

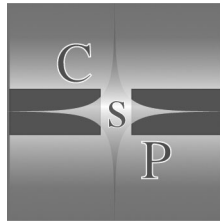
# Crash Cinema



Crash Cinema  
Representation in Film

Edited by

Mark Goodall  
Jill Good  
Will Godfrey



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Crash Cinema: Representation in Film, edited by Mark Goodall, Jill Good, Will Godfrey

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## FOREWORD

*Crash Cinema* is an integral part of the Bradford Film Festival at the National Media Museum (formerly National Museum of Photography, Film and Television). Launched in 2002, the symposium annually enjoys the benefit of the film department's superb facilities. *Crash Cinema* was created by academics and curators who share the common aim of promoting the importance of film both as an academic study and for critical public appreciation. The symposium is an on-going collaboration between the Bradford School of Art, the National Media Museum and the University of Bradford, and this volume records the dynamic generated thus far by presenting a selection of ten papers from the first four symposia.

The term 'Crash Cinema' was coined to symbolise the particular emphasis that the organisers place on issues of representation. The purpose of a double homage was to draw attention to the politics of representation by referring to the dramatic resonances of JG Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973) and the cult (even notorious) film adaptation by David Cronenberg (1996). Given that *Crash* has symbolised the principal focus of the symposium, it is hardly surprising that this role was complemented by the further set of collisions in the recent film of the same title, *Crash* (2004) by Paul Haggis. It is also no surprise that both films share the dominant motif of the car crash. However the similarities end in the mutilated and blazing vehicles. It is the differences between these two films that exemplify the range of issues addressed by *Crash Cinema*.

Bombarded by images, we inhabit a media intensive world in which every aspect of life is pervaded by visual signs. In these circumstances it becomes increasingly significant to engage with the politics of representation. Through this vital process we can acknowledge that all cultural forms, whether in high art or the mass media, are in the broadest sense political. We can also appreciate that it is a complex agenda of interests that shapes specific ideological meanings. Fulsomely equipped, we can apply this essential tool to the exciting task of decoding the political, social and cultural meanings articulated through the making, promotion and consumption of film. So, in view of the emphasis that *Crash Cinema* places on the role of representation in the production of meaning, how is it that the two *Crash* movies symbolise our agenda? Each film offers a model of the ways in which representations produce notions of 'reality'. To risk a generalised (though not mutually exclusive) distinction, we can see that *Crash* (1996) alerts us to issues of disability, sexuality and technology, whereas *Crash* (2004) highlights issues of race, gender and class. Furthermore,

as is to be expected, the representations created in both films construct identities and histories for individuals, groups and cultures. Perhaps in the twenty-first century the task of understanding representation is no longer merely a matter of concentrating on why, how and for whom filmmakers, critics and audiences make representations. The especial fascination now is the extent to which these representations make us. Both the *Crash* movies disturb and challenge perceptions of societal institutions and behaviours. In so doing, these films invite us to consider the extent to which their representations shape ourselves.

*Crash* (1996) may be seen as a black satire on consumer culture. As if to acknowledge that the film itself is a product, the values associated with Hollywood appear to be questioned. In particular, the notion of genre is problematised – firstly, by Ballard’s choice of science fiction as the arena for his social explorations of the ‘everyday’; secondly, by Cronenberg’s expertise which adds the nuances of horror and cult to this uncertain, even surreal, frisson of categories (despite our knowledge that Cronenberg’s films are mainstream productions). The analytical viewpoint of *Crash* (1996) envisions a nihilistic dystopia in the liminal space at the edge of a landscape of apparent plenty. The film’s critique is enacted by representations of the dysfunctional inhabitants who, as affectionless individuals, insist on the meaninglessness of life. In so doing, the film problematises the conventionally meaningful status of that essential must-have commodity, the car. This icon becomes so thoroughly subverted that it is transformed into the symbol of a suppressed desire for self annihilation. The potency of the car now represents the ultimate freedom – to kill yourself, and the characters propel themselves into the abyss with an eager willingness, as if satisfying some inner compulsion. It is through these representations of eroticised behaviour that taboos are challenged. Both the car crash and the detritus of the crashed car become fetishised: the car crash as the site of either pleasurable voyeurism or violent death; the crashed car as the locus for enjoyment of either sexual encounters or sexual pleasure in mutilation and pain – or both. Through these representations Cronenberg visualised Ballard’s aim to demystify the delusions we have about ourselves, our relationship to consumer culture and the ways in which these delusions are created for us.

In both films the car crash provides the opportunity for human contact. In *Crash* (1996) it is the mangled hulks of smashed machines that are central to the film’s erotic narrative, and the site of sexualised encounters involving pain and the desire for death. *Crash* (2004) begins with a car crash and ends with another. In between the film is punctuated by crashes. However the prime function of each car crash is to introduce a range of encounters that address the vexed question of race. What seems to be problematised here is the multi-cultural city (in general, even though the city of Los Angeles provides the location for the film’s narrative). Territories are identified and the process of migration across

the city (let alone from across the globe) is seen to be hazardous. The lives of a selection of Angelinos of disparate ethnicities intertwine and literally crash into each other. Occasionally, these crises provide moments of self realisation and redemption for individuals. In so doing, the film engages with the identities, geographies, sexualities and class divisions between and within racial groupings. Haggis constructs representations of intolerance amongst, and reconciliation between, the various ethnicities in order to illuminate issues of authority within the inter-race and inter-class relationships: among the professionals of the political, law enforcement, health and media worlds; among the out-of-town, would-be gangsters displaced within 'white' terrain; among recent and longstanding immigrants, and among other groups whose illegal immigration is either willing or enforced. By presenting all the characters as victims of cultural stereotyping, Haggis alludes to the tradition of the Hollywood liberal movie. This film certainly surprised Hollywood with its unexpected success at the 2006 Academy Awards by winning three Oscars – for Best Picture, Original Screenplay and Film Editing. This in itself is notable and worthy of exploration – as also are the production values and promotional strategies – in order to understand how this low budget ensemble movie prevailed over films like *Syriana* and *Brokeback Mountain*, which had been puffed as radical political statements.

While these two *Crash* movies symbolise our emphasis on issues of representation, the symposium's agenda encourages a wide variety of approaches to, and subject matter from, the world of film. *Crash Cinema* clearly seeks to stimulate, even provoke, and the post-symposium screening of a controversial film reinforces this key aspect. For example, *Crash Cinema 2* was brought to a fitting conclusion with Gualtiero Jacopetti's *Mondo Cane* (1963) in order to coincide with Mark Goodall's public interview with the creator of the 'mondo' movie. The full transcript of this groundbreaking occasion is archived at the National Museum, and an extract was published in *Crash Cinema 3: The Proceedings* (2004).

Even though I am delighted to have participated in its creation, *Crash Cinema* will burgeon through the efforts and enthusiasms of the organisers: Jill Good (Bradford School of Art) and Mark Goodall (University of Bradford). At the National Media Museum, the constant support of Bill Lawrence (Head of Film) and Tony Earnshaw (organiser of the festival) will, as ever, underpin each annual success. Together, we all look forward to many more remakes of *Crash Cinema* at the Bradford Film Festival.

Dr. Patrick Eyres

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The staff of the Bradford Film Festival who each year accommodate the symposium, in particular Tony Earnshaw and Bill Lawrence, who spotted the potential of a lively academic component to the festival, and backed it up.

Jacob Woodward and Godfrey Reggio from IRE who kindly allowed us to reproduced their beautiful stills from *Koyaanisqatsi*.

Finally, Traci Tighe helped complete the final manuscript with the professional expertise, high standards and rigour that we have come to expect from her.

Without the help of these people neither the book you hold in your hands, nor the *Crash Cinema* symposium would exist.

## INTRODUCTION

### FILM AND REPRESENTATION: THREE READINGS

My Auntie Audrey's favourite film was *The Sound of Music*. She must have been to the cinema to see it about twenty times. She loved the songs, the romance and the clothes made out of curtains. Perhaps what she didn't realise was that she was also engaging with a complex representation that produced meanings about national identity, power and oppression, gender, religion, politics and constructions of the family.

Thirty years after Auntie Audrey enjoyed singing along with Julie Andrews during the depiction of the Nazi occupation of Austria I was moved by the harrowing scenes of the Jewish ghetto in Krakow in Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. This film touched me on a deep emotional level. At the time what I too wasn't aware of was that I was also engaging with a complex representation that produced meanings about national identity, power and oppression, gender, religion, politics and constructions of the family.

Why is one of these films positioned as 'light hearted entertainment' and the other as 'gritty realism'? After all they are both based on actual historical events. Is it that one is 'truer' than the other? Or is it because of the conventions employed during the representation of these events.

The genre of musicals, in particular musical romance films, is traditionally regarded as fantasy escapism. A film belonging to this genre would be created to be a spectacle. The conventions used in the construction of such a film contribute to this understanding. Songs and dances disrupt the flow of the narrative, characters and plotlines appear to be simplistic, costumes may be flamboyant and endings are invariably happy. In *The Sound of Music*, a classic of this genre, the filmic elements that create the film are conventional. Discourse around the film constructs it as frivolous entertainment for the whole family. The film is not seen to merit serious discussion and analysis. However its themes are serious and are powerful in terms of the production of meaning.

*Schindler's List* on the other hand has been widely written about and deconstructed. The subject matter and its treatment have been taken very seriously and the film is considered to add to the discourse on depictions of war and suffering. The filmmakers used the conventions of documentary to portray

the film's story as 'real'. These strategies include the use of black and white film, a format that carries connotations of the past as well as signifying actual news footage of the Holocaust. Apparently factual information and statistics are displayed on screen and viewers are therefore reminded that this story is based on historical events. The film closes with full colour footage of the actual people who were depicted by actors in the film at Oscar Schindler's graveside. This movement into a portrayal of a contemporary situation invites the whole film to be read as a representation of reality.

*Schindler's List* was created as a hard hitting, emotional and realistic representation of actual events. Nevertheless *The Sound of Music* is also an emotional film and depicts the same era. In the genre of musicals however entertainment is a core criterion. In the genre of holocaust films realism and authenticity are popular conventions. This discourse creates particular meanings and it is how these constructs are made to appear 'natural' that is the central work of our analysis of various representations.

This is what *Crash Cinema* is about.

Within a media saturated western society engaging with and critically questioning representations, both mainstream and independent, is fundamentally important. How we see the world and what we think and feel about it is constructed through media representations. These are not reflections or presentations of reality but rather re-presentations, versions or interpretations. Film is a representational system that communicates concepts and feelings in such a way as to enable interpretation of their meanings. A film may invite its audience to understand a preferred reading of it yet a viewer's social positioning may influence their reading of a film.

Films can be enjoyed as entertainment, they can educate and inform and they can excite and disturb. Films are powerful pieces of culture. *Crash Cinema* aims to offer an arena for the analysis of these representations. Often a film is discussed in terms of how 'true to life' it is, how authentic is the dialogue and how accurate is the plot. That is not what *Crash Cinema* is about. Here we question the whole concept of 'truth'. Representations cannot depict the 'truth' and *Crash Cinema* does not claim to search for the 'truth'. We ask *whose* 'truth' is being represented, how is it represented and why is it represented like that? We also ask how do representations tell us something about the culture within which they are created.

For example, *The Sound of Music* was made in America in 1963 and the characters of Maria and the Baroness are open to be read in relation to constructions of 1960s American ideas of femininity. The character of Maria is a nun who dresses very plainly, sings beautifully and cares for Captain Von Trapp's six children. She is connoted as a 'good girl', pure and innocent, who has domestic talents and maternal instincts. Yet she is also feisty and a little

rebellious. Maria can be read as a 1960s Cinderella. The Baroness is constructed as an older more sophisticated woman of the world. This is signified through her fashionable dress, her smoking and her evident awkwardness with the children. These are the preferred readings that the film constructs. However there is always more than one way to read a representation depending on your position as a social subject. Auntie Audrey resisted the invitation to identify with Maria's particular femininity. She read against the grain of the film and constructed her own meanings. While cheering on and singing along with Maria she actually identified with the glamorous Baroness. As a widow with four children Auntie Audrey may have seen the Baroness's loss of the Captain and family life to Maria not as tragedy but as liberation from the drudgery of domestic enslavement.

**Jill Good**

Why do cinematic representations matter? After all, these are only pictures we're talking about. Only shadows flitting across a screen, reflections in a mirror. The films that we see at the cinema do more than simply entertain, amuse or horrify. Cinema not only gives us our thrills and jollies but also communicates to us about ourselves and in the twentieth and twenty-first century moving images have become the dominant form of communication.

Cinema, like all other means of storytelling, connotes and utilises myths to communicate its messages. These myths are manifest signs of the culture's ideology, which in Marxist terms, serve the needs of the ruling elite. The subtlety of cinematic language in film, means that communication can take place at a latent level, with the audience almost unaware of the messages, and the underlying the ideologies, of the stories they're being told. These sequences of myths, or mythologies (in the Barthesian sense), become conventions of seeing and knowing, common assumptions about the nature of reality which society is content to leave un-stated and unchallenged.<sup>1</sup> Of course these myths are not static. Their ideological function ensures that myths are restructured over time as the needs and hegemony of a ruling elite change. For example the Manichean messages of British colonial films of the 1930s, '40s and '50s seem crude and racist to us today but they have been replaced by a more subtle neo-colonial Manichean mythology in modern cinema which serves the needs of a new phase of imperialism in a post-colonial context. Raymond Williams maintained that society has been wrong in regarding communication as secondary.

"Many people seem to assume as a matter of course that there is, first reality, and then, second, communication about it. We degrade art and learning by supposing

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<sup>1</sup> Fiske & Hartley, *Reading Television* (London & New York, Routledge, 1989), 87

that they are always second hand activities: that there is life, and then afterwards there are these accounts of it... What we call society is not only a network of political and economic arrangements, but also a process of learning and communicating.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Williams communication begins with the struggle to learn and to describe and to pass the results on to others. Communication does not occur after the fact of reality, but is a part of reality, and is one of the ways in which reality is formed and shaped and changed. The power of moving images to shape the world was bloodily demonstrated on the 11th September 2001 in New York City. There had been other terrorist attacks on symbols of American power such as the battleship USS Cole in Yemen and the US embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi prior to 9/11 but these barely registered on the public consciousness. What made 9/11 different wasn't just the iconic status of the World Trade Centre and the number of American lives lost. What made 9/11 different was the cinematic nature of the attack. We had seen the Twin Towers destroyed so many times before in so many disaster movies and when we saw it for real the world was riveted. The attacks by themselves didn't change the world. It was also the images, the pictures beamed into homes across the planet and how they were used by politicians and the media that launched the war on terror and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And what made those pictures so powerful, so apocalyptic, was their cinematic quality. The movies, the dream factory, had become real. In the wake of 9/11 all the old Hollywood tropes came into play, the simplistic notion of the struggle between good and evil, the dastardly foreign villain (Osama bin Laden/Saddam Hussain/Fu Manchu/Dr Evil) who must be defeated by the forces of good (Bush/Blair/Austin Powers/America), heroic sacrifice to win out against all the odds with the promise of a happy ending (over the rainbow). Reality became a movie. Cinema matters because its representations shape the politics, the culture and the societies of the world we really live in. The politics of cinematic representation underpins the *Crash Cinema* Symposiums and all of the essays in this collection. In shaping cultural discourses cinematic representations influence our attitudes and ideologies towards issues of race, gender, age, identity, wealth and power. Some films seek to question or challenge dominant discourses whilst others (the majority) function to maintain and reinforce existing relationships. By focusing on issues of representation *Crash Cinema* seeks to unpick and expose the underlying ideological motivations of cinema.

**Will Godfrey**

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, Raymond, *Communications* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962), 11

*Crash Cinema* arrived at a time when the discipline of film studies was engaged in a deep debate about the direction it should take in the twenty-first century. This is not surprising, as film studies has, in effect, ‘grown up’ and seems to somehow evade the sustained attack from press and broadcast mass media (both ‘low’ and ‘high’ brow) that other forms of communication have to endure (the clichéd tabloid rhetoric defining ‘media studies’ as ‘watching telly studies’ for example). Film studies has acquired a level of respect almost equal to the study of literatures and it is not uncommon to find the study of the two disciplines conducted side-by-side. The engaging tussle between, on the one hand, historical and ideological studies of film and on the other film as a vaguer experimental tendency, characterises the formation of a strong theoretical cannon. This ‘ideological’ role of cinema seemed to have successfully supplanted the idea that film could be a conveyor of magical illusion, a referent of the unconscious, a revolutionary (as opposed to Revolutionary) tool, notions that had concerned, for example, the surrealist film project.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, it was such a project that the ‘screen theories’ of the 1970s and beyond treated with great suspicion and sought to outlaw. The dominance of cinema/ideology which utilised film, at the time quite rightly, as a vehicle for furthering social, racial and cultural politics has now become, according to some critics somewhat tired.<sup>4</sup> The fantastical, experimental nature of cinema had been eroded by an obsession with the ‘meaning’ of film and a constant repudiation of the idea that cinema could offer some form of documentary ‘truth’. Thus, in recent times, tentative steps have been taken to ‘reinvent’ film studies, to look at the medium, now transformed by digital interactive viewing, sideways, upside-down and backwards.<sup>5</sup> One vision is that of Daniel Frampton in his book *Filmosophy*, which provocatively tries to tackle the evasiveness of cinema from novel empirical, emotional perspectives. Frampton argues that films such as *Fight Club* and *The Matrix* offer new form of fluid cinema and so must be read ‘differently’.<sup>6</sup> Radical texts from a more experimental age such as Amos Vogel’s *Film as a Subversive Art* and Gene Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema* are being dusted off, or being read for the first time. Perhaps the most extreme vision is Gregory Ulmer’s *Heuretics* where the poetics of cinema, pedagogy and the meaning of film theory is somehow integrated to produce a fascinatingly

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Hammond, *The Shadow and Its Shadow* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2000)

<sup>4</sup> Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology* (Starword, 1992) 4-14; Robert B. Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies* (Indiana University Press, 2001) 1-14; Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *How Films Mean, or, from aesthetics to semiotics and half-way back again* in *Reinventing Film Studies*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold), 8-17.

<sup>5</sup> Gledhill and Williams, *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower, 2006)

rich study that offers an experimental vanguardist model of ‘theory as research’. Time will tell as to whether this revolution (like most current radical insurgencies a tentative rather than ferocious one) will have any lasting effect. There is still an enormous amount of academic entrenchment and ‘path dependency’ to ‘overturn’.<sup>7</sup>

Yet throughout all of this the *Crash Cinema* project identified that one of the most trustworthy and fascinating modes of film analysis was that of representation. The study of film’s signifying practices, focussed as it is on the glorious detail of the film frame (and in the work of Manny Farber and Michel Chion beyond the film frame) yields yet many riches.<sup>8</sup> The essays in this volume are not ‘stuck’ in the representational concerns of the past where the semiotics of the cinema could only succeed by furthering rigid agendas and ‘key issues’ but try instead to uncover the power of cinema to shock and surprise whether that be through visceral impact, subversive content, experiments with identity or the exploration of the taboo. Representation, for the creators of *Crash Cinema*, is a fluid and dynamic approach to the study of film; arguably the only tool from the ‘traditional’ cinematic theory box that has stood the test of time in an era when the global space and the audiovisual stimuli (of which cinematics is still dominant) of all lived experience, has rapidly moved from what Debord theorized as a ‘diffuse’ to ‘integrated’ spectacular form.<sup>9</sup> Happily, the study of film, to which this volume contributes some unique case studies, is as popular as ever and has withstood growing challenge from the ubiquity of CGI (Computer Generated Animation), the internet and computer, console and online gaming. This is because the pleasure of film is still the most humanistic and because the sophistication of the representations offered by cinematic expression remain, in contrast to the infantile consumerism of new media, ever more complex and pleasurable to decipher.

**Mark Goodall**

As *Crash Cinema* celebrates multiplicity, the diversity that a wide-ranging model such as representation offers, the essays in this collection reflect a broad range of materials and concerns. In order to offer the reader some framework of reference however, the collection is loosely chronological, beginning in the early years of cinema and ending in a contemporary expression of film art. This allows any reader interested in the study of film an opportunity to reflect on how

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<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Ray, *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Manny Farber, *Negative Space* (London: Studio Vista, 1971) 3-11; Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: sound on screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994)

<sup>9</sup> Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1989).

issues of representation have, and have not, changed over the last 100 or so years.

The utilisation of the devices of cinema to shock and disgust is one of the prevailing trends of contemporary cinema. Yet, as Moody's *Crash Cinema* essay reveals, this process is far from new. Since the inception of cinema, producers and directors have sought out the taboo image in order to startle, appal and mesmerise paying audiences, through both fiction and documentary modes. As Moody makes clear, shock operates at the level of text (images), context (exhibition) and interpretation (censorship). Devoid of the significant impact the soundscape can have on the physical effect of shock cinema, early silent film had to deploy other devices. In the early stages of British cinema 'simple' devices such as movement, realism and fakery were enough to startle audiences. Arguably the filmmaking of the future needs to return to these principles to affect viewers, once the exponential amplification of disgust has worn thin. One of the surprising aspects of the Moody's study is that Britain, a country steeped in cinema censorship, is revealed as a centre for the development of shock effect. Then again, perhaps the devious way in which shocking images are used and promoted at the beginning of the twentieth century, buffered by a veneer of respectability and hypocritical moral condemnation, is typically Anglo-Saxon. One of the most powerful and long-lasting effects of representational practices is that of transgression, now reaching a critical stage on its theorisation and imaging. Riley shows how 'B' cinema in the golden age was able to draw on subversion, camp and irony to evoke a carnivalsque (Stallybrass and White) vision that is still capable of haunting the imagination in today's shock-weary audiences. In the films of Heck Harvey's quasi-auteur method the blurring of boundaries is thrillingly rendered. Uses of abstraction and visual style in a film like *Carnival of Souls* steal from high artistic practices of Euro-cineartists (Cocteau, Bergman) in the service of the base. Riley looks at how subversion need not be the preserve of the avant-garde. Interestingly, James Riley's project stretches beyond the critical theoretical analysis of film to promoting forty year-old taboo cinema to new audiences with his own brand of fleapit (road) showmanship. The most problematic concern of cinema, to try to capture and represent the unconscious human mind, is examined in Nardelli's essay on the work of Michelangelo Antonioni and Hollis Frampton. In different but complementary ways these two filmmakers, the latter a master of the of the visible art film, the former a master of underground avant-garde experimentation, have tried to align the technique of the edit (cuts) of filmmaking with the 'edits' of the subconscious subjectivity. The dynamic structure of cinema, its ability to manipulate images and sound in plastic manner, makes it the ideal medium for both representing and transforming the human mind. The interruption of the cinematic cut can be experimental in

delivering a vivid landscape of human subjectivity; both Antonioni and Frampton use the shock of the cut to mimic this and negate the smooth narratives of industrial cinema production. Editing is the most powerful of filmmaking tools and so this representational process is, depending on your tastes, hauntingly evocative or extremely trying. In this piece representation is a practice of experimentation and expression rather than a strongly ideological or political device. Patrick Allen and Mark Goodall engage with theories of space, composition and framing in relation to Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*. Their essay proposes the application of theoretical models normally associated with fine arts to cinema in order to adequately explain the multimodality of the spiritual documentary film. In the extraordinary oeuvre of American filmmaker, teacher and dramaturg Godfrey Reggio, framing moves from the specific to the global and back again with thrilling intensity. Three popular films of the 1990s and their representations of female characters are explored by Michele Bergot. The female lead characters in *Thelma and Louise*, Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs* and Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct* are all analysed in relation to the key issues of power, sexuality and violence that fuelled so much debate about these films. Bergot argues that these films offered a particular representation of female characters that has paved the way for different portrayals of women. Jill Good writes about representations of maternal action heroines in popular film, the *Alien* films and *Kill Bill Volumes 1 and 2*, and television, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She discusses how Ripley can be read as destabilising traditional representations of maternal characters yet the characters of the Bride and Buffy are represented in such a way as to restore and re-assert western society's cultural norms. Catherine Bradley also discusses how the world is turned upside down in *Donnie Darko*. Donnie's challenge to the patriarchal law of the father threatens to destroy the world and he can only save those he loves by destroying himself, thus re-asserting the established order of things.

In the late 1960s the 'Third Cinema' project saw the revolutionary potential for the cinema to express issues of race and ethnicity. These theories both critiqued cinema and advocated a new mode of film representation. National cinemas were profoundly affected by these movements none more so than British cinema, already part radicalized by various 'new waves'. These politics were killed off by changes to funding for experimental film and the disastrous tendency to compete with American film production and distribution. The strident and necessary anti-racist agenda now seems, according to mass media discourse, like gender iniquities, to have become largely redundant in our now 'enlightened' multi-cultural epoch. Godfrey's essay on the politics of race in Britain and Ireland, however posits a counter-argument to this dangerously smug notion. On the contrary, he argues, the racial stereotyping and neo-

colonial imaging common to cinema is merely displaced from one ethnic group to another. This process, made effective by the immense power of the (cinema) photographic image and sound/music devices conjoined with ‘end of history’ politics, the essay concludes, can actually be repeated, to devastating effect, ad infinitum. Caroline Hepworth’s essay on Gus van Sant’s film *Elephant* explores issues around the representation of the vulnerable body. Through a close analysis of two scenes from the film Hepworth makes visible the quiet trauma of a vulnerable character within the film. This character, Michelle, is not allowed to be ‘othered’ in a way that defines boundaries between the self and the other. She is positioned within the text as an ‘in-between’ character. She occupies the liminal space between those categories. Karen Scott problematises the contemporary documentary film by looking at the spoof Bill Gates assassination film *Nothing so Strange*. This curious work of art demonstrates with frightening clarity how easily audiences groaning under the weight of ‘actuality’ and ‘reality’ film and television can still be duped by skilful manipulation of the moving image. Josh Appignanesi and Devorah Baums’s account of memorialising Josh’s grandmother on film is underscored by the politics of memory, Alzheimer’s and identity along with modern society’s treatment of the aged. They discuss how the face is represented in cinema, in Hollywood as an idol but in his Grandmother’s case as a witness to the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This essay ends the collection where it started— with a highly personalised account of ‘how films mean’.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE USE AND PROMOTION OF SHOCKING EVENTS/IMAGES IN EARLY SILENT BRITISH CINEMA

PAUL MOODY

### Introduction

The use of shock and spectacle in silent British cinema is revealing not only about the early development of film in this country, but also about the role of shock in films in general. British filmmakers were at the forefront of each new development in the early cinema industry, and because of this these films are revealing about how shock came to play a major role in cinema history. In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of this period, this chapter will focus on the following key areas:

- Firstly, the texts themselves – Analysing what shocking images were included, their presentation and what ideological purpose they served.
- Secondly, the production and exhibition context – Here I will consider the backgrounds of the filmmakers and the presentation of their work.
- Thirdly, censorship – How did this impact on the above areas?

Through a close examination of these factors, I will reveal how shock events/images were a natural development of the cinema in this country, and how these scenes helped to construct and present British national identity.

### Non-Fiction Films in the Formative Years of British Cinema

To begin, I will examine some of the first British film texts of the silent period. In general, the fledging productions of British cinema history were non-fiction, and could be subdivided into three main categories:

- *Actualities*, were the result of placing a camera in front of an object/location and filming them in their natural state. Good examples

of this are the numerous films of waves crashing over rocks (such as *Rough Sea at Dover*, made in 1895 by Birt Acres, and *Rough Sea*, made in circa 1900 by Bamforth and Company) that were sold by most major film distributors in the late nineteenth century. The shock element in these films was that the image was moving, with no need for any further contextual information. This form of cinema was virtually obsolete by 1902, although it had developed into fiction films, such as *After Dark, or The Policeman and his Lantern* (made in 1903), which consisted of ‘a series of views’ as seen by the lantern rays of a policeman on a night beat.<sup>1</sup>

- *Topicals* were the second category, and covered newsworthy events such as Queen Victoria’s funeral, with the shock coming from the event rather than the image.
- From this foundation came the development of *interest* films, which were essentially early documentaries. The subject of the piece, rather than just the picture itself generated the interest, and constructed this by the selection and presentation of the events.

What all three of these had in common was their reliance on *realism*. The names ‘actualities’, ‘topicals’, and ‘interest’ all conjure up images of reality presented to the viewer as it is, and it was this goal that first led to the utilisation of shocking images and events. What attracted audiences, and hence what was offered to them, were small snapshots of reality—an occurrence or event distilled and packaged ready for comfortable viewing. A common way of presenting reality was to film major national events that the public could bring some background knowledge to, thus requiring only the portrayal of the key image or essence of the event. Queen Victoria’s Jubilee in 1897 came only two years after production of the earliest films, and 100-foot reels of this event proved a major boost to a fledgling industry. Much more commercially successful was Victoria’s funeral procession in 1901, filmed and distributed by every film company operating in Britain at the time. The Boer war also provided a rich source of filmmaking material, and subsequently produced some of the first faked news pictures of any major event. For example, in one of these productions a British soldier gives a Boer a drink, only to be shot when his back is turned—of course, the entire piece consisted of faked images. Therefore, the reputation that the fledgling industry had developed for realism had been utilised to promote a certain ideological standpoint, but more importantly this standpoint had been reduced to one shocking image. In essence, Victoria’s

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<sup>1</sup> Description from the Charles Urban Trading Company Catalogue (1903), held at the British Film Institute (hereafter BFI) Library.

funeral procession reveals a nation in great mourning, and the Boer film succinctly states the country's moral authority for war.

The work of the Charles Urban Trading Company provides another example of the dynamics at play in 'interest' films. Urban despatched one of his cameramen, Joe Rosenthal, behind the lines of the Russo-Japanese war to make pro-Japanese films. However, while Rosenthal was working with the Japanese, Urban had also sent George Rogers, another one of his cameramen, to join the Russian side, thus monopolising his company's representation of 'shock' war images. Urban had previously worked with the Warwick Trading Company, and on 22 September 1902 sent F. Orminston Smith to lead the Bioscope expedition up the Alps. This series received a great deal of publicity as to its 'shocking' content, as the following quotation from *Illustrated Mail* highlights:

...the most remarkable strip of all shows the guides roped together slipping down a precipice. It happened just at the moment the camera was ready for operation, and Mr Smith, with the greatest sang-froid, continued to turn the handle. 'You see,' he says, 'They were too far off for me to help them...'<sup>2</sup>

In these two examples, realism is the decisive factor in attracting audiences. Firstly, Urban's cameramen capture images from the heart of the war, with the question of which side has the more justifiable cause remaining non-existent, due to the despatch of crew to both camps. Secondly, this lack of moral considerations when securing images resides on a more personal level; the excitement for the audience increases by the revelations that the cameraman had to continue operating the camera while his fellow crew members faced possible death. Therefore, realism in these productions is independent of any underlying ideological cause; rather, it is utilised as a device to attract paying audiences to the films, with these shock scenes working as signifiers of an overall sense of watching reality.

Cecil Hepworth's *The Alien's Invasion* (1905) is a contrary example to this trend, using realism to promote a cause. It focuses on an English workman who fails to find employment due to the influx of cheap foreign labour at the London docks. The catalogue for the production describes the immigrants as sharing rooms with 20 other people, before saying, 'These are the people who oust the honest British toiler from his work and *this* their manner of living...'<sup>3</sup> The pressing concerns of the time had been interpreted on the screen as a singular shocking message. This is particularly interesting when placed within the

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<sup>2</sup> Low, Rachel, with Manvell, Roger, *The History of British Cinema Volume One 1896-1906*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Low, Rachel, with Manvell, Roger, *The History of British Cinema Volume One 1896-1906*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 58.

context of Hepworth's reputation; namely as a purveyor of peculiarly English films – it can be seen here that his setting up of Englishness, in opposition to a predefined 'other', has been inextricably linked to the use of spectacle and consequently, the use of realism. Hepworth preys on the fear of foreigners and their invasion into British culture to define a distinctly English sensibility.

Whereas Hepworth was concerned with defining Englishness, Urban used shock to depict world events – an internationalist stance that betrayed his American roots. However, they were still essentially constructing non-Englishness as 'other'; Urban's images are extraordinary, distinct from the normality of everyday British life. His mountaineers are in danger; his foreign correspondents witness a world at war. Moreover, the audience could view this from comfortable English fairgrounds or music halls. His eventual successes with First World War propaganda and royal pageantry filmed throughout the empire were all products of this mentality.

## **Fiction Films and Their Production Context**

The non-fiction work of the period formed only the initial basis of the industry in this country, and once the viewing of film became entrenched as a popular leisure pastime, so did the production of fiction films. In this section I will analyse the production context behind some of the fiction films produced in the period, in order to explain why the use of shock developed in the way it did in these texts, and also to analyse how the use of these images compared to the non-fiction work of the time.

- **Personal Background** - The majority of British cinema's pioneers came from non-artistic backgrounds; they were chemists, engineers, and lantern lecturers. The cinema was an opportunity to explore these skills with a different medium, and the incorporation of shock or 'trick' elements was a natural progression. For example G. A. Smith first became interested in films as illustrations to his own lectures. Thus, the clips utilised had to carry an impact and present the theme of his argument in single images. The fact that the camera equipment was so cumbersome also had a major effect, and it was not until the early 1910s that producers found a way to move beyond static camera shots. Because of this, the impact of the visuals in the main frame had to be decisive. Two early fiction productions, R. W. Paul's *An Extraordinary Cab Accident*, made in 1903, and Cecil Hepworth's *How it Feels to be Run Over*, made in 1900 both show the importance of shock within a static frame (depicting extremely exaggerated automobile accidents), and the desire to incorporate 'tricks'.

- **Tinting** - R. W. Paul had instigated hand colouring in 1896, and from this developed the process of tinting film stock, which was much easier to use. It is difficult to decide on the impact that this had on audiences of the time. In many ways, it was an attempt to add a further degree of realism to the films, by moving away from monochrome projection. However, it was also an inherently unrealistic device, one designed to prey on audience preconceptions of how different colours signified emotions or natural states (such as a blue tint to signify night). A good example of this is in James Williamson's *Fire!* (1901) which utilised a red tint for its first scenes. In fact, Williamson described *Fire!* as 'undoubtedly the most sensational fire scene which has yet been kinematographed, and never fails to arouse the utmost enthusiasms. To enhance the effect, portions of the film are stained red.'<sup>4</sup> This device registered with audiences in much the same way as original cinema productions did – i.e. they came just to see the colour (or spectacle), not necessarily for the purpose it intended to achieve. In many ways colour initially reduced the various developments in contextual information down to a series of shocking images once more – and the title Williamson gave to this production – *Fire!* – speaks for itself in this respect. In fact, Williamson's career was full of titles such as these, as his first multi-shot narrative film, *Attack on a China Mission – Bluejackets to the Rescue* (1900), attests.
- **Narrative** - Nonetheless, *Fire!* provided some attempt to put spectacle into context, using it to construct a cohesive narrative. As Frank Gray points out:

“By designing a work of fiction which employed the apparatus and staff of a real fire brigade, used locations and a set, and possessed careful shot construction and a clear editing strategy, Williamson created a film with a passionate, dramatic energy.<sup>5</sup>”

He uses the spectacle in a controlled way, but by employing real firemen, he also seeks to attach the defining sense of reality to it. As Gray highlights, this construction has its genesis in the readings of fire rescue narratives at magic lantern lectures in the late 1880s. These narratives could be broken down into five stages:

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<sup>4</sup> *Williamson's Kinematograph Films*, September 1902, pp. 27-8, held in the South East Film and Video Archive Collection.

<sup>5</sup> Gray, Frank, 'James Williamson's Rescue Narratives', in Higson, A. (ed.), *Young and Innocent?: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter 2002, p. 36.

1. Detection/raising the alarm
2. Preparation/departure
3. Journey: the race to the blaze
4. Fighting the flames
5. The successful rescue<sup>6</sup>

No. 4 is clearly the shock aspect of the picture, but it has been sandwiched within other dramatic developments. In the lantern lectures, the individual slides provided the shock images, but the accompanying text added a dramatic context that increased the image's power. Williamson's attempts to do this with cinema, employing both tinting and narrative, shows a marked development in the use of spectacle, and a move away from the independence of these images.

Interestingly, the development of rigid narrative forms hinging around a central shock element became the key constituent of serials, during which constant cliff-hanger endings were used as a shock device to entice the audience back to the cinema the following week. Eventually Alfred Hitchcock developed and popularised this approach, frequently describing his screenwriters as 'constructionists' and emphasising their necessity to build frameworks for his shocking set pieces.

- **Fiction and Non-fiction: Some Conclusions** – It is now worthwhile to draw some preliminary conclusions. Early British Fiction films developed out of similar backgrounds to non-fiction productions. While there were some attempts made to add contextual information, they operated in much the same way as non-fiction, utilising shock and spectacle to draw in audiences and represent a general theme or mood. This process allowed the reduction of certain ideas to one concise, definitive image.

## Exhibition Context

Before I examine the impact of censorship, it is essential to analyse the exhibition of the films in question. As my discussion of the texts has shown, the use of shock in these productions directly related to audience needs, whether these were illustrations for presentations or feeding into fears about the influx of foreigners. Because of this, the presentation of these films to the public was

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<sup>6</sup> Gray, Frank, 'James Williamson's Rescue Narratives', in Higson, A. (ed.), *Young and Innocent?: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter 2002, p. 34.

integral to their reception. Several considerations impact on analysis of exhibition in this period:

- **The Role of Showmen** – Producers sold their films to ‘showmen’, who would then present the pictures at music hall or fairground exhibitions. As Rachel Low points out, ‘Film shows were for a time included in the programmes of other music halls throughout the country, usually as one item of twenty to thirty minutes towards the end of the performance.’<sup>7</sup> These productions fitted within a short timeslot, and needed to make their impact felt immediately. The utilising of shock images/events was once again a necessary device in order to attract the audience’s attention.
- **Live Narration** – The showman would perform the function of a live narrator, explaining events as they appeared on the screen. This form of public contextual analysis enhanced the eventual impact of the images on the audience. Once more, the narrator was available to highlight the key points in the film, allowing maximum effect from the shock images presented.
- **Realism** – This was once again a prevailing force, used initially by showmen who were keen to highlight the new medium of moving pictures, as in the following description of a showman’s patter:

His peroration was magnificent; ‘You’ve seen pictures of people in books, all frozen stiff. You’ve never seen people come alive in pictures, moving about natural like you and me. Well, go inside and see for yourself living pictures for a penny. Then tell me if I’m a liar.’<sup>8</sup>

These nods to realism developed to their logical conclusion by the operation known as ‘Hale’s Tours’, which began in Oxford Street in 1906. For 6d, you could sit in a mock-up of a railway carriage and watch the illusion of passing scenery. By August 1907, the manager claimed a thousand people a day were paying their sixpences.<sup>9</sup> Realism was once more a defining selling point for these productions, and even the illusion of passing scenery could still provide the necessary shock factor desired by the public. However, when coupled with

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<sup>7</sup> Low, Rachel, with Manvell, Roger, *The History of British Cinema Volume One 1896-1906*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Low, Rachel, with Manvell, Roger, *The History of British Cinema Volume One 1896-1906*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Low, Rachel, *The History of British Cinema Volume Two 1906-1914*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 13.

other illicit suggestions (such as G. A. Smith's suggestively titled 1899 film *The Kiss in the Tunnel*) the shock element was greatly increased.

Despite the nods to shock and realism displayed in these productions, the key difference highlighted by analysing exhibition practices is the move away from national leanings. Exhibition was an inherently local practice, one that took the national predilections of the filmmakers and through the oration of the showman appropriated them for local audiences. Here, shock took on a distinctly personal flavour; for example, a skilled showman could turn a showing of *The Alien's Invasion* in a town high in unemployment into something carrying much more power than originally perceived by Cecil Hepworth. The result of this was to make exhibition the most important factor in the whole process of shock within the cinema. It is also because of this reason that censorship, which affected the texts and their production contexts, as well as exhibition practices, was to have such a major effect on the use of shock in British cinema.

## Censorship

Due to a curious loophole, formal censorship in Britain initially had the effect of entrenching realistic portrayals of shocking events. The Cinematograph (Films) Act (1909) included a sentence arguing that 'photographs of current events [are] exempt from censorship.'<sup>10</sup> The BBFC had sought clarification of 'photographs of current events' from the Home Office, who advised them that this covered any film that was taken at the time of happening of the event, irrespective of when it may be shown. However, the inclusion of a commentary, whether critical or merely descriptive, or the insertion of shots which were not of current events would take the film out of the 'current events' classification and make them censorable.<sup>11</sup> As previously mentioned, film producers found themselves required to produce films with a number of shocking images, in order to attract and hold an audience. However, by doing so they ran the risk of having their productions censored. The Cinematograph (Films) Act provided them with an avenue with which to exploit these images, as long as they were within the context of 'photographs of current events.' Of course, the filming of these events also attracted producers because of the immediate popular recognition of them, which would virtually guarantee a wide audience base. Nevertheless, the lack of restrictions on this type of product certainly influenced

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<sup>10</sup> Home Office Correspondence regarding Cinematograph Films Act (1909), 2 November 1934, Held in the Public Record Office (hereafter PRO): BT 64/87.

<sup>11</sup> Home Office Correspondence regarding Cinematograph Films Act (1909), 2 November 1934, PRO: BT 64/87.