. 7).

[49] Chrysochou, Panayiota, "Fractured Bodies and Social Wounds: The Simulation of Trauma in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*," *FORUM*, vol. 8, 2009; and Groppo, Pedro, "Death and the Machine: J. G. Ballard's *Crash*," *Aletria*, Belo Horizonte, vol. 27, n°1, 2017, pp. 161-180.

[50] Duffy, Christopher, "Hidden Heterotopias in *Crash*," *J. G. Ballard*, Brown, Richard; Duffy, Christopher and Stainforth, Elizabeth, (eds.), Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 112–125.

[51] Emphasis added.

existential book about how *everybody uses everything*. How everything uses everybody (p. xi).

Her acknowledgment of her own initial misinterpretation underscores the subtlety and complexity of Ballard's themes and the importance of re-evaluating initial reactions to the novel. Her warning is that moral panic around representational politics risks missing the universality of Ballard's dystopian vision and satire, and enforcing censorship, which can be extended to Cronenberg's masterful adaptation. Nuance is essential to separate boundary-pushing critique from offense. Smith's insights counter Bradshaw's claims, questioning his observations of a societal shift towards acceptance or desensitization to controversial films. She unveils a complex interpretation, critiquing her "faux-feminism" alignment with censors and highlighting the risk of misunderstanding multifaceted narratives like *Crash*. Smith points out Ballard's novel explores existential themes, contrasting with Bradshaw's view of the film's "weirdly hypnotic high-porn torpor." This contrast reveals misinterpretation risks, suggesting controversies may arise from superficial engagement rather than deep understanding of its themes.

Journalists and critics like Bradshaw[52] or Sebastian Groes argue that the concern with the car as a cultural landmark is now dated[53]. Groes stresses that Ballard is not a purely "prophetic" writer, as *Crash* reflects anxieties of the time about motorways and suburban life. There is no questioning the fact that both the novel and the adaptation have left a longstanding legacy. Sinclair has already offered some insight on how the film *Crash* impacted interpretations of Ballard's novel as well as real-world events like Princess Diana's death (2015, pp. 113-117). But beyond car-culture, both the novel and the film engage with questions of identity, *via* image and technology underscoring the complexity of their anticipatory insights into post-humanity. Bukatman (1993) first read Ballard's

---

[52] Bradshaw, Peter, "Crash Review–Cronenberg's Auto Eroticism Still Has Impact," *The Guardian*, Nov. 27th, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/nov/27/crash-review-david-cronenberg-james-spader-holly-hunter (accessed Nov. 2023). Bradshaw also stresses that the film already seemed dated when it was released, compared to the novel: "But *Crash* is no longer so contemporary. Even in the late 90s, it didn't quite have the zeitgeisty charge of the book, which had come out 20 years previously. Cars themselves (and certainly airports) aren't really as sexy and urgent as they could plausibly be presented by Ballard, as part of his eerily disquieting atrocity exhibition of modern life. Cars themselves have become far more boring and reliable and safe in our culture. Nowadays, the airbag of banality is deployed" (2020).

[53] Groes, Sebastian, "The Texture of Modernity in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High-Rise*," *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions*, Baxter, Jeanette; Wymer, Rowland (eds.), London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 123-39.

novel as a posthuman text in the 1990s via his theory of *terminal identity*. In recent years, the critical interest in posthuman theory produced a renewed interest in both the novel and the film. Ballard's and Cronenberg's focus on altered forms of consciousness and identity in a technologically saturated world, depicting characters exhibiting a strong desire to go beyond conventional human experiences and boundaries, is a key posthuman concern. Emma Whiting suggests that the redefinition of identity in the context of technological interfacing and altered states of consciousness challenges traditional notions of what it means to be human (Baxter and Wymer, 2012). Ballard's work has also been interpreted as "anti-humanist," "using speculative fiction to imagine radical posthuman evolution resonating with post-structuralism in de-centering the human subject and giving primacy to technology in shaping desires and bodies[54]. Barbara Klonowska argues the novel has an "optimistic view" of technology's potential, while the film takes a more critical dystopian view[55]. The film does indeed seem to show a "messy" and "fragmented" integration of human/machine, unlike more "clean" mainstream sci-fi films (Cornea, p. 14). But there does not seem to be any consensus on this point. Guilhem Billaudel, for instance, examined the role of cars in Cronenberg's films *Crash* and *Cosmopolis*, arguing that cars transcend their role as mere props or symbols of consumerism. Instead, they become integral characters, deeply connected with the films' human characters and the narrative itself[56]. Both the novel and its adaptation reflect the paradoxical nature of humans striving to transcend their biological constraints through technology, embodying a simultaneous fascination and repulsion. This phenomenon resonates with Günther Anders' concept of "Promethean shame"—the discomfort stemming from humans recognizing their own obsolescence relative to their technological creations' superior efficiency and permanence[57]. Despite the attendant existential unease, we remain eager to integrate with self-surpassing technologies, amplifying the irony. Anders encapsulates the profound ambivalence undergirding the posthuman condition, our simultaneous pride in achievement and philosophical unease in the face of our potential replaceability. His perspective lays bare the emotional and philosophical depths pervading our

---

[54] Vanhanen, Janne, "The Crash-Event: Repetition and Difference in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*," *The Journal of Somaesthetics*, vol. 5, n°1, 2019, p. 68, pp. 73-74.

[55] Klonowska, Barbara, "Transhumanist desire and utopian tensions in David Cronenberg's *Crash*," *Beyond Philology*, n°14, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 120-121.

[56] Billaudel, Guilhem, "Corps (é)conduits : La construction d'un regard-machine dans *Crash* (1996) et *Cosmopolis* (2012) de David Cronenberg," *Sillages critiques*, vol. 34, 2023, http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/14492 (accessed Nov. 2023).

[57] Anders, Günther, *The Obsolescence of Man: Volume I* [1956], Translated by Michael B. Smith, New York: Verso, 2021.

complex entanglement with technology—framing it as an uneasy dance oscillating between aspiration, disillusionment, and reflection upon our shifting place in this increasingly technologized world.

I would argue that both the transhuman and the posthuman readings[58] are partly, if not mainly, possible because reading humor in the works continues to be so strongly resisted and through a tendency to "elevate" the pathology of the characters to a form of new normality[59]. Or, to borrow Luckhurst incisive critique of "discursive mimicry": "[Again], *Crash* is not read so much as reiterated in a different register" (2005, p. 516). If Freud is right in pointing out humor's role in exposing human limitations to create a sense of common humanity, missing the humor in the reading implies missing the human. The novel's overlooked humor also lies in the narrative, in its ironic use of "complex," for example, to describe technology, sexuality, and psychology, highlighting narrative irony. This term is applied to vehicle and machine parts with detailed descriptions like "the complex geometries of a dented fender" and "complex interchanges" (p. 5, p. 7), paralleling vehicles to human anatomy. Characters are attributed with "complex pleasure" and "complex affections" (p. 25, p. 56), and sex acts are termed "complex" in "stylized postures" (p. 123), adding layers to their psychological portrayal. Vaughan, depicted with a "complex personality," ironically distances the reader due to his psychopathic tendencies. This repeated use of "complex" underscores a ritualized, dark essence, ironically juxtaposing ostentatious language against shallow character depths, critiquing modern psychological and sociological methods. Frye's notion that irony in literature implies minimal direct statement (2000, p. 40) is echoed here, suggesting a satirical critique by Ballard through superficial depth, despite portraying a nuanced view of humanity's darker undercurrents.

As for Cronenberg, his irony has an equally humoristic touch. The first time Ballard asks Vaughan about the nature of his project, he gets the following response, breaking the fourth wall yet again: "The reshaping of the human body by modern technology" (40'07"). The second time he asks the question, repeating Vaughan's expression word for word ("What about the reshaping of the human body by modern technology?") (53'10"), Vaughan replies: "that's just a crude sci-

[58] The transhuman lenses applaud pursuits of morphic freedom in *Crash* as mankind's self-overcoming while posthuman critique provocatively unpacks how interfacing bodies and machines exposes ontological liminalities rather than uplifting humanity *per se*.

[59] Mathijs has suggested the characters are not "apathetic, disenfranchised […] they *do* care; they love each other to bits" (*The Cinema of David Cronenberg: from Baron of Blood to Cultural Hero*, New York: Wallflower Press, 2008, p. 194).

fi concept. It kinda floats on the surface and doesn't threaten anybody" (53'18"). This dialogue effectively critiques the superficial transhuman and posthuman understandings of the film. Cronenberg seems to be acknowledging the allure of such themes in science fiction while simultaneously downplaying their seriousness or applicability. This self-referential humor not only adds a layer of complexity to the film's narrative but also challenges overly literal or uncritical interpretations of its themes.

Both Ballard's and Cronenberg's irony and humor critique transhuman and posthuman interpretations by emphasizing human flaws amidst technological fusion, underscoring absurdities rather than idealizing the posthuman condition. Their work reveals complexities in human-technology integration, using dark humor as a defense against dehumanization and preserving human individuality against mechanization.

## Conclusion

Humor has long been overlooked in both works, but it has been easier in recent years, for critics at least, to discern it both in the film and the novel, even if such readings remain quite marginal. The transgressive content and clinical prose style, or neat film aesthetics, have remained barriers to discerning the dark humor interwoven through satire and parody, in the form of irony, incongruous language, and exaggerated scenarios. Yet re-reading the humor reveals new insights. Ballard's strategic literary techniques establish an undercurrent of unsettling, morbid comedy by clashing his detached narrative voice with disturbingly poetic descriptions of disfigured bodies and violent sexuality. Like a Swiftian satirist, he uses rational language to describe irrational obsessions, underscoring absurdity. Cronenberg translates this in the film through a jarring, modernist visual style contrasting with affectless performances and sudden disruptions of sex by mundane events. Moreover, I have attempted to show how missing humor and metaphor enabled problematic posthuman elevation of the characters' pathology as pioneering new subjective possibilities. Overlooking Ballard's and Cronenberg's black comedy leads to techno-utopian readings. But their grotesque scenarios should highlight the lingering humanity rather than transcend it. The metaphoric fusion of flesh and machine manifests physically and mentally as a humorous, satirical allegory of society's increasing interfacing with technology and a parody of overdone Hollywood tropes, rather than a liberating endpoint. The works' quality comes not from technophilic celebration but, partly, from a Swiftian disgust at commercialized dehumanization or meta-cinematic commentary, and partly, as a straightforward, non-moralizing thought

experiment. Ultimately, the humor in both works spotlights the grotesque consequences of social conditioning and reader complicity.

However, fully recognizing this complex dimension of Ballard's and Cronenberg's artistic visions requires relinquishing assumptions about the purpose of humor solely as a soothing device. Their transgressive comedy actively creates discomfort. And as demonstrated through emerging re-appraisals decades later, allowing *Crash*'s demanding humor to unsettle audience expectations can open spaces for new interpretations that better appreciate both its enduring emotional power and socio-cultural commentary. In the end, humor proves to be ontologically ambivalent in unlocking the layered significances within Ballard's and Cronenberg's startling imaginative worlds. The alarming cruelty and seductiveness of their semi-satirical semi-prophetic work compels self-reflection on humanity's present trajectory down isolated tunnels of alienating technology, speed, and obsession with images.

## Works cited


Anders, Günther, *The Obsolescence of Man: Volume I* [1956], Translated by Michael B. Smith, New York: Verso, 2021.

Ballard, James G., "A Response to the Invitation to Respond," *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 18, n°3, Science Fiction and Postmodernism, November 1991, p. 329.

---, *Crash* [1973], London: Fourth Estate, 2019.

---, "In Conversation with J. G. Ballard," *Writers In Conversation With Christopher Bigsby*, vol. 1, Norwich: EAS Publishing, University of East Anglia, 2000, pp. 72-86.

---, "Introduction to the French Edition of *Crash*" [1974], in J. G. Ballard *Crash* London: Triad/Panther Books, 1985, pp. 5–9.

Ballard, James G.; Cronenberg, David, "Cronenberg and Ballard: Talking Crash 1996," The Guardian interviews, *Youtube*, August 22nd, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fALlOTzAzM0&t=2770s (accessed Jan. 2024).

Baudrillard, Jean, "Crash," *Simulacra and Simulation*, Faria Glaser, Sheila (trans.), Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 111-119.

Baxter, Jeanette; Wymer, Rowland (eds.), *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Beard, William, *The Artist as Monster—The Cinema of David Cronenberg*, Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2001.

Bergson, Henri, "Laughter," *Comedy*, Sypher, Wylie (ed.), Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956.

Billaudel, Guilhem, "Corps (é)conduits : La construction d'un regard-machine dans *Crash* (1996) et *Cosmopolis* (2012) de David Cronenberg," *Sillages critiques*, vol. 34, 2023. http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/14492 (accessed Nov. 2023).

Boucher, Mélanie, "Facteurs d'inquiétante étrangeté dans les tableaux vivants de l'art contemporain. L'apport du récit littéraire," *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, vol. 44, n°2, 2019, pp. 183–198.

Boxall, Peter, "Science, Technology, and the Posthuman," *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Boyne, Roy, "Crash Theory: The Ubiquity of the Fetish and the End of Time," *Anglelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 4, n°2, 1999, pp. 41–52.

Bradshaw, Peter, "Crash Review–Cronenberg's Auto Eroticism Still Has Impact," *The Guardian*, Nov. 27th, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/nov/27/crash-review-david-cronenberg-james-spader-holly-hunter (accessed Nov. 2023).

Brottman, Mikita; Sharrett, Christopher, "The End of the Road," *Car Crash Culture*, Brottman, Mikita (ed.), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. https://doi-org.nls.idm.oclc.org/ 10.1007/978-1-137-09321-9_18 (accessed Nov. 2023).

Bukatman, Scott, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

Chrysochou, Panayiota, "Fractured Bodies and Social Wounds: The Simulation of Trauma in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*," *FORUM*, vol. 8, 2009.

Cornea, Christine, "David Cronenberg's *Crash* and Performing Cyborgs," *The Velvet Light Trap*, n° 52, 2003, pp. 4-14.

Cronenberg, David, "Braking and Entering: Director David Cronenberg on His Austere and Unnerving J. G. Ballard Adaptation, *Crash*," *Filmmaker Magazine*, Winter 1997. https://filmmakermagazine.com/110818-david-cronenberg-crash/ (accessed Nov. 2023).

---, "Viggo Mortensen & David Cronenberg on CRASH," *Youtube* uploaded by TIFF, March 31st, 2019. https://youtu.be/f5r9Xi7OZ1w?si=4_Mqv_0GeZKjx3CX7, (accessed Jan. 2024).

Detig, Cameron, "Slow Motion in the Age of Intensified Continuity," *Film Matters*, vol. 12, n°1, March 2021, pp. 7-16.

Duffy, Christopher, "Hidden Heterotopias in *Crash*," *J. G. Ballard*, Brown, Richard; Duffy, Christopher and Stainforth, Elizabeth, (eds.), Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 112–125.

Dunlap, Aron; Delpech-Ramey, Joshua, "Grotesque Normals—Cronenberg's Recent Men and Women," *Discourse*, vol. 32, n°3, Fall 2010, pp. 321-337.

Freud, Sigmund, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" [1905], *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 8, Strachey, James; Freud, Sigmund (eds.), London, Vintage Publishing, 2001.

Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* [1957], Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Francis, Samuel, "'A Marriage of Freud and Euclid': Psychotic Epistemology in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*," *Humanities*, vol. 8, n°1, May 2019, pp. 93-107.

Gasiorek, Andrzej, *J. G. Ballard*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.

Groppo, Pedro, "Death and the Machine: J. G. Ballard's *Crash*," *Aletria*, Belo Horizonte, vol. 27, n°1, 2017, pp. 161-180.

Grundman, Roy, "Plight of the Crash Fest Mummies: David Cronenberg's *Crash*," *Cinéaste*, vol. 22, n°4, 1997, pp. 24-27.

Gruner, Charles R., *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*, New Brunswick: Transaction, 1997.

Metz, Christian, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Harpold, Terry, "Dry Leatherette: Cronenberg's *Crash*," *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 7, n°3, 1997.

Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan* [1651], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, Urbana, and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [1991], Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement*, translated by J. H. Bernard, London: Macmillan, 1914.

Kavanagh, Ciarán, "Categorically Grotesque: Ballard, Bodies and Genre in *Crash*," *Open Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, n°1, 2019, pp. 456-468.

Klonowska, Barbara, "Transhumanist desire and utopian tensions in David Cronenberg's *Crash*," *Beyond Philology*, n°14, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 111-123.

Luckhurst, Roger, "J. G. Ballard: *Crash*," *A Companion to Science Fiction*, Seed, David (ed.), Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005, pp. 512–21.

MacLeod, Catriona, "Still Alive: Tableau Vivant and Narrative Suspension in Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*," *Dutch Vierteljahrsschr Literaturwiss Geistesgesch*, n°80, 2006, pp. 640–665.

Mathijs, Ernest, *The Cinema of David Cronenberg: from Baron of Blood to Cultural Hero*, New York: Wallflower Press, 2008.

Pethő, Ágnes, "The Tableau Vivant as a 'Figure of Return' in Contemporary East European Cinema," Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, *Film and Media Studies*, vol. 9, n°1, 2015, pp. 51-76.

Riches, Simon (ed.), *The Philosophy of David Cronenberg*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012.

Schopenhaueur, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation* [1818], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Sinclair, Iain, *Crash. David Cronenberg's Post-mortem on J. G. Ballard's 'Trajectory of Faith'*, London: BFI Publishing, 1999.

Smith, Zadie, "Introduction," *Crash*, J. G. Ballard [1973], Los Angeles: Rare Bird Books, 2019.

Sontag, Susan, "The Pornographic Imagination," *The Partisan Review*, vol. 34, Spring 1967, pp. 181-212.

Suarez, Michael F., "Swift's Satire and Parody," *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, Fox, Christopher (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 112–127.

Vanhanen, Janne, "The Crash-Event: Repetition and Difference in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*," *The Journal of Somaesthetics*, vol. 5, n°1, 2019, pp. 61-74.

Williams, Carolyn, "Tableaux and Melodramatic Realism," *English Literature*, vol. 6, December 2019, pp. 101-124.

## Author's biobibliography

Myrto Petsota has taught languages, literature, and translation in secondary and higher education for over a decade. She completed a Ph.D. on Italo Calvino at the University of Edinburgh in and recently obtained a doctoral contract for a second Ph.D. at Paul Valéry University Montpellier 3. The main hypothesis of her current research is that contemporary British fiction, built on the ruined landscape of progress, explores the anthropological deadlock of humankind in the age of neoliberalism, and outlines a new project that challenges the theoretical claims of posthumanism.