

Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs, Ramaswami Harindranath: The Crash Controversy. Censorship Campaigns and Film reception

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On 3 June 1996, the film critic Alexander Walker filed a report from the Cannes Film attacking the new David Cronenberg film *Crash* based on the book of the same name by J.G. Ballard. Subsequently labelled 'A movie beyond the bounds of depravity' by the London Evening Standard and denounced by Christopher Tookey of The Daily Mail (an influential newspaper of middle England opinion) as a film at which even a liberal society must draw the line, a year-long campaign to have the film banned started. A campaign which was taken up to a lesser degree by other papers.

The Daily Mail ran stories about the private lives of the British Board of Film Classification examiners (BBFC), it contacted every local authority and city council (in UK they still retain the right to ban a film even if the BBFC has given it a certificate. In the eighties my local council disbanded the committee responsible for vetting films, over-turned the previous bans, and cinemas were suddenly showing *The Exorcist* (1973), *Caligula* (1979), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Life of Brian* (1979)), and generally led a crusade against this controversial film about people who are sexually aroused by the violence and disfigurement associated with car crashes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the authors embarked on a year-long project to explore five areas relating to *Crash*: (1) the nature of the public debate, (2) the journalistic practices which allowed these views to dominate, (3) press coverage in Britain compared with other countries, (4) the impact the controversy had on ordinary viewers and (5) the viewing strategies which went along with liking and approving of the film.

The French response to *Crash* was more intellectual than the hysteria exhibited in Britain, with America lying somewhere in the middle. However, *The Crash Controversy* is primarily concerned with audience viewing strategy and the effect of the publicity on it. Observations relating to the journalistic campaign will be taken up in a later publication, the authors say. Frankly, there is a general lack of audience research being done at the moment, and it is badly needed.

In many academic (and political) contexts we talk about the 'viewers...' and the effect films and TV have on them: does a film convey a message which is received and understood by the audience, is this received message the one intended by the artist (liberals who abhorred *Rambo* (1985), and Ronald Reagan who loved it, might be surprised to know that communist rebels in the Philippines were inspired to fight against the Marcos regime by watching *Rambo* on video). The concept of viewing strategy, the principle that viewers do not come to a film unprepared, that they have their hopes, fears, previous experiences and involvements, required

links among the following to be studied: What did people already know about the film and the book? Why did they want to see it? Which group did the viewer feel they were watching the film with or on behalf of? How did they go about the process of watching, remembering and ignoring? How did they fill in gaps of plot or character motivation when they are not made explicitly evident? How did the audience go through the process of experiencing the film to making judgments about it?

In order to judge the validity of the limited conclusions the authors make, it is important to look at their methodology. They decided there should be a nine-cell categorisation based on the two axis: (liking - neutral - disliking) and (approval - neutral - disapproval) to organise their materials.

They had access to an arts cinema, The Watershed in Bristol, with a seating capacity of 200. They recruited an audience by advertising in public places such as libraries and community centres, placing invitations in local papers and using friends and colleagues.

Prospective viewers were asked to fill in a questionnaire about themselves and their reasons for seeing the film. Eventually, 167 people were chosen to give a range across the variables of age, gender, ethnic background, reasons of (re)seeing the film, specialised interests in car/car crashes, disabilities, films and crime. After they had seen the film they were given another questionnaire to fill in immediately.

All the questionnaires were data-based and classified by the authors according to their nine-cell categorisation. A total of 63 people were then interviewed individually and in mixed-sex groups. The groups were asked about their expectations and reactions to the film, and their opinions on censorship in general.

The discussions were transcribed and the transcripts loaded into the qualitative analysis software NUD*IST, which allows researchers to code their material in as many ways as they choose. Although NUD*IST couldn't distinguish individuals within the groups, you could see how much time certain attitude groups spent on certain subjects, or whether a certain type of talk increased or declined as positivity declined or increased.

The authors' conclusions are spread throughout the book and they are not always easy to identify. In fact, they admit to disagreeing about some conclusions with each other. „Attacks on *Crash* repeatedly invoked a picture of a weak, corruptible viewer. This ‚person‘ if not already damaged beyond rescue might be tempted into more harmful ways through being involved with this film [...]” (S.93) and therefore should be protected from it. But it is clear from the detailed descriptions and analysis of the conversations the participants in this study deal with the film in different ways, and come to different conclusions about it. However, with this kind of empirical research it is difficult to know if 167 participants can constitute a large enough sample. One of the clearest declarations the authors

make is that the people who enjoyed and approved *Crash* were willing and able to enter into a challenging relationship with the film, to remain open, to be active with regards to watching the film. Being „willing„ and „able„ to engage is influenced by many factors including a newspaper campaign. If you go to see *Crash* within the context of „pornography„ and „violence„ then you will judge it within that context. You may be disgusted by it or even disappointed by it because you’ve seen better ‚porn‘. The Daily Mail ran a political campaign, it was just before a general election, under the guise of a moral campaign, to protect you, the viewer, they said. However, Barker, Austin and Harindranath make it clear that there are many „yous“ sitting in the audience, and it’s difficult to believe that one voice can speak on behalf of all us. This kind of research is important because it denies the credibility to those who dishonestly want to speak on our behalf in support of their own agenda.

However, it is difficult to know the effect of being part of a research project had on the participants’ opinions and judgments regarding the film, and whether it is possible to do this kind of audience research without influencing the results. Unfortunately, an Uncertainty Principle is often in operation whereby the observation of the process changes it.

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