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Empire of the scene : film adaptations of the novels of J. G. Ballard

Scott R. Stalcup

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ABSTRACT

EMPIRE OF THE SCENE: FILM ADAPTATIONS OF THE NOVELS OF J. G. BALLARD

Scott R. Stalcup, MA
Department of Communication
Northern Illinois University, 2015
Dr. Jeffrey Patrick Chown, Director

This study examines primarily the adaptations of J. G. Ballard's novels *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*, directed respectively by Steven Spielberg and David Cronenberg. An overview of the production histories, the contrasts between the films and their source texts, and the reception by audiences, as well as Ballard himself, are addressed.

In addition, the study examines lesser-known/less available adaptations of Ballard's writing, specifically Sam Scoggins' take on *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Solvieg Nordlund's adaptations of "The Low-Flying Aircraft" and "Thirteen to Centaurus," Jonathan Weiss' *The Atrocity Exhibition*, as well as looking ahead to the Ben Wheatley-helmed *High-Rise* currently in production.

Prior to any of his works being adapted, Ballard voiced concern that if any of his works were made into films, the film would supplant the source text, indicating that the work should have been a film all along. Ballard appears to sabotage every adaptation in his reaction. The main thrust of the study seeks to determine if his concerns were valid and whether the works should have been films all along.

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EMPIRE OF THE SCENE: FILM ADAPTATIONS OF THE NOVELS OF

J. G. BALLARD

BY

SCOTT R. STALCUP

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DEDICATION

To my mom, my girlfriend, and my best friend

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

According to Desmond and Hawkes, “[I]n any given year, about one-third of all commercial films produced in the United States started as published texts” (2006, p. 2). Where film differs from the traditional narrative in a novel is that film moves along five tracks. They are: theatrical performance, words both spoken and written, music, sound effects, and photographic images, both moving and still (p. 2). Literature only moves upon the written track of words, with less sensory involvement than film. Of the categories of adaptation, Desmond and Hawkes define a close adaptation as one where “most of the story elements in the literary text are kept in the film and few elements are dropped or added” (p. 3). A loose adaptation consists of a film where “most story elements are dropped and the literary text is used as a point of departure” (p. 3). Last, the intermediate adaptation is one which “neither conforms exactly nor departs entirely from the literary text but stays in the middle of the sliding scale between close and loose” (p. 3). Due to the aforementioned higher involvement of the senses, it is not unusual for a film adaptation to take precedence over the literary work upon which it is based.

In 1982, postcolonial British author J.G. Ballard expressed relief that no true film adaptation of his novels existed yet. He spoke specifically of his novel *Crash*. He feared that in viewing any adaptation, he would “see [himself] beginning to believe the movie version. – [his] own imagination *deformed* by the damned thing, squeezed into somebody else’s mold” (Sinclair, 1999, p. 10). With this quote, Sinclair presents a conundrum. If successfully translated onto celluloid, then the logic proceeds that it fails as a novel and should have been a film all along.

Ballard elaborated further elsewhere, declaring, “[A]ll great novels are unfilmable because they’re so interiorised” (p. 11).

Ballard was born on November 15, 1930, in Shanghai, China to James and Edna (*nee* Johnstone) Ballard (Matthews, 2005, p. 46). At the time, Shanghai was the fifth most populous city in the world. According to Baxter (2011), Ballard believed his parents were “shocked” by the Third World conditions that greeted them in Shanghai. Obviously, they recovered well enough to move into a three-story pile at 31 Amherst Avenue. The street itself was “a monument to Europe’s commercial invasion of China,” being named after Lord Amherst, who opened China to Western trade a century previous (p. 9).

Baxter also noted the racism of James and Edna and how it reflected in their son. Despite Ballard’s exultations of pre-war Shanghai being “exciting [in being] a collision of these different cultures” and how he “always believed in multiracial societies” (p.10), he proved to be another example of the aphorism that “those who profess the most will practice it the least.” The Ballards did not socialize with the Chinese. For that matter, they did not socialize with the Americans or the mainland Europeans either (p. 10). As an adult, the few friends Ballard had were Anglo-Saxon. As a final note, in his stories, the characters, “saving the occasional black or Eurasian villain, are entirely white” (p. 11).

Barely into what is now considered adolescence, Ballard and his family were relocated from their home on Amherst to a prisoner of war camp. Recollecting his time in Lunghua, Ballard regarded that period as “largely happy” (Baxter, 2011, p. 25). A chief reason for this was because his parents left him alone. Yes, Lunghua was a slum. Ballard did not disagree with this, but “it was *his* slum” (p. 24). Shunning the other three to four hundred children who resided at

the camp, Ballard preferred to socialize with the other inmates or the American merchant seamen.

After the war, Ballard's father decided that the family should be repatriated to England. The family sailed in November aboard the *Arawa*. Though young Jim believed he would return to Shanghai when things settled down, "he remained in exile for the next half-century, clinging resentfully to the fantasy of a lost Shanghai" (p. 26). Baxter compares Ballard to Orson Welles' character Charles Foster Kane and "Rosebud," with Ballard "nurs[ing] a resentment of childhood loss rather than doing something to redress it" (p. 27).

Three key events would have an impact on Ballard's literary career. First, after attending Leys School in Cambridge, Ballard studied medicine at King's College for two years. Thereafter, he switched to English, which he studied at London University for one year. Seemingly the two would appear unrelated, though Ballard's years of reading medicine would heavily influence his writing, often in unsettling ways. In 1953, Ballard joined the Royal Air Force in Moosejaw, Canada. During his time in Her Majesty's Air Force, the third crucial event occurred. Here Ballard was first exposed to science fiction. It is a genre into which Ballard would be pigeonholed due to the ecological disaster themes of his first four novels (counting the disowned first, *The Wind From Nowhere* [1965]), as well as the short stories he wrote during this period. His first short story, "Prima Belladonna," one of his "Vermillion Sands" short stories, was published by *Science Fantasy/New Worlds* in 1956 (Brower, 2002; Gasiorek, 2005). Via connections at the publication, Ballard became the assistant editor at *Chemistry and Industry*.

As stated earlier, the theme of global catastrophe dominated Ballard's first four novels, leading to his ghettoization as a science fiction writer. In *The Wind From Nowhere*, oblivion took

the form of escalating winds that toppled buildings. With *The Drowned World* (1965), it was the melting ice caps. In *The Drought/The Burning World* (1964), it was the melting ice caps' converse, or its stateside namesake. Last, in *The Crystal World* (1966), doom came in the form of a "spreading cancerous mutation" in the form of mineralization. In all of the works, the protagonists within the novels greet oblivion with open arms, in sharp contrast to the "stiff upper lip-- after all, we are British" mindset of other British disaster novels of the period (Baker, 2008).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ballard's writing shifted focus toward the changes in the political and cultural aspects of society. Recounting his first decade as a writer, Ballard wrote in *Miracles of Life*, "[It] coincided with a period of sustained change in England as well as in the U.S.A. and Europe" (2008, p. 192). He continued:

Change was in the air, affecting the nation's psychology for good or bad. Change was what I wrote about, especially the hidden agendas for change that people were already espousing. Invisible persuaders were manipulating politics and the consumerist market, affecting habits and assumptions in ways that few people realized. (p. 192)

Those concerns took his work out of the realm of science fiction and into what might be viewed as a hyper-exaggerated present for his next grouping of novels: *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974), and *High-Rise* (1974), his so-called technobarbarism period (Savage, 1991). Shifting from the motorways to residences, *High-Rise* focused on the "utopian but misconceived and underfunded tower block projects" of the 1950s and 1960s (Groes, 2012, p. 123).

The impact of mass media and the changes in postwar British society would also mark Ballard's writing during the second half of the 1970s on into the 1980s, as demonstrated by short stories like "The Greatest Television Show on Earth" (Gasiorek, 2006, p. 8). The fascination

with celebrities as our “new gods,” first expressed in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, would be taken to its ridiculous extreme thematically with Ballard’s next quartet of novels. *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), *Hello, America!* (1981), *Day of Creation* (1987) and *Rushing to Paradise* (1994) all featured main characters who suffered from messianic delusions.

In the last quartet that closed out Ballard’s career, Ballard returned somewhat to the hyper-exaggerated present of his early 1970s period. *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003), and *Kingdom Come* (2006) all explored themes of violence in seemingly peaceful communities or “acts of violence as a way of combating social unrest” (Matthews, 2005, p. 51). In all, a crime has been committed. The audience knows who committed it. Ballard spends the whole of each novel joining the dots.

The four thematic periods aside, autobiography is a subject Ballard returned to throughout his career. It occupies two chapters of his *User’s Guide to the Millennium* (1996) compilation as well as three book-length pieces. The first, *Empire of the Sun* (1984), focused on his childhood. *The Kindness of Women* (1991), while containing some overlap with *Empire*, focused on the first forty years of Ballard’s life, though it really does not take flight until his time reading medicine in the 1950s, followed by the various relationships Ballard had with women following the sudden death of his wife Mary. From these relationships, Ballard derived the title of his this second attempt at autobiography (Matthews, 2005, p. 49). Given that both books were categorized as works of fiction, the autobiographical content appears somewhat suspect. Only Ballard’s third attempt, *Miracles of Life: From Shanghai to Shepperton* (2008), may be considered a true autobiography. It covered Ballard’s early childhood up to the diagnosis with prostate cancer that would claim his life a year after the book’s publication.

To shift from biographical to critical matters, Ballard arguably represents one of the more polarizing authors to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. Delville wrote his book-length critical work on J.G. Ballard as a response to the charges levied against Ballard by critics Fallowell and Platzner. The two condemned Ballard's fiction as lacking in both "moral and emotional commitment" (1998, p. 5). In contrast, Delville believes Ballard's novels act "as a forum for contemporary debates about regression, sexual deviance and the role of violence and radicalism in the arts" (p. 6). On the back cover of *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J.G. Ballard*, Luckhurst (1997) asks, "Prophet or pervert? How are we to judge his work?" Francis (2011) believes Ballard "a literary maverick, an imaginative radical, a transgressive, subversive writer unafraid to violate taboos and to voice unspoken truths about the state of modern humanity" (p. 7).

Despite a career that extended from the 1960s into the 2000s, Ballard's work remains relatively unknown stateside. Were one to peruse the shelves at one of the big box bookstores, endangered species though they are, chances are the only books by Ballard one would find are *Crash* and/or *Empire of the Sun*, the two works of Ballard's that were adapted for the screen by David Cronenberg and Steven Spielberg respectively.

For an author who wrote for four decades, though considered a cult figure stateside, his reputation in England would appear to merit a greater amount of scholarship than what exists currently. That said, since Ballard succumbed to prostate cancer in 2009, scholarship on his work *has* experienced a considerable increase. Prior to this boom in scholarship, Stephenson's *Out of the Night and into the Dream* (1991) added only a third critical voice to Ballard studies after Goddard and Pringle's (1976) and Brigg's (1985) books. Stephenson combined the close reading

approach of New Criticism with Archetypal Criticism in his exploration of the themes in Ballard's work. To focus on the strain of Archetypal Criticism, Stephenson drew from Mircea Eliades' discussions of flight and ascension, Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth, Northrop Frye's discussion of the quest-romance, and last, Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, individuation, and the "characterization of the shadow and the anima/animus archetypes" (pp. 3-5). According to Stephenson, all represented the themes present in Ballard's work.

Luckhurst's *The Angle Between Two Walls* (1997) examined Ballard's works by approaching Ballard's question, "Does the angle between two walls have a happy ending?" in terms of Derrida's *la brisure*, or that point in any structural system which renders the system both possible and impossible (p. xiii). When one applies *la brisure* to the canon of Ballard's work, his novels occupy that space between wherein they escape analysis by any one critical discourse, be it psychoanalytical, Marxist, or feminist (p. xix). Though it would appear that by removing them from examination by other schools of criticism, Luckhurst still imposes a critical school onto the works by his act.

Gasiorek's 2005 *J.G. Ballard* (2005) approached Ballard's work through Gasiorek's own previous obsessions with realism and experimentation in post-war British fiction, placing a cultural-historical emphasis on Ballard's works, emphasizing Ballard's debts to the Surrealists and Pop Art. According to Gasiorek, "Ballard's writing [. . .] has also been motivated by a strong analytic tendency, a drive to uncover and to understand the hidden logics that inform everyday social life" (p. 13).

Jeanette Baxter, an emerging scholar rivaling longtime scholar David Pringle in the field of Ballard studies, contributed *J.G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (2009). Baxter continued the examination of Ballard's writing through the Surrealist influence. She claimed, "Surrealism's enquiry into the unconscious" played a significant role in Ballard's transforming post-war science fiction (p. 6). Brigg also notes the influence of the Surrealists upon Ballard touched on by other scholars, noting Ballard credits Dali with demonstrating "the death of affect." Brigg defines the condition as one "in which the sheer weight of the horror of violence and confusions of emotional life have deadened human reactions" (1985, p. 16).

By contrast, Francis' *The Psychological Fictions of J.G. Ballard* (2011) sought to "occupy a hitherto inexplicably uncolonized" critical perspective in Ballard Studies. Francis' work attempts to examine the cultural implications and value of Ballard's "creative use of psychological theories to find new perspectives or ways of thinking." Additionally, Francis seeks to determine what makes the psychological aspects of Ballard's fiction so alluring (p. 2).

Other scholars grabbed the baton passed by Francis' study. One fourth of the anthology *J.G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions*, edited by Baxter and Wymer (2012), examines the works of Ballard through the psychological lens. The other essays in the collection focus on "Form and Narrative" (p.19), depictions of London in Ballard's fiction (p. 123), and "Sex, Geometry and the Body" (p. 71). The last of these categories, though promising, devotes most of its ink to two of Ballard's more well-known techno-barbarism works, *The Atrocity Exhibition* and its spawn *Crash*, albeit with the novel dominating the discussion.

In addition to the alarm that should be raised by the dearth of recognition of Ballard and its attendant lack of scholarship is the alarm expressed by the lack of film adaptations of

Ballard's novels. Despite his supposed relief that none of his works had been adapted for the cinema, surely at least one version each of his ecological disaster novels would have been filmed since the 1960s, particularly given the fascination with disasters and dystopias held by generations promised nuclear annihilation but receiving instead smaller scale atrocities like the attacks on the East Coast in 2001.

Ballard certainly has his share of fans in the performing arts. In his interview with Pringle, Vale (2005) notes the large following Ballard has, particularly among musicians who, unsurprisingly, arose out of the punk/post-punk era in England. Gary Numan counts himself as a fan. Daniel Miller of The Normal drew inspiration from *Crash* for the one hit for which the group is known, "Warm Leatherette." Ian Curtis, the doomed singer for Joy Division, recorded a song titled "The Atrocity Exhibition" that appears on the group's last album recorded prior to Curtis's suicide (Vale, 2005, pp. 219-20). Additionally, Hawkwind, a group associated with Ballard's sometime friend/more often colleague Michael Moorcock, recorded a song titled "High-Rise." Other fans of Ballard in the field of popular music include Radiohead, Ultravox, and the Human League (Baxter, 2011).

This study seeks to add another voice to the growing field of scholarship on the work of J.G. Ballard, with particular focus on the scant film adaptations of his novels. The study opens with a chapter discussing the film adaptation of Ballard's first novel-length autobiography, *Empire of the Sun* (1984). Written forty years after his time spent in Lunghua, the piece recounts a time that, despite having World War II as its backdrop, Ballard looked back on largely with a degree of happiness, likely due in part to the age at which he was during his internment (McBride, 1997).

Empire of the Sun broke stylistically from the current trajectory of Ballard's writing, garnering him accolades previously unknown to his writing, as well as gaining the attentions of Hollywood heavyweight Steven Spielberg and the darling of contemporary British drama, Tom Stoppard. Both men were drawn to Ballard's novel due to identifying with the story of a boy uprooted from his home and destined never to return again. Spielberg also saw the potential in adapting the text as a break away from the sort of fare he had been producing since his breakthrough in the 1970s to do films more in the style of his hero, David Lean, who was initially attached to the project (Wasser, 2010).

Focus then shifts to the complicated production history with Lean, originally attached to the film, giving up on the script to be replaced by Harold Becker. Stoppard came into the project at the same time as Becker, though Becker would give way to Spielberg, an upheaval Stoppard found troubling initially (Freer, 2001; Nadel, 2002). Further troubles arose regarding authorship of the script as Spielberg's hired gun, Menno Meyjes, toyed with Stoppard's original script after Stoppard fell away from the production initially (Nadel, 2002). In discussing the adaptation of the film, this is troubling. Not only is the question of which text dominates, film or the literary work on which it is based, in question, but who is the author of the film problematizes matters. Clouding the water further in the study is the emphasis on Spielberg, the *auteur*, over Stoppard, the scriptwriter. It is a downplaying engaged in by critics, Ballard, and Stoppard himself (Ballard, 2008; Gormlie, 2002; McBride, 1997). To his credit, Ballard limited his involvement to visits to the set and a walk-on cameo and voiceover, both of which were cut before the final production (Taylor & O'Brien, 1999).

Discussion then turns to the allusions to cinema throughout the text. For a man who worried that a film adaptation of his work would dominate his original novel, *Empire* appears doomed from the outset. For example, Ballard's *doppelganger* Jim Graham consumes endless newsreels and the family chauffeur, Yang, is in local film productions. In a way, Ballard's writing style also takes on elements of film, according to critics (Gormlie, 2002).

Next, the chapter focuses on the problems of adapting Ballard's novel. Strangely, as a novel's very make-up *is* the written word and Stoppard was known for his wordplay, the film is highly visual in nature. This led Ballard, ever the gainsayer if for no other reason than to be difficult, to say, "This has nothing to do with my book" (Fox, 1991, p. 185).

To see if Ballard is right, the chapter then shifts to an examination, comparing and contrasting the novel and film. Due to the climate of the mid-1980s, Spielberg and Stoppard had to downplay the homosexuality of the characters of Frank and Basie, played by Joe Pantoliano and John Malkovich (Freer, 2001; Wasser, 2010). Additionally, the graphic depictions of physical violence in Shanghai, the camp at Lunghua and the war going on around the camp at the time had to be downplayed, given the current climate, lest the film be mistaken for being part of the video nasties/splatter genre of the 1980s (Gormlie, 2002). In other instances, the script extends scenes that barely registered in the text, such as the setting of the pheasant traps in the film adaptation (Freer, 2001, p. 159) or replicates them wholly from the text, such as Jim returning to his family's home and noticing the footprints in spilled talcum powder (*Empire*, p. 44).

Before plunging into the critical reception of the film, a brief digression into the visible influences of Spielberg's hero and the original director of *Empire of the Sun*, David Lean, are

discussed. From the swinging crane shot over Shanghai, to the relationship between Jim and Basie supposedly mirroring that of Oliver and Fagin in Lean's adaptation, as well as the confusion of which side Jim is on shared with Captain Nicholson in *Bridge on the River Kwai*, the film appears a love letter to the films made by Lean, if not to Lean himself (Freer, 2001).

The chapter's penultimate subtopic consists of a discussion of the critical reception of the film, which was, outside of generating most of its ticket sales from overseas audiences, almost universally negative. The reasons were manifold. The downplaying of the violence noted by Gormlie was viewed as a black mark against Spielberg's film. Other critics viewed the film as more of the same from Spielberg. Even though he tried to get away from the humor and niceness of his earlier projects, critics could not see him outside of the Peter Pan role into which the public had cast him (McBride, 1997). Still others found the film too demanding compared with Spielberg's earlier work and dismissed it as a result (Wasser, 2010). Further criticism came from the survivors of the Japanese occupation regarding the downplaying of the conditions in the camp (Taylor & O'Brien, 1999).

The chapter closes with Spielberg's reaction to the film's reception. Expressing shock at how poorly the film was received, Spielberg believed that the majority of the reason for the film's failure was due to him being typecast as a filmmaker and turning out something other than a sequel to *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* or another Indiana Jones film (Taylor & O'Brien, 1999). This is what Spielberg did, producing *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Always*, and *Hook* as his next three films, retreating back into the form of mainstream films with which the viewing public were more comfortable and he could be assured an avoidance of critical condemnation by the viewers.

Among the questions that arise in the chapter regarding issues of adaptation of Ballard's work are how closely and whose vision of the source text in particular was achieved in the film? Is Ballard's fear realized? Does the film's narrative replace his own or was its failure at the box office what spared Ballard's original vision from falling by the wayside? Focusing on the script, whose vision was dominant? Was it Stoppard as the scriptwriter? Was it Spielberg as the filmmaker? How much of Menno Meyjes' work poisoned the well? All trouble the discussion of *Empire of the Sun's* film adaptation.

Chapter Three focuses on the long process involved in adapting Ballard's novel *Crash* for the cinema. The study opens tracing the convoluted history of Ballard's story of a group of people who achieve sexual gratification via automobile accidents, beginning in part with Ballard's experimental novel *The Atrocity Exhibition*, of which the "condensed novel" ("Crash!") was one of its chapters. The piece had as a recurring motif public figures being subjected to physical violence, such as John Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, who had already been subjected to physical violence resulting in their deaths. *Crash* also had its roots in an art installation put together by Ballard in 1970 involving crashed automobiles. During the tour through the exhibit, patrons were interviewed by a topless model (Baxter, 2011). Another strain came in the obsession Ballard had with capturing his girlfriend Claire Walsh/Churchill in sexually suggestive positions in an automobile, first in a concrete poem titled "A Poem for Claire Churchill" and his proposed film of a car crash in which she would be the star. All culminated in Ballard's writing of the novel of *Crash*.

Discussion then shifts to the even longer history of the attempt to get the film produced. Stretching back to the 1970s, shortly after the book's publication, Sandy Lieberon had tried to

get the film produced with Nicholas Roeg's involvement, seeing the film as a potential successor to Roeg's film *Performance* with Mick Jagger in the starring role of Lieberson's adaption of the novel. A short film called *Crash!* was produced in the 1970s, but in its arty production style and voiceover by Ballard, the film was only an adaptation in the loosest sense of the word, as experimental in nature as the condensed novel from which it took its name. Another version followed in 1990 made by Chris Petit updating the production made twenty years previous. It is after this point David Cronenberg's adaptation enters the picture (Sinclair, 1999).

In the segment devoted to Cronenberg's adaptation, multiple problems plagued the production. Initially, Cronenberg was put off by the clinical nature of Ballard's descriptions of the sex scenes. Also, once he finally understood the novel, he had trouble generating interest from anyone to make the film until after his film *Naked Lunch*. Matters only continued on a downward spiral as Cronenberg, in a move seen as suicidal in attempting an adaptation, removed Elizabeth Taylor, whose presence was so central to the novel, from the script. Also, again, Ballard's involvement was limited, but this time the choice was Cronenberg's (Baxter, 2011). Further cuts were made by Cronenberg as he reduced the number of extramarital partners for the fictional stand-in, Ballard, and his wife Catherine, ridding the script of the characters of Renata and Karen. He also shifted the location from the suburbs of England to his native Toronto. With regard to the production, the minimalist approach of Cronenberg's narrative is reflected in the musical score and the repeated reliance on the three-person steadicam tracking shot, with none of the principals making eye contact (Sinclair, 1999).

Turning attention to the subject of authorship, whether Ballard or Cronenberg dominates, Genette's discussion of paratexts is applied (1991). During the time of the film's release, for tie-

in purposes, the cover of the novel would depict film stars James Spader and Holly Hunter, as well as listing the production credits for the film. This problematizes the nature of authorship, particularly when Genette's theories are joined by those of McGann (1991). For Sinclair (1999), this lends credence to declaring Cronenberg's vision of the novel as dominant over Ballard's.

Next, the chapter examines the critical reception of the film, which, like *Empire of the Sun* before it, was largely negative. The fault rested not with the director and the expectations of the audience regarding that director but rather the content, which all agreed bordered on or was outright pornography. For example, Christopher Tookey said the film displayed "the morality of the satyr, the nymphomaniac, the rapist, the pedophile, the danger to society . . . even a liberal society should draw the line" (Baxter, 2011, p. 100). Some critics and publications on the whole called for its outright ban. Ted Turner, whose New Line Cinema had provided the budget for the film, sought to have the film shelved.

The chapter closes discussing why this adaptation of Ballard's novel also failed. It might first appear due to the reception that greeted the film's content. True, the content is at fault, but not in its presence so much as in its absence. So loose is Cronenberg's adaptation that the film, lacking the central obsession of Elizabeth Taylor, its psychogeographical location of the London suburbs, and being stripped back to five main characters: Ballard, Catherine, Helen Remington, Gabrielle, and Vaughan, that the piece collapses. It becomes the nothing more than the pornographic film it was charged as being.

The concluding chapter depicts how the scarcity of scholarship on Ballard is reflected in the film adaptations of his work. Though *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash* are the two most well-

known, if known at all, they are not alone. Four other films, limited in access, were produced using Ballard's prose as source material. They are discussed in this chapter.

In 1983, filmmaker Sam Scoggins produced a short film titled *The Unlimited Dream Company*, though the title and the actor in a tattered flight suit, constructing portraits of Ballard in three different types of landscape, are the only affinity between the film and the source text. It, like the two filmed versions titled *Crash* before Cronenberg's cinematic abortion, veers more toward an arty-slanted documentary on J.G. Ballard as a writer (Vale, 1984).

Swedish filmmaker Solveig Nordlund also filmed two adaptations of Ballard's short stories. 1986 saw the production of *Journey to Orion*, based on Ballard's 1964 piece "Thirteen to Centaurus." Sixteen years later, Nordlund adapted Ballard's 1971 story "The Low-Flying Aircraft" for film. Unfortunately, neither film is readily accessible, though Sellars and O'Hara (2012) commend Nordlund for bringing an art-house sensibility to Ballard's story in the film adaptation.

Finally, the much written about, but seldom seen adaptation of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, produced by Jonathan Weiss, came out in 2000. Made over the course of two years with most of its fifty thousand dollar budget going to clearance rights for the documentary inserts, the lack of access to examine it for how close it adheres to Ballard's source text is criminal. Moreso in that, before his death, Ballard seemed to concede defeat when he said he felt as if he were watching the film at the same time he was reading the book. Sinclair echoes this sentiment, referring to the film as "a painstakingly faithful transcription of Ballard's text" (1999, p. 102). Though the film is only available on the secondary market at an inflated price, Sellars and O'Hara provided a

transcription of the DVD commentary which consists of a conversation between Ballard and Weiss (2012). It features heavily in this section of the chapter.

The chapter closes with the discussion of *High-Rise*, one of Ballard's 1970s novels due to be released in 2015. Due to the film not yet being released, it is not possible to talk of it in regard to its production history, how closely it adheres to or veers away from its source text, or its reception by audiences compared with the reception of the novel by its audiences. Early indications suggest, however, that filmmaker Ben Wheatley is not taking Cronenberg's approach, favoring instead to situate the film in England lest he incur the wrath of those in the mindset that shifting *Crash*'s film adaptation to Canada robbed the film of its geographic specificity (Williams, 2013). Additionally, denied Ballard's input by default rather than by design, Wheatley spent long hours with Ballard's papers at the National Library (Child, 2014). His approach appears closer to that of Spielberg, imagining himself as a child whose parents had an apartment in the tower block that gives Ballard's novel its title (Child, 2014).

The chapter does touch on the long gestation period that *High-Rise* shared with *Crash*, with both projects being marked early on by the involvement of Nicholas Roeg and Jeremy Thomas, Cronenberg's producer on *Crash*. Also, discussion of the history of the drafts of the script, beginning with Rudy Wurlitzer, then with Richard Stanley and then finally beginning anew with Amy Jump, are also discussed. Of greater importance is discussing how *High-Rise* might fail and if its predicted end were also the actual reasons for the failures of *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*.

Marsh's (2013) differentiation between film and literature is used as a critical lens. Marsh believes film can only show what is on the surface, that it is not possible to convey inner

meaning in “the density of great prose [. . .] articulated with nuance by words.” If one follows Marsh’s logic, film does not follow the division between oral discourse and written discourse, with the latter being privileged. Marsh places three aspects of adaptation in ascending order: the story, the imagery, and the tone of the writing. Film adaptations succeed when little is present on the written page. They fail when the prose is brilliant in nature. Marsh cements Ballard’s writing in the latter camp.

Does this, however, work? Is Marsh’s premature critique of *High-Rise* fitting? Does this, again, explain the failures of *Crash* and *Empire of the Sun*? Marsh’s rubric is applied using excerpts from the three respective texts to determine the suitability for adaptation of all three films. In doing so, this study seeks to answer whether Ballard’s novels are great prose or great fodder for screenplays. If they fit the latter category, then were the original diagnoses for why the adaptations of *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash* failed correct?

CHAPTER TWO

EMPIRE OF THE SUN

In *The China Odyssey* (Mayfield, 1987), the documentary of the film adaptation of *Empire of the Sun*, J.G. Ballard said, “It took twenty years to forget the events that took place in Shanghai and another twenty years to remember them. I had to shut out all memories of Shanghai.” On the cusp of adolescence, Ballard and his family were relocated from their home in China to a prisoner of war camp in Lunghua, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Here they would remain until 1946 when Ballard, along with his mother and sister, relocated to England. His father would remain in China for another four years (Gasiorek, 2006).

Additionally in *The China Odyssey*, when discussing his time spent in the camp, Ballard said, “If I’m honest, when people say to me, ‘What was it actually like in the camp?’ I have to admit that I quite enjoyed myself.” He explained his stance further in McBride’s biography on Spielberg, saying, “I have [. . .] not unpleasant memories of the camp [. . .]. I was young, and if you put [four hundred] or [five hundred] children together they have a good time, whatever the circumstances [. . .]. I know my parents always had very much harsher memories of the camp than I did” (1997, p. 398).

“[A]fter some [four hundred] interviews on *Empire of the Sun*, I have never yet explained why it took me forty years to write the novel,” declared Ballard in the compilation *The User’s Guide to the Millennium* (1996, p. 271). It was something that, if Ballard is to be believed (a risky proposition to be sure), he always wanted to do. Paddy (2012) cites an interview Ballard

gave to Mark Pauline wherein Ballard states he “always wanted to write a book about my China background” (p. 184). According to Ballard, *Empire* was not “all that different from most of my other writing; it’s just that my other fiction doesn’t have *the reassurance of the familiar*” (p. 184, emphasis in original). It was a point on which Ballard elaborated further:

I’ve been writing about it all the time – I just wrote about it *in disguise*. . . .
As I was writing *Empire of the Sun* I was constantly seeing bits of my other novels coming up. It was like an assembly kit made up of bits of my other novels set not in the near-future, but in the 1940s. (p. 185)

The novel of *Empire of the Sun* went on to garner massive accolades for Ballard. Not only was he nominated for the Man Booker Prize, but he also won the *Guardian* Fiction Prize in 1984. Both were due to *Empire*. He was also nominated for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1985 (Matthews, 2005). Reacting to this sudden mainstream success, Ballard said, “I got a lot of new readers for *Empire of the Sun* who promptly left [. . .] once they’d finished that book” (Paddy, 2012, p. 190).

The text was a break stylistically from the three periods that dominated Ballard’s work up to that point, as stated in the introduction. It was not an ecological disaster novel like the sort that typified his work during the 1960s, nor did it fit into the category of the techno-barbarism novels that dominated his work in the earlier part of the 1970s. Last, with the exception of Jim’s delusional thought that he could bring back the dead expressed in the novel, the work did not resemble Ballard’s more recent work wherein the central character suffers messianic or megalomaniacal thoughts that dominated his novels *The Unlimited Dream Company*, *The Day of Creation*, *Rushing to Paradise*, and *Hello, America*. In another interview with Pauline (2005), Ballard said, “[*Empire of the Sun*] create[d] a huge amount of interest which no other book of mine ever will, because I’ve gone back to writing imaginative fiction again” (p.138).

During the same period in which Ballard had broken away from the imaginative fiction and was basking in the fleeting glow of mainstream acceptance, Steven Spielberg wanted to break away from the type of productions with which he had become synonymous. After receiving the Thalberg Award in 1986, Spielberg, frustrated with others' scriptwriting, gave a speech where he declared it "time to renew our romance with the written word" (Taylor & O'Brien, 1999, p. 119). In a process of "branching out" that began with *The Color Purple*, Spielberg turned to *Empire of the Sun*. As stated earlier, Spielberg found himself in a creative crisis in his career. He wanted to do films similar to those he viewed in his youth. He wanted to make films that were closer to the style of his hero, David Lean (Wasser, 2010). He wanted to shift to the older fascination with landscapes which earmarked Lean's films, such as *Dr. Zhivago* and *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Unfortunately, the tide of popular culture was working against him. At the time, *Schindler's List* remained but a pipedream. The only film that was *remotely* made in the style echoing Lean's during the 1980s was the Warren Beatty vehicle *Reds*. Doubtlessly, the film would have never been made without Beatty's pre-*Ishtar* status as a Hollywood heavyweight. More recently, at the time, *Silverado* had been made, but again, would it have ever seen the light of day without the involvement of Lawrence Kasdan? It is doubtful. Yet neither Beatty nor Kasdan were enough to save either film from being box office failures (Wasser, 2010, p. 131).

Spielberg was drawn to the film for his own reasons. He recounted to Myra Forsberg:

I was [. . .] attracted to the idea that this was a death of innocence. This was a boy who had grown up too quickly, who was becoming a flower long before the bud had ever come out of the topsoil. And, in fact, a flower that was a gifted weed. (2000, p. 127)

In other words, Jim's existence was the antithesis of the Peter Pan existence, that boy who never grew up, that, in the popular consciousness, Spielberg was living. Wasser (2010) noted also that Spielberg "spotted a particularly visual story in [Ballard's] novel [where] Ballard portrayed a boy fascinated by flight" (p. 129). It was a fascination Spielberg shared with Ballard.

Drawing parallels between his own life and Ballard's, Spielberg expressed feeling the same displacement as Ballard when Ballard was uprooted from Shanghai to England via Lunghua. Spielberg said, "I think the longing for home comes from my own life. I've lived in so many places since I was a child I felt I never really had a home, and that's a feeling many people respond to" (Taylor & O'Brien, 1999, p. 44).

It should be noted that Spielberg was not the first director attached to the project. *Empire of the Sun's* problematic birth began with his hero, David Lean. Lean had originally been attached to the picture as director, with hope of Spielberg producing. As Lean progressed through the process of adapting Ballard's novel for the screen, he felt it impossible to continue. He explained, "I worked on it for about a year and in the end I gave it up because I thought, this is like a diary. It's bloody well written and very interesting but I don't think it's a movie for me because it hasn't got a dramatic shape" (Freer, 2001, p. 158). Ballard alleged another reason for Lean's stepping down in *Miracles of Life*. Ballard said Lean declined because he could not work with the young actor, Christian Bale, who played Jim, the younger version of Ballard in the film (2008, p. 255-56). Ballard alleged, "Perhaps Jim was too aggressive and too conflicted for Lean, who liked his boy actors to be lisping and slightly effeminate" (p. 256). Adding a hiccup to the production history, before Spielberg's involvement, Harold Becker was attached to the film along with playwright Tom Stoppard as scriptwriter (Freer, 2001).

Stoppard was drawn to the film due to the similarities between Ballard's World War II childhood and his own (Nadel, 2002). Indeed, if one examines Stoppard's early life in comparison to Ballard's early life, uncanny parallels appear. The childhoods of both writers were marked by absent fathers, their families being displaced due to the war, and relocation to England at an early age. Until late January 1942, the then-Straüssler family lived in Singapore (p. 23). During their relocation to India, Tom's biological father, Eugen Straüssler, died when his ship was attacked by the Japanese fighter planes in the middle of February 1942 (p. 26). On November 25, 1945, Stoppard's widowed mother remarried. Her new husband, Major Kenneth Stoppard, adopted Tommy and his brother Peter (p. 36). Major Stoppard and his new family relocated from India to England, the same year Ballard's family left Shanghai (p. 37). According to Nadel (2002), Stoppard's experiences would find expression in his work on the screenplay to *Empire of the Sun*.

Empire of the Sun was initially brought to Stoppard's attention by Kenneth Ewing when Stoppard visited Los Angeles (Nadel, 2001). A year after the publication of Ballard's novel, Stoppard wrote to his parents that spring about the book. Stoppard considered the text "very good" but "rather depressing and close to home" due to the subject matter (p. 355). It should be noted, however, that, unlike Ballard's cinematic stand-in, Stoppard was not separated from his family. At the end of the novel, when Jim must "face squarely up to the present, however uncertain," this mentality, according to Ira Nadel, mirrors Stoppard's own attitude toward existence. While one did not forget the past, it was not an instrument that paralyzed. Rather, one chose to deal with it in practical terms.

Ballard and Stoppard shared a love of all things American as well. The set design of Jim's room, according to Nadel (2001), "produced some uncanny connections for Stoppard" (p. 356). For example, the chart of the flag of nations on Jim's wall was, according to Stoppard, "*exactly* the chart I'd had. Identical. Clipped from a magazine, I shouldn't wonder. Spooky" (Nadel, 2001, p. 356, emphasis in original).

Stoppard began working on the script during the Spring of 1985. He referred to his draft as a "film narrative" rather than a "treatment." His reasoning was "treatment seems to mean different things to different people" (Nadel, 2001, p. 356). The text merely tracked the sequence of the yet-to-be-made film. No attention was given to dialogue or the detail of a screenplay. Stoppard took issue with the book's sole focus on Jim, the younger version of Ballard. The sole hero of the text being a young boy was a problem. He felt the focus needed to be broadened. The first draft of the script was completed in January of 1986. It opened with the scene at an airfield. Young Jim played with a toy plane, surrounded by Europeans witnessing the aftermath of a battle.

The next month saw the changing of directors from Becker to Spielberg. Becker's removal from the film was, for Stoppard, "something of a shock" (Nadel, 2001, p. 356). Initially, Stoppard and Spielberg were timid with one another. According to Freer (2001), "Spielberg and Stoppard seemed a bizarre meeting of the minds: the world's most populist film-maker collaborating with the creator of erudite riffs on Shakespeare" (p. 158). Soon however, the two men developed a decent friendship and approached the screenplay with diligence (Nadel, 2002).

According to Stephen Frears, Stoppard had written a script for the novel before Spielberg replaced Becker on the film. Spielberg's writers tinkered with the script before showing it to

Lean. Lean “politely” informed Spielberg that the piece was “not very good” and Stoppard needed to be reinstated in the project (Nadel, 2001, p. 95). Attempts by the studio to lure him back failed. Spielberg reportedly called him personally. Stoppard informed Spielberg he was working for the BBC. Spielberg said, “But that’s just television [. . .] This is Hollywood.” Stoppard responded, “No [not television, but] [r]adio.” Eventually, Stoppard relented and came back on board (p. 95).

After Spielberg became involved, given his status, the script took on a much larger scale. Stoppard recounted, “Before Steven became involved, I was being very modest. I didn’t write in a fly-over of P-51s – I’d no idea there were any available that still flew” (Nadel, 2002, p. 357). Three P-51 Mustangs were used for the movie with a price tag of fifty thousand dollars each. Authorities allowed Spielberg to change road signs, cover streets in dense fog, and shut off seven blocks of main thoroughfares during filming for the first time since 1959 (Freer, 2001).

Initially, Spielberg was to use locations in, in Ballard’s words, “the Militant republic of Liverpool – the architecture was in period and there was an endless supply of Marxists, but too few Chinese” (*User’s Guide*, 1996, p. 218). Additional alternatives included Buenos Aires, Vienna, Stockholm, Hong Kong and Lisbon (Freer, 2001). Better sense prevailed, though, and Spielberg filmed in Shanghai. Unfortunately, Ballard’s childhood home was “now a near-ruin and the offices of the Shanghai Electronics Industry Information Bureau” (*User’s Guide*, 1996, p. 218). A suitable location had to be found elsewhere. That came in the form of a “mock-Tudor mansion in Sunningdale of all places” (p. 218). Other interiors, such as the camp, were filmed around Spielberg’s more familiar haunt of Elstree Studios (Freer, 2001).

Becker's removal was not the only upheaval. As mentioned earlier, *Empire's* adaptation was hobbled by the involvement of Menno Meyjes, a hired scriptwriter brought on by Spielberg to tinker with Stoppard's original screenplay (Nadel, 2002). Though the specifics remain unclear, Meyjes contributed elements of dialogue to the screenplay. In July of 1986, Stoppard began sending Spielberg "page by page commentary" on the third draft dated July 11, 1986 (p. 357). With regard to Stoppard's notes on the changes made to the dialogue, Nadel describes Stoppard's eye as "sharp but sympathetic" (p.357). Stoppard wrote, "[I]t's okay to be wrong about it but it's not okay to be casual about it . . . You're looking for my reaction to the big changes but it's the small things which depress me really" (p. 357). He objected to the streamlining of the story, saying "the general tendency is to simplify the tapestry in order to make way for a couple of bold patterns" (p. 357). In a revised third draft dated September 12, 1986, Stoppard examined the script to see if any of the changes he noted had been made, but none were (p. 357).

Revisions on the script continued during the shooting of the film. As late as March of 1987, Stoppard added an additional four pages to the script. One of the issues was the need for a different poem to use at the end of the film, although it was not a scene Stoppard held in high regard. He favored Dryden's translation of Horace's "Ode 29" from *Book III*. He gave other options, including Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up" and the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, though he considered both to be too "pious" (Nadel, 2002, p. 357). Stoppard argued, "If you don't like the Dryden, I'll have to write the bloody thing myself and pretend it's old . . . If you don't like the Dryden do not despair – we have the technology" (p. 357).

The fourth draft of the script led to further suggestions from Stoppard. There were issues with the chronology of the story. The problem resulted from “a confusion of the historical and emotional narratives” within the story (Nadel, 2002, p. 358). After page 148, the script, according to Stoppard, had “been treated as though it were composed of interchangeable parts” (p. 358). Nadel notes again Stoppard’s meticulous-to-the-point-of-obsessive eye in an explanation about the border signs. They read “You are entering the United States” instead of “You are *now* entering the United States” which, according to Stoppard, was how the signs read (p. 358).

Issues with the scenes in the camp led to further rewrites. Meyjes came to England and the two writers attempted to excise twenty pages from the camp section of the February 1987 draft of the script. Stoppard invited Meyjes back to his home where both men stayed up late working on the script. After Meyjes departed, Stoppard made further revisions to the script. Additional work took place with Meyjes assisting Stoppard, but “the fundamental shift, which made the rewrite possible, was Stoppard’s” (Nadel, 2002, p. 357). Stoppard transposed the two main scenes with Jim and Basie. Weeks before shooting ended on June 6, Stoppard, close at Meyjes’ heels, flew to Spain to revise a final scene: Basie’s death. The character, played by John Malkovich, lives through the film in the finished product.

Given the constant tinkering with the film, especially the input from Meyjes, whatever it might have been, perhaps it is no surprise that a dispute arose over the screenwriting credit. The Writers Guild of America had to step in and act as a referee. Stoppard declared himself “‘the first and last writer on this film and indeed am still working with the director on the day I write this statement’ (4 August 1987)” (Nadel, 2002, p. 258). He did not feel it was justified sharing

screenwriting credit with Meyjes “for no more than twenty-five pages of material” (p. 358). Despite Stoppard’s displeasure leading to the Writers Guild interceding, this did not taint his relationship with Spielberg. Spielberg was so impressed with Stoppard, he kept him on as a “script doctor” for *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *Schindler’s List*. When the former became a box office blockbuster, Spielberg sent Stoppard a “thank-you bonus” of one million dollars (p. 359).

Stoppard learned much on the art of filmmaking while “interfering” in the post-production of *Empire*. He said:

[O]n the page you feel you must have a certain line, but when you see the film you want to cut all over the place. Even now I’d take out the odd phrase here and there from the ‘Empire’ screenplay if I could . . . the genius of filmmaking I so much admire is to capture the same feeling I get from words by showing. It’s awfully seductive. Another great thing about film is its fixedness, where the great thing about plays is they can be changed. That fixedness of film is a relief and a luxury for a playwright, but most deceptive. (Nadel, 2001, p. 95)

It is that emphasis on the visual in film over the verbal that characterizes Stoppard’s work that problematizes the study of his work on the adaptation of Ballard’s novel.

To their credit, Freer (2001) and Gormlie (2002) acknowledge Stoppard’s involvement with the script for *Empire of the Sun*. While discussing the focus of the film, Freer says, “Spielberg, through Stoppard, zeroed in on the relationship between Jim and Basie” (p. 158). However, Gormlie’s credit to Stoppard is couched in indifference. He writes, “[I]t may not really matter if we call the film of *Empire of the Sun* Steven Spielberg’s (or for that matter Tom Stoppard’s who wrote the screenplay)” (p.128). However, it *does* matter in attempting to determine which text is privileged over the other.

Stoppard's own downplaying of his contribution further complicates matters while explaining the process of adaptation. In McBride's (1997) biography on Spielberg, Stoppard said, "The book is a big canvas [. . .]. To film all of it, you'd end up with a film which is maybe four or five hours long" (p. 395). On what, then, does one focus and whose decision is it? According to Stoppard, "the *auteur* – the author as opposed to the screenwriter – is the person who ultimately makes these choices" (p. 395). While in the camp, Jim's relationships are manifold, although they differ in levels of significance. "You can't deal fully with all of them," Stoppard continued. "Steven was most interested in Jim's relationship with Basie" (p. 395). It would seem not even Stoppard himself thinks his contribution greater than Spielberg's to the film.

Ballard only mentions Stoppard once in *Miracles of Life*. Ballard and his domestic partner Claire Walsh met Tom Stoppard at the Beverly Hilton during the film's Los Angeles premiere in December of 1987. He described Stoppard as a "pleasant but intensely nervous man" (2008, p. 258). Sadly, but unsurprisingly, Ballard gives the majority of the credit to Spielberg when discussing the adaptation.

Ballard's first impressions of Spielberg were positive. He said:

I liked him enormously, and in fact within five seconds of talking to him, I knew that my book was in the best possible hands. He struck me as a man with a very powerful, hard imagination – completely *unsentimental*, quite the opposite of what I had read in the newspapers. (Taylor & O'Brien, 1999, p. 121)

Ballard said he found himself "immediately impressed by [Spielberg's] thoughtfulness and his commitment to the novel. Difficult scenes that could easily have been dropped were tackled head-on" (*Miracles*, 2008, p. 256).

As an example, Ballard cited Jim's attempt at reviving the dead kamikaze pilot in Chapter Forty-One. In the film, the young pilot "merges into [Jim's] younger, blazer-wearing self, a powerful image that expresses the essence of the whole novel" (p. 256). Jim viewed the pilot as "this imaginary twin he had invented" (*Empire*, p. 269). He felt "if he could raise this dead Japanese pilot he could raise himself, and the millions of Chinese who had died during the war," among others, including Basie and his parents, who might or might not be dead (p. 271).

Spielberg told Ballard he "'saw' the film [. . .] in the scene where the Mustangs are attacking the airfield next to the Lunghua Camp [. . .]. It's an unsettling moment, one of many in [. . .] Spielberg's best [. . .] film" (Ballard, 2008, p. 257). Ballard's precision in describing the aircraft parallels the precision of Stoppard's writing and Spielberg's directing. When the third aircraft approaches, it flies "so low that Jim was looking down at the cockpit. He could see the pilots and the insignia on their fuselage" (*Empire*, p. 150). Ballard describes Jim as "feast[ing] on every rivet in their fuselages, on the gun ports in their wings, on the huge ventral radiators that Jim was sure had been put there for reasons of style alone [. . .]. Mustang fighters were the Cadillacs of air combat" (p. 151).

While his involvement in the film would not be of the same level as Stoppard's, Ballard *did* take part in the filming. Like Stoppard going to Shanghai before principal photography, Ballard visited the sets (Nadel, 2002). He remarked that the scenes at Sunningdale were, for him, "strange to be involved in" due to the attention paid in recreating the childhood home of Ballard. When Ballard stepped out of the house to see the period automobiles, Packards and Buicks from the 1930s, Ballard remarked, "The scene was so like the real Shanghai of my childhood that for a moment I fainted" (p. 257). Baxter (2011) notes that though the Ballards' home in Shanghai did

not have a swimming pool, in Spielberg's film adaptation, the home does have one. Does one chalk it up to the fault of the location, considering the inability to use the original home with the Sunningdale location as its stand-in or is it a nod to the recurring appearance of swimming pools in Ballard's fiction?

Ballard would also contribute to the celluloid version of his work, though sadly those contributions would not reach the final production. Ballard had been asked by Spielberg to play a walk-on part as a party guest dressed as John Bull. The scene was cut from the final production, although it is glimpsed in the making-of documentary, *The China Odyssey* (Taylor & O'Brien, 1999). According to Freer (2001), Spielberg, playing on the "empire" element of the book's title, offered a Roman centurion's costume to Ballard originally. With the exception of the cut scene, Ballard kept his involvement in the film limited to the introductory voiceover, which again, ended up on the cutting room floor. The logic behind Ballard's "hands-off" approach was, "I want to be able to sit back in the audience like everybody else and be captivated by the magic of Steven Spielberg" (Taylor & O'Brien, 1999, p. 121). In doing so, Ballard, one might argue, removed his authorship in a way from the film, setting himself up for that which he feared the most: audiences privileging the film over the novel.

Even if neither Spielberg nor Stoppard ever laid eyes on the text, Ballard linked the text to the cinema throughout the film as "one of the recurring motifs in the book" (Gormlie, 2002, p. 130). The novel begins with Jim watching newsreels in the Shanghai Anglican Cathedral. As Ballard employs film as a trope in the novel, Ballard's film *doppelganger*, Jim, associates viewing the newsreels with patriotic duty. If that is true, then Jim is a *model* patriot. In the novel Ballard writes, "Usually Jim devoured the newsreels, part of the propaganda effort mounted by

the British Embassy to counter the German and Italian war films being screened in the public theaters and Axis clubs of Shanghai” (1984, p. 4). He contrasts the *March of Time* films with the Pathé newsreels, finding the former “more somber, in a way that appealed to [him]” (p. 4). As for the latter, they gave the impression that “despite their unbroken series of defeats,” the British, by and large, were enjoying the war (p. 4). By so strongly employing film as a trope, he bridges the boundary between novel and film, weakening the privileging of the novel over the film.

Additionally, the chauffeur for the Graham family is an actor in locally produced films (Gormlie, 2002). According to Ballard (1984), “Yang enjoyed impressing his eleven-year-old passenger with tall tales of film stunts and trick effects” (p. 5). Jim thought of Yang’s acting in the chapter named, unsurprisingly, “The Open-Air Cinema” (p. 81). He recalled how, before war broke out, “cartoons and adventure serials made by the Shanghai film industry were projected at night to audiences of Chinese mill girls and dockyard workers” (p. 81).

The film trope brackets the plot of the novel. In the last chapter, before the Grahams leave for England, Jim makes note of the three screens set up along the Bund, the embanked riverfront in Shanghai, as a joint effort by the local government and the Allied forces. On them were screenings projecting for the citizens “in order to give the population a glimpse of the world war that had recently ended” (*Empire*, p. 275). While his parents were slow to recover following their return from the prison camps, in the two months since his return to Amherst Avenue, Jim frequented the cinema, sitting through repeated viewings of *Bataan* and *The Fighting Lady* to the puzzlement of Yang (p. 275).

According to Gormlie (2002), “References to films and cinema form a grotesque and ironic comment on the action in the novel” (p. 130). He cites the “honor guard of fifty

hunchbacks in medieval costume” outside of a showing of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and the massive poster of *Gone With the Wind* (p. 130). For Gormlie, even Ballard’s literary style, “from long, slow tracks through the streets of Shanghai, to dramatic cuts at the ends of chapters or sections,” takes on cinematic aspects (p. 130).

The challenge for Spielberg as a director lay in externalizing a piece that, according to Ballard, was “almost entirely an interior narrative” (Forsberg, 2000, p.130). Spielberg admitted, “I was very disturbed making this movie [. . .]. This was not a happy experience, not because it was such a difficult film to make [. . .]. It was my attitude. It was that I was doing things against not the grain of my intuition, but against the collection of my own experiences as a director” (p. 130). Spielberg had to resist the urge to balance the darkness of the film with humor, a reflex on the part of Spielberg that marked his work up to that point.

According to Taylor and O’Brien (1999), the film is a difficult one to describe in terms of its content, “largely because of the reliance upon the visual performance of [. . .] Jim Graham” (p.121). Turning his attention to Stoppard’s script, Taylor and O’Brien consider it “a relatively busy one in terms of dialogue but one which *simplifies* and adapts the novel for visual purposes” (p.121). Indeed, considering the work’s literary origins, and the very love of wordplay that typifies Stoppard’s work, it is, ironically, the imagery that propels the plot and meanings within the film. Ballard himself admitted that his first reaction to the film was, “‘This has nothing to do with my book.’ [. . .] It’s [due to] the nature of the medium, so remote from the medium of print” (2005, p. 185).

Freer believes “Ballard’s words [are] translated into haunting, slightly surreal pictures to render Jim’s mindset manifest” (2001, p. 162). As examples, Freer cites the scene where Jim

touches a Zero with sparks flying off it before he salutes the Japanese airmen. This “replicates his idealised view of his enemy and the world” (p. 162). Freer also cites the Mustang pilot waving to Jim as the plane flies past during the U.S. Air Force’s demolition of the prison camp.

In 1990, Spielberg summarized his working relationship with Stoppard, stating:

[W]hat I think I’ve done is to introduce Tom to telling the story with pictures and Tom introduced me to telling the story with dialogue. He showed me an interesting way of talking, not to the point but round the point. You don’t just come out and say what you mean. Let the audience figure it out for themselves. Give them all the clues and then confirm, after they figure it out, that they were right. (Taylor & O’Brien, 1999, p. 121)

For better or worse, Spielberg believed credit went to him for the alteration in Stoppard’s methods.

To turn the attention to the script compared to the novel, where do the two contrast?

In his critique of the film, Morris (2007) describes *Empire* as “differ[ing] significantly from J. G. Ballard’s autobiographical novel, but no more than most adaptations” (p. 135). According to Morris, the break between the two rested with “the novel’s limited third person narration[, which] offers trustworthy explanations [where] the film leaves audiences to draw inference from parallels and contrasts *shown* rather than explained” (p. 135, emphasis in original).

Among the differences noted by Freer (2001), the script avoids the sexual ambiguity of Frank and Basie’s relationship, along with their “predatory interest” in Jim (p. 158). This was nothing new for Spielberg, having had to eschew the lesbian relationship in the source text of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. As the world was five years into the AIDS epidemic, a virus that was still associated with homosexuals in Reagan’s America, for Spielberg even to attempt the depiction would have most assuredly meant career suicide (Wasser, 2010). Thus, he repeated himself in his adaptation of *Empire*.

The same cannot be said of Ballard's novel. When Jim is taken to Frank and Basie's living quarters, he notes "[a] familiar scent [. . .] in the air, reminding him of his mother's bedroom in Amherst Avenue, the odors of face powders, cologne, and Craven A cigarettes" (1984, p. 68). For Jim, the association is so strong, he imagines his mother will emerge to wake him from the nightmare of the war.

Further hints of the two's homosexuality are given by Ballard viewing Frank and Basie through Jim's eyes. Basie's hands are "soft" and he powders himself while hidden underneath a quilt during their introduction (p. 69). Is it an overgeneralization to say aspects of softness and/or a desire to preserve one's modesty were not masculine traits during World War II? Furthermore, the two men sleep together under the quilt (p. 75). In one brilliant sentence, after explaining Basie's former employment on the Cathay-America line, Ballard's prose practically screams of Basie's effeminacy. He writes, "To a large extent, Basie had modeled himself on the women passengers he had served [then], forever powdering themselves in the heat as they lit a cigarette" (p. 75). If Basie is *not* homosexual, he toys with aspects of transgenderism, which, at the time, *was* conflated with homosexuality all the same. As one final example of the questionable sexuality of the two Americans, during Basie's constant questioning of Jim, he asks, "Tell me about [your parents'] swimming-pool parties [. . .]. I imagine there was a lot of . . . gaiety" (p. 76). Could word choice be *that* accidental?

Spielberg/Stoppard refrained from "the catalogue of Japanese atrocities – the public stranglings, the piles of maggot-ridden corpses – as described in the book and the sense of poverty-stricken Shanghai" (Freer, 2001, pp. 158-59). Here Freer slightly misreads the text in his comparison of the film to the novel. Ballard devotes only a single paragraph to the public

stranglings. Also, he does not describe an actual execution, but the small stadium where the executions took place, as well as the reaction by the Chinese citizens. To Jim's mind, "The Chinese enjoyed the spectacle of death [. . .] as a way of reminding themselves of how precariously they were alive" (1984, p. 40).

Ballard, both as writer and his fictional stand-in, takes great interest in examining the bodies of the newly deceased, as depicted in the opening page of Chapter Three. Ballard writes, "[Jim] stopped to peer into the lidless coffins. The yellowing skeletons were embedded in the rain-washed mud [. . .]. Jim was struck by the contrast between the impersonal bodies of the newly dead [. . .] and these sun-warmed skeletons" (p. 17). He held the skulls with particular fascination, "with their squinting eye sockets and quirky teeth" (p. 17). In his description of the corpses, the reminders that Ballard read medicine at university, which crop up repeatedly in his books, returns, despite his desire to break away from the sort of fiction he wrote before *Empire*.

True, Stoppard's film adaptation opens with the floating coffins, but within the luxury of the printed form, Ballard is able to indulge in his appreciation for anatomy at its most horrid, particularly when describing the funeral pier at Nantao where those Chinese too poor to pay for a funeral sent the coffins of the deceased out to sea, "[c]arried away on one tide, they came back on the next [. . .] the old men and women, the young mothers and small children, whose swollen bodies seemed to have been fed during the night by the patient Yangtze" (p. 26). For some morbid reason, Ballard deems it necessary to describe the swelling of the corpses. The coffins wash ashore again when Jim is down at the Bund, joined this time by the "carcasses of dogs" (p. 65). Jim, fascinated, or if not, *desensitized* by the corpses, imagines Frank and Basie engaged in

raiding the floating graves of the Chinese for the one gold tooth every Chinese citizen allegedly had, “prodding the corpses that drifted past and exposing their gums” (p. 74).

It is the absence of these horrors, for which Spielberg would receive criticism after the film’s release, through which Gormlie (2002) conducts his analysis of the film adaptation versus the source novel. He sets up the dichotomy between the book and film, based on the absence and presence of the aforementioned nightmarish images. He writes, “Jim’s illusions about war, and his gradual disillusionment, form the novel’s core, but a sense of unreality is at the heart of the book: a sense expressed in a nightmarish vision of bodies and death, which would not be out of place in a modern ‘visceral’ horror movie” (p. 129).

By contrast, the film skirts the “sense of nightmare.” In its place are “dreamlike surrealist sequences serving to show how attractive the war is to Jim, a great adventure, and thus avoiding the novel’s critical edge” (Gormlie, 2002, p. 129). If Stoppard were to include the “visual horror” of the text, Gormlie explains, noting the rats eating into the burial mounds and Jim’s viewing the beheadings of the peasants with the same disinterest as he views Pathé newsreels, the film would most likely resemble one of George Romero’s zombie movies (p. 132). Unlike the destruction of the Nazis after the opening of the Ark of the Covenant at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Spielberg could not depict these scenes with even the black humor that marks that scene. The choice would come back to haunt him upon the film’s release.

To shift from the dead to the dead-but-still-living, the Graham family’s chauffeured Packard passes a solitary beggar in the film. This differs compared with the multitude of beggars in the streets of Shanghai. In the novel, the beggar’s foot is even “casually crushe[d]” by Jim (Gormlie, 2002, p. 159). In the novel, Ballard writes, “There were so many beggars in Shanghai

[. . .]. [T]hey sat outside the gates of the houses, shaking their Craven A tins like reformed smokers. Many displayed lurid wounds and deformities, but no one noticed them that afternoon” (*Empire*, pp. 11-12). He is speaking of the day of the invasion, but is that day really different from any other with regard to the beggars?

One last omission noted by Freer (2001) is the treatment of Mrs. Vincent as Jim’s “first object of lust” within the text (p. 159). Ballard’s language complicates Freer’s critique though. True, “Like all the men and older boys in G Bloc, Jim was attracted to Mrs. Vincent, but her real appeal lay elsewhere” (1984, p. 138). She seems almost deity-like in her detachment from the camp. Though he wants to touch Mrs. Vincent, it is, according to Ballard, “less out of adolescent lust than simple curiosity” (p. 138). All the same, when Jim reaches for her shoulder, she pushes his hand away, suggesting he return to Mr. Maxted in the huts. Freer does view “a whiff” of the idea still being present in the scene where Jim watches the Victors (as they are named in the film), through the netting in their dormitory, having sex (2001, p. 159).

For all the elements of the novel that were excised from the script, others were embellished by the union of Stoppard and Spielberg. The scene where Jim sets pheasant traps for Basie takes up a single paragraph in Ballard (1984, p. 128). In the film, the scene is developed into “a taut, tense, cinematic set-piece that is typically Spielberg” (Freer, 2001, p. 159). Other images are taken from the book and “heightened with Spielbergian touches” (p. 162). Jim signals to the *HMS Petrel* with his flashlight on the night the Japanese invade, culminating in a blast that sends the young boy across the room. The camera “whip-pans” to three mirrors, suggesting that Jim’s life and personality have both been shattered by war (p. 162). In the text, Jim believes he

started the war due to the Japanese misinterpreting the semaphores he flashed to them from his bedroom window (1984, p. 28).

After his separation from his parents, Jim returns to the Graham home. Exploring the premises, he notes a footprint in talcum powder that becomes several, suggesting a struggle. At the end of the scene, Jim opens a window, blowing the dust away. Freer (2001) reads this as an obliteration of not just the dust, but Jim's parents. Stoppard lifts the scene wholesale from the text. In the book, while Jim does see the prints in the spilled powder (1984, p. 44), neither the wind from the open window nor the dramatic symbolism noted by Freer are present.

Stoppard and Spielberg disagreed about the end of the picture. One might argue that Stoppard wanted to represent his own childhood issues when he wanted Jim's life, even after the reunion with his parents, "never [to] be pleasant again" due to his experiences in the prison camp (Freer, 2001, p. 159). According to Freer, such a position was "completely antithetical to Spielberg's worldview" and the film ends on a note of uncertainty about Jim's future (p. 159). Stoppard's vision of how the film should end was closer to the damaged, adult-before-his-time Jim with whom Stoppard felt a kinship, shown in the closing paragraphs:

He stepped onto the gangway, conscious that he was probably leaving Shanghai for the last time, setting out for a small, strange country on the other side of the world that he had never visited, but that was nominally "home." Yet only part of his mind would leave Shanghai. The rest would remain there forever, returning on the tide like the coffins launched from the funeral piers at Nantao. (*Empire*, p. 279)

It is difficult not to think of what might have been if Stoppard had been allowed to reflect the somber tone with which the novel ends in his own script. Jim is not the "Jamie" returning to the warm bosom of his mother that Spielberg shows in the film version. Within that brief but dense

description of Ballard, Jim is shown as a shellshocked survivor. The damage to him is very severe, not only is mental illness suggested but also associations of death, with the returning image of the floating coffins. Jim is not and cannot be “Jamie” ever again.

As Lean was initially attached to the film, and Spielberg’s goal for taking on the film adaptation of Ballard’s novel was to make films in the style of David Lean, not to discuss the celluloid nods throughout Spielberg’s film would be irresponsible. Freer catalogues the nods to Lean’s films present throughout *Empire*. One sees Lean’s signature crane shot as it moves from a lone figure to reveal a swarming mass in Spielberg’s filming of the streets of Shanghai. Additionally, in the relationship between Basie and Jim, Freer sees a reflection of the relationship between Oliver and Fagin in Lean’s film adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. Freer sees additional shared affinities between Spielberg’s film and Lean’s Dickens adaptation, citing “the foggy look of Shanghai and Jim being slapped after asking for more food at the detention centre,” which parallel Lean’s depictions of Victorian England and Oliver’s physical abuse when he also asks for more food (p. 159). The corpses of the Chinese rebels being strewn across the rooftops reminded Freer of *Doctor Zhivago*. In both *Empire* and *Bridge on the River Kwai*, both Captain Nicholson and Jim both forget which side they are on in the war. Both identify more with the Japanese than with the British.

Freer also sees in Spielberg’s film additional debts to directors other than Lean. He notes Victor Fleming’s *oeuvre*, paralleling the burning of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind* to the chaos in Shanghai. The chance that this parallel is accidental appears unlikely, considering the appearance of the film poster in both the book and the film adaptation. The motif of the privileged boy out of his element that constituted *Captains Courageous* repeats as well in *Empire*

of the Sun. Freer also draws parallels between Basie and William Holden's Sefton in the escape scene of Billy Wilder's *Stalag 17* (p. 160).

Finally, though arguably tenuous in some instances, Freer compares Jim's learning to live by his wits to Antoine Doniel in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, which *might* make sense as a cinematic tip of the hat, considering Truffaut's acting part in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Freer also views the stadium "full of bric-a-brac" as paralleling the warehouse at the end of *Citizen Kane*. The march of the prisoners from the camp reminds Freer of the exodus in *The Ten Commandments*. Last, Jim's reunion with his parents, in its inherent awkwardness, Freer compares to Natalie Wood's return home in *The Searchers* (p. 160).

In a review by Philip French from *The Observer*, French wrote, "The film's admirable first hour is stunning in its recreation of the confused Shanghai . . . The picture jumps forward from 1942 to 1945 and thereafter it loses its clarity, dramatic grip and simple coherence" (Freer, 2001, p. 165). French's opinion about the divided nature of the film reflected Stoppard's own toward the film.

To Stoppard's mind why the first half of the film was superior was because it "had a compression, a density. There was more room in it for Steven to do what *he* does. The images were very eloquent—they locked together in a way which aggregated—and not many overtly dramatic events were happening [emphasis Stoppard]" (McBride, 1997, p. 396). Stoppard cites the scene where Jim is rude to the servant for taking an item from the icebox. "I didn't care too much for it on paper," said Stoppard. "But Steven always knows what he's doing." The scene is tied to when the servant later slaps the boy's face, another scene lifted from the book (Ballard, 1984, p. 44). "[T]hose two moments, are so interdependent. The boy wasn't trying to be

insolent. The boy was just expressing colonialism, he was expressing the ethos of his own society” (McBride, 1997, p. 396).

Stoppard stated, “I think the first hour of *Empire of the Sun* is somewhere in the masterpiece class, as good as anything [Spielberg] ever did [. . .].” Stoppard ranks it “up to *Schindler’s List*, the work of his I like best of all.” He regarded the scenes in the streets of Shanghai as “absolutely remarkable. The way the shots are put together, the balance between the work that Steven is doing against the work which I and [Ballard] were doing, the balance there just seemed to me to be perfect” (McBride, 1997, p. 395).

Though Stoppard seems ignored in relation to Spielberg when (or if) critics write about the film adaptation of *Empire of the Sun*, in other respects, Spielberg acted as a human shield, given the amount of negative press he received upon the film’s release. Indeed, the film was a disappointment at the box office. McBride (1997) noted that the attacks on Spielberg were due to the film’s downplaying of Ballard’s account of the disease and starvation that wracked the prisoners in the camp at Lunghua, as well as for the film “minimizing the brutality of the Japanese guards” (p. 398). McBride cites a review by Pauline Kael who wrote that the film “treats the hell of the prison camp as if it were the background for a coming-of-age story” (p. 398).

For all his resistance to creating films similar in sweetness and humor to past projects like *E. T.*, Spielberg still stood accused of treading the same ground with *Empire of the Sun*. “[He] seems to be making everything nice,” Kael continued. “[T]here’s something in the source material that’s definitely not nice” (McBride, 1997, p. 398). Such criticism, according to

McBride, “betray[s] a fundamental misunderstanding” of the complexity of the perspectives of Stoppard, Spielberg and Ballard on childhood (p. 398).

In his review of *Empire*, Richard Corliss wrote:

In war, even in this Spielberg war, wisdom brings bitter lessons. It teaches Jim that he may – must – filch food from the dying and take shoes from the dead. When P-51s zoom above him, the plane crazy boy crash-dives into delirium; his dreams have seized him by flying too close, poisoned him with their oil and cordite. . . . No child can see this and hold on to childhood. (Taylor & O’Brien, 1999, p. 121)

Even though Corliss gets the thesis of the film in its loss of innocence, his classifying the film as “this Spielberg war,” whether it be intentional or not, stigmatizes Spielberg’s depiction of life during wartime.

The *Los Angeles Times* review of the film stated, “The film’s grave problem is a lack of central heating. We don’t have a single character to warm up to. They are either illegal, immoral, or fatally malnourished” (Wasser, 2010, p. 132). *Empire* ended up being the first film of Spielberg’s since *Sugarland* to have less than ten million viewers (p. 132).

Wasser believed the film emphasized Americans over other groups. This seems hardly surprising, considering Spielberg’s nationality and the shared fascination with American culture on the parts of Ballard and Stoppard. Wasser labels Malkovich’s Basie as “a darker version of the American adventurer [. . .] a self-centered survivor whose only redeeming quality is the intermittent interest he takes in Jim” (p. 132). Compared to *The Color Purple*, Wasser believed the film to have “less sugarcoating [. . .] although the atrocities were kept mostly off-camera” in addition to the homosexuality of Pantoliano and Malkovich’s characters being erased from the final production (p. 131).

Wasser criticizes the film further, stating that the “happy ending” is neither. He labels the film “a prelude to a new more deracinated world where loyalties are not easily granted to nations or even to smaller groups” (p. 133). At best, the film served as a warm-up exercise to *Schindler’s List*. Compared to Spielberg’s previous work, the film was and remains more demanding. No redemption is offered. The evil is more contextual and less obvious. Neither the audience nor Jim witness Shanghai’s destruction. Wasser states:

Horrible beauties are found in the remnants of immense tragedies such as caskets floating in the harbor, an implied rape in the footprints set in spilt talcum powder, the depiction of the distant Hiroshima bomb as a subtle colored light in the morning sky that Jim mistakes for a parting soul [. . .]. While viewers have witnessed the maturing of the boy, neither the filmmaker nor the audience were quite sure what the boy has learned. (p. 133)

To shift matters to its overseas reception, *Empire* was selected for the Royal Film Performance in March 1988. Survivors of the Japanese occupation took issue with the film. However, the nature of their complaint rested more with Ballard’s “child’s eye view” of the prison camp than anything Spielberg did in his adaptation (Taylor & O’Brien, 1999, p. 123). The film had twice as many foreign viewers as it had domestically. It should be remembered that the box office world into which *Empire of the Sun* was released differs greatly from the current climate. European audiences expressed a greater partiality toward films in the style of *Empire*, compared to the American blockbusters that have dominated international cinema in the nearly thirty years since the film’s release.

Keeping in mind the “Peter Pan” mentality into which the viewing public cast Spielberg, Spielberg’s reaction to *Empire* reads all the more heartbreaking. He says:

I thought *Empire of the Sun* was a ‘high concept.’ When that film didn’t perform, I was a bit surprised. Not that I’d got so used to success but just simply because I thought *Empire of the Sun* wasn’t a journey into misery

-- it was about the death of innocence – but it turned off a lot of people in America. A lot of audience said, ‘well, this isn’t typecasting for him so I don’t think I’m going to give this film a chance’ because it seems like a film that, if John Boorman’s name was on it or even someone else’s, they might give it a chance. (Taylor & O’Brien, 1997, p. 122)

A bit of contextualization appears in order. Released at the same time as *Empire*, and dealing with the same sort of subject matter, Boorman’s film *Hope and Glory*, based on Boorman’s experiences as a child in England during the Blitz, overshadowed and proved a greater success than *Empire*. Hence Spielberg’s calling out of Boorman in relation to *Empire*’s failure.

Continuing in his discussion of the film’s failure, Spielberg stated:

I got a bollocking from critics who didn’t like the idea I was suddenly trying to stretch my character. There are certain people in America who want to keep me young: that makes them feel safe. But I’ve had ten years and a lot of success, in a certain genre of movie. Not that I have to explore other forms to shake myself out of what every artist fears, which is lethargy and apathy. I’m looking forward to a new and unusual ten years. (p. 123)

Spielberg’s next three films, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Always*, and *Hook*, were viewed as a retreat on his part into the mainstream films upon which he had built his name (p. 135). However, Taylor and O’Brien see a holdover in *Always* to what Spielberg attempted with *Empire*, writing “*Always* reveals its intention to concentrate more on letting character tell the story in the vein of [. . .] *Empire of the Sun*, rather than letting their personalities emerge through the action” (p. 72).

As difficult as it was for Kael and others to understand the film adaptation of *Empire of the Sun*, it is also difficult to determine conclusively how closely and whose specific vision of Ballard’s novel was represented on celluloid. Does it supplant its source material? Did its failure at the box office spare Ballard’s creation from being co-opted? While the source text remains

Ballard's, remember his initial reaction to the film. Also, it is true that the Writers Guild of America ruled in Stoppard's favor as far as the writing credit on the screenplay. However, one wonders how much of Meyjes' contributions remained. Even if it were possible to erase (or at least to ignore) Spielberg's reputation momentarily, the compromised "happy" ending of the film complicates issues of authorship. The truth remains elusive.

CHAPTER THREE

CRASH

In *Miracles of Life* (2008), Ballard writes about his life during the latter half of the twentieth century, following the death of his wife Mary. Ballard said, “I was in many ways an onlooker, bringing up my children in a quiet suburb” (p. 208). He did concede, however, “I also went to a great many parties, and smoked a little pot, though I remained a whisky and soda man” (p. 208). This removal to a homeland that was, as a result of his experiences during World War II, only “nominally ‘home’” seems, if one believes Ballard, to give him license to comment on the social upheavals affecting British society with greater ability than others who might be more directly involved in the action.

If one accepts Ballard’s self-characterization of an onlooker, then Sebastian Groes’ mentality makes sense. Groes believes, “It might be better to think of J.G. Ballard as a literary anthropologist whose work speculates on current social and cultural trends by imaginatively projecting them into intense situations” (2012, p. 121). Furthermore, Ballard’s work should be regarded as “an attempt to understand the ways in which contemporary social relationships are mediated and distorted by new forms of urban space at a highly specific moment in the post-war period” (p. 124). Groes cites Joe Moran, stating “Ballard’s torn feelings about the motorway [expressed in *Crash* and *Concrete Island*] were [. . .] a reflection of popular attitudes at the time” (p. 123). According to Groes, both novels were written at the time when, though on the wane, the public was experiencing a collective anxiety toward the “motorway revolution” (p. 123).

Crash presents a first-person narrative from a character named, unimaginatively, Ballard. Ballard's own car crash provides a gateway into "a world of injuries and personality distortions of the victims of similar car crashes" where he encounters the charismatic figure of Vaughan, a man whose fixation on crashes and the bizarre "sexual and erotic implications" thereof leads him to being involved with a cavalcade of "accident victims, crash researchers, and stunt drivers" (Brigg, 1985, p. 68). Vaughan's obsession leads to his death in a botched automotive murder-suicide involving the actress Elizabeth Taylor where, instead of crashing his auto into her limousine, he crashes into a busload of airline passengers.

Before continuing, it is not possible to discuss *Crash*, either the film adaptation or the source text, without a brief detour through the creation and reception of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Ballard's novel is itself an adaptation of the "condensed novel" "Crash!" out of *The Atrocity Exhibition* (Delville, 1998; Sinclair, 1999). Published in 1970, *The Atrocity Exhibition* was Ballard's experimental novel consisting of fifteen chapters, or as Ballard referred to them, "condensed novels" (Delville, 1998, p. 22). The larger text concerned the mental disintegration of its central figure, the psychiatrist Travis/Talbot/Traven/Trallis/ Trabert/Talbert/Travers, using a media landscape as its backdrop where violence in its manifold forms is inflicted on celebrities/public figures of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Why did Ballard choose Elizabeth Taylor as the object of Vaughan's obsession? Baxter (2011) explains that Ballard's focus on Taylor over other actresses had roots in both popular culture and his personal life. In the period from 1961 to 1964, Taylor dominated headlines as first Rouben Mamoulian, followed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, attempted to film *Cleopatra*. Production began initially in London before being completed in Rome. In 1961, Taylor

contracted viral pneumonia, but her life was saved after a tracheotomy was performed. The same strain of pneumonia was what killed Ballard's wife Mary while they were on holiday in Alicante. Had she been in London, like Taylor, Mary might have survived.

Shortly before his death, Ballard (2008) noted how the piece:

seem[ed] to be emerging from the dark and [I wonder] if the widespread use of the internet has made [the novel] a great deal more accessible. The short paragraphs and discontinuities of the morning's e-mails, the overlapping texts, and the need to switch one's focus between unrelated topics, together create a fragmentary world very like the text of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. (p. 237)

The influence of media at the time, and since, shows itself in the organization and reception of the text.

Keeping in mind the disjointed nature of the text, initially being a collection of short stories written during the 1960s and 1970s by Ballard, as well as the overarching "narrative" tracing the mental breakdown of Ballard's shifting character of (in this section's case) Tallis, one is ill-advised to find connections other than the aforementioned influence of the media and the title of the short story to the novel beyond the shared subject matter. Ballard's training as a medical student shows through in the piece's resemblance less to a traditional narrative and more to a psychological study. The first paragraph informs the reader of studies regarding "the latent sexual appeal of public figures who have achieved subsequent notoriety as auto-crash fatalities, such as James Dean and Jayne Mansfield. The piece then explains how three groups: suburban housewives, petrol station attendants, and "terminal paretics" were shown newsreel footage of celebrities followed by sequences of car crashes to test the pulse and respiratory levels of the study groups (Ballard, 1990, p. 97). The rest of the piece proceeds in a similar fashion.

However, the reader is advised to note the headings wherein Ballard, in addition to the footage of celebrities and automobile accidents, ties the text in with the cinema. To combine them for issues of clarity:

Each afternoon in the deserted cinema [,] Tallis was increasingly distressed by the images of colliding motor cars. Celebrations of his wife's death, the slow-motion newsreels recapitulated all his memories of childhood, the realization of dreams which even during the safe mobility of sleep would develop into nightmares of anxiety. (Ballard, 1990, pp. 97-99)

Does Ballard protest too much regarding ties between the influence of cinema and his novels? Is it more about at what point in the process cinema enters into his writing?

Paul Theroux, in his review of the text for *The New York Times*, declared *The Atrocity Exhibition* “a stylish anatomy of outrage, full of specious arguments, phony statistics, a disgusted fascination with movie stars and the sexual conceits of American brand names and paraphernalia.” Furthermore, turning his attack on Ballard, Theroux writes:

Man is more than warm meat, but Mr. Ballard's attitude is calculated. He says love when he means sex, and sex when he means torture, and there is nothing so fragile as sorrow or joy in the book. It is not his choice of subject, but his celebration of it that is monstrous. (Baxter, 2011, p. 229)

Publishers would take note. The critical reaction scared off publishers in America, as Ballard noted. Not that it mattered. Ballard told his agent not to bother seeking publication in America for his last works.

The novel developed further as part of a media experiment Ballard conducted between *The Atrocity Exhibition*'s publication and his writing *Crash*. The experiment took the form of an “art happening.” As Ballard recounted to Savage (1996):

I've never been to [a party] where everybody got so drunk so quickly [. . .]. [We had] a crashed Pontiac and a couple of English cars that'd been in massive

collisions. As we were setting up the show, where people would walk into the gallery without realizing what was going on, they'd see these crashed cars, and you'd get a kind of hysterical laugh. At the actual opening party, I've never seen people getting drunk socially with so much more aggression and belligerence – I got nearly attacked [p]hysically by a reporter from the [*New Society*]. I had a topless girl interviewing people [. . .]. It was all too much. Everybody got overexcited, the girl nearly got raped in the back of the crashed Pontiac [. . .]. Something about putting these crashed vehicles on display focused [on] certain areas that most people kept quietly concealed. Their ambiguous feelings about cars and car crashes were released! (p. 107)

Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on a Ballard scholar's aims, this, according to John Baxter, appears a case of “print the legend.”

In April 1970, *Crashed Cars*, a group of just that, crashed cars, went on exhibit. Jo Stanley, a well-endowed model, interviewed the attendees, parading about the exhibit topless. Initially, Stanley agreed to appear naked, but after meeting Ballard and seeing the installation, she wisely changed her mind. Ballard believed she saw what he was combining as this expression of his sexual fantasy. Hence, she agreed only to go topless (Baxter, 2011, p. 204). Despite Ballard's allegations of emotions being brought to such a fever pitch among the attendees that Stanley narrowly escaped sexual assault, a videotape of the event demonstrates no such incident occurred (p. 206).

This conflation of the flesh and the automobile with sex preoccupied, nay, *obsessed* Ballard. In the thirty-seventh issue of *Ambit*, Ballard's “A Poem for Claire Churchill” appeared. Baxter describes it as “a concrete poem, consisting of words such as ‘Girl,’ ‘Fuck,’ ‘Suck,’ and ‘Wife,’ printed repeatedly in vertical columns” (Baxter, 2011, p. 170). The poem was accompanied by a series of drawings that depicted an essentially naked female, clad only in black stockings, writhing in the passenger seat of an automobile (p. 170).

Additionally, Baxter noted a conversation between Ballard and Charles Platt at a London party. Ballard informed Platt of his plan to stage a car crash in which Claire Walsh (*nee* Churchill), Ballard's off and on girlfriend after his wife's passing in 1964 until his death in 2009, would be the "star." It would be, according to Ballard, "an act of love [. . .] or, at least, of passion" (Baxter, 2011, p. 187). At that point in the conversation, Ballard placed his palms on Claire's cheeks and asked Platt, "Look at this beautiful face. Can you just imagine the shape of a radiator grille superimposed?" (p. 187).

When published, *Crash* was greeted with reviews that, with a few exceptions, were uniformly negative. D.K. Mano believed it was "the most repulsive book I've yet to come across . . . no-one needs this sort of protracted and gratuitous anguish" (Baxter, 2011, p. 99). Martin Amis gave the piece similar condemnation, describing it was an "exercise in vicious whimsy . . . 70,000 words of vicious nonsense" (p. 99). In contrast, Jean Baudrillard *loved Crash!* The sire of the simulacrum described the novel, writing, "This [. . .] violently sexualised world [. . .] full of violent and violated bodies [. . .] is it good or bad? We can't say. It is simply fascinating, without this fascination implying any kind of value judgment whatsoever" (Baxter, 2011, p. 42).

Turning attention to the Ballard scholars, Gasiorek believes *Crash*, as a text, has caused the greatest trouble among Ballard's work "largely because its lapidary depiction of 'the nightmare marriage between sex and technology' [. . .] refuses to flinch from the implications of its thesis" (2005, p. 17). He cites the critique by Vivian Sobchak, labeling the work as "a cautionary tale, which 'is vigorously about the human body abstracted, objectified, and literalized as techno-body – and Ballard's vision sees this techno-body as driving us, quite literally, to a dead end'" (p. 18). Gasiorek believes the genius of the text rests with its ambiguity.

Gasiorek writes, “It can never finally decide what kind of text it is – a moral tract, or a paean to the joys of sexual violence? This indecision makes it a luminal work that blurs the boundary between the moral and the immoral, and it keeps crossing back and forth between these discourses” (p. 18).

Even Ballard proved elusive in how he regarded the novel. Gasiorek (2005) notes, “[H]e himself can never quite decide if it is a cautionary tale with a moral purpose, a deeply immoral and corrupting book, or a dispassionate forensic examination of a repressed cultural logic” (p. 18). Elaborating on this point, Gasiorek states that in some instances, Ballard has viewed the work as a moral tract, considering the book as “a warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape” (p. 83). At other points, Ballard contradicts himself, seeing the moral dimension as absent from the text. He has labeled the work “a psychopathic hymn [. . .] which has a point” (p. 83). The difficulty in reconciling *Crash*, according to Gasiorek, “may be traced to the metaphor around which the text is constructed, namely that the car crash is a symbol of sexual fulfillment. By this rhetorical move the phantasmic potential of the car (its dynamism and eroticism) is physically embodied and objectified” (p. 83).

Brigg cites a statement Ballard made about *Crash* to which Brigg correctly responds negatively. Ballard believed *Crash* was “an example of terminal irony, where not even the writer knows where he stands – quite a difficult trick to manage incidentally – some of your readers might try it” (1985, p. 74). Brigg views this as ironic in itself because “it hides the author’s true attitude while at the same time revealing that he is fully conscious of the implications of situations presented in the novel” (p. 74). Much like “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan,”

another condensed novel in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard knew the novel was obscene and wrote it with that intent.

Whatever pornography existed in *The Atrocity Exhibition* exploded across the pages in the full-length novel version of *Crash*. As a result, the novel became a huge success in France. This, according to Pringle, “is understandable, since the novel fits well into the tradition of intellectual pornography exemplified by writers like Celine, Genet, and Pauline Reage” (1979, p. 12). In comparing *Crash* to *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Pringle writes, “What makes *Crash* so different [. . .] is the greater sexual explicitness and the long descriptions of injuries and mutilations – all of which seem divorced from ‘normal’ human feelings” (p. 28). Unfortunately, Pringle’s argument is hobbled slightly when he justifies its tone via Ballard’s medical background. He states, “The novel is written less in the language of pornography than in that of a medical text book, conveying a strange union of flesh and machine” (p. 28).

Pringle seems to flip-flop throughout his discussion of Ballard as to the pornographic content, writing, “The characters in *Crash* treat each other like erotic dolls or masturbatory devices; the women are little more than mannequins” (1979, p. 41). He cites the description of the reawakening of Catherine and Ballard’s sex life after the accident as an example:

Since the accident she seemed completely at ease with me for the first time in many years. My crash was a wayward experience of a type her own life and sexuality had taught her to understand. My body, which she had placed in particular sexual perspective within a year or so of our marriage, now aroused her again. She was fascinated by the scars on my chest, touching them with her spittle-wet lips. These happy changes I felt myself. At one time Catherine’s body lying beside me in bed seemed as *inert and emotionless as a sexual exercise doll fitted with a neoprene vagina*. (Ballard, 1973, p. 51, emphasis added)

Though matters, at that moment, had “improved,” previously Catherine appeared so dehumanized to him that he equated her with an inflatable sex toy.

Sinclair, in reaction to the text, notes, “[O]ur senses are seduced by sights, sounds, smells conveyed with the hyper-real clarity of a dream that is recalled but not experienced” (1999, p. 17). Given the heavy influence on cinema specifically and mass media generally on Ballard, that he does write so cinematically, yet with the disdain for film adaptations of novels mentioned in the introduction always in the back of one’s mind, frustrates ultimately. Witness the description of Ballard’s wife giving him a cigarette while he was in the hospital, keeping in mind this *was* the 1970s when he was writing:

I drew uncertainly on the *geranium-flavoured* smoke. The *warm* tip of the cigarette, stained with *pink* lipstick, carried with it the unique *taste* of Catherine’s body, a *flavour* I had forgotten in the *phenol-saturated* odour of the hospital [. . .]. The *grease-smear*ed tip reminded me of her nipples, liberally *painted with lipstick*, which I would *press against my face, arms, and chest*, secretly *imagining* the imprints to be wounds. (emphasis added) (Ballard, 1973, p. 32, emphasis added)

Chalk it up to the visual influence of cinema or dismiss it as evidence of Ballard’s medical training. Either way, the employment of the sensual moves the text beyond the printed form to where one wonders why *not* adapt the novel as a film?

Upon investigation, it turns out that Cronenberg’s adaptation was *not* the first attempt at filming *Crash*. Sandy Lieberman attempted to adapt *Crash* around the time the source text was generating its initial controversy. He approached Nic Roeg about it as a possible follow-up to Roeg’s 1970 Mick Jagger vehicle, *Performance*. Lieberman states, “I was absolutely captivated by it, it was brilliant. That was the first one of Ballard’s books that I’d read. It was unconnected to anything else, in terms of literature” (Sinclair, 1999, p. 14). As with *Performance*, the film adaptation of *Crash*, along with another proposed adaptation, Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork*

Orange, were both to star Mick Jagger. According to Sinclair, neither panned out due to Jagger's reaction. With specific regard to *Crash*, "[p]resumably the part of Vaughan came too late in the cycle to have much appeal, and the James Ballard character in *Crash* was too passive" (p. 15). Additionally, though arguably flippant on Sinclair's part, "he didn't have any songs" (p. 15).

The following year, a short film called *Crash!* did air on BBC Two, predating Ballard's novel by two years and Cronenberg's film by twenty-five. Baxter considers Harley Cokliss' film as "something of a rehearsal for what was to come" (2011, p. 3). The film featured Ballard and actress Gabriella Drake. Ballard also provided the voiceover for the film. Baxter describes the film as "reworking textual extracts [. . .] and imagined scenarios from *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Cokliss' '*Crash!*' combines footage of crash tests with close-ups of Ballard and the mannequin-like Drake standing silently in empty multi-storey car parks; these images are interspersed with looped images of motorway signs, car interiors, and Ballard driving along the Westway" (p. 3). Besides being a soap actress, Drake was the sister of the doomed folk singer/cult hero Nick Drake (Sinclair, 1999, pp. 28-29). As with many women in Ballard's life, she would be given a suitably twisted tribute in Ballard naming the crippled crash victim, played in the film by Rosanna Arquette, after her (p. 30).

Another version of *Crash* followed Cokliss' in 1990. It was a short film made by Chris Petit for *The Moving Picture Show* (Sinclair, 1999, p. 31). Sinclair labels the piece "a more sophisticated reading of the earlier Cokliss attempt [with] [t]he same driving around the perimeter, sky-reflecting modernist hulks, dummy accidents [and] Petit's own voice, echoing Ballard" (p. 32). After reading *Crash*, Petit believed that the only way the film could be made was if shot as an eight millimeter film. In approaching the film that way, "You could have lots of

different forms and textures. Once you translate it into the conventional production schedule, it becomes unworkable” (p. 32). It was in Petit’s production that Cronenberg first came into Ballard’s orbit. Petit had both men read the following excerpt from *Crash*:

The amiable saunter of Frances Waring, bored wife of my partner, through the turnstiles of the local supermarket, the domestic wrangles of our well-to-do neighbours in our apartment house, all the hopes and fancies of this placid suburban enclave, drenched in a thousand infidelities, faltered before the solid reality of the motorway embankments, with their constant and unswerving geometry, and before the finite areas of the car-park aprons. (Sinclair, 1999, p. 33)

It was from here that the film took off for Petit. Ultimately, the task of director passed over Petit to Cronenberg, though Ballard *did* think Petit capable of filming the adaptation. By Petit’s own admission, “I think we could do it now, but it wasn’t possible then. I think you could do it with a Sharp. A mixture of Hi-8 and 8mm” (p. 34).

Given its source material, any film adaptation of *Crash* appeared doomed from the start. No white knight in the form of a Hollywood heavyweight or great of British contemporary drama could ever stand a chance of redeeming it or, more likely, taming it for mainstream acceptance. Whereas Spielberg jumped at the chance to tell Ballard’s story of innocence lost, Cronenberg was put off initially by the source material of the novel, which is more than a bit ironic, considering Cronenberg’s productions prior to taking on *Crash*:

The book, at first, I found to be very cold and clinical and all the descriptions of sex were very medical, there were no passion words, no street sex words, it was all ‘anus’ and ‘penis’ and ‘vagina’ and all that stuff, which is normally a turn-off. But by the end of the book these words, along with the words like ‘nacelle’ and ‘speedometer’, were starting to get very sexy, and I thought, ‘he’s really done something to my head here.’ (Cronenberg, 1996, pp. 331-32)

Cronenberg sought Ballard’s permission to film it thereafter.

Unfortunately, Cronenberg had difficulty interesting producers in the project until he suggested it to Jeremy Thomas, the producer of Cronenberg's film *Naked Lunch*. The major stumbling block consisted of the legalities surrounding the involvement of Elizabeth Taylor, or a stand-in for the then-aged attendee of many an AIDS-awareness benefit function, at least. Cronenberg stated his intention to excise her from the script completely. Once this took place, the project moved forward (Baxter, 2011, pp. 309-310). A budget of nine million was secured from New Line Cinema, a company owned by Ted Turner.

Ballard's critique of *Empire* claimed that Spielberg's adaptation had nothing to do with the source text. Matters appear a bit more considered with *Crash*. Ballard told Dery (2012):

I've seen the film three or four times now, and I constantly see things in it that I hadn't seen before [. . .]. [T]o be fair to Cronenberg, no film can possibly contain the whole of a novel in a couple of hours. The important thing is to concentrate on the nervous system of the novel. I think David has done that. (p. 346)

Unlike Spielberg who sought to use *Empire* as his vehicle for emulating the style of his hero, David Lean, Cronenberg differed in another way in his approach to adapting Ballard's novel. Unlike Ballard and Spielberg, Cronenberg did not consider himself a film aficionado. True, like Ballard, Cronenberg as a student felt he was a scientist who took a turn down the wrong path. However, where Ballard favored celluloid over the printed word, Cronenberg took the opposite approach, diving headfirst into novels. The only influence Cronenberg supposedly derived from the films he viewed was in recognizing that, like novelists, filmmakers had the same control over their works (Sinclair, 1999, p. 78).

Though Ballard took a hands-off approach to Spielberg's adaptation, in the nine-year lapse between *Empire of the Sun* and Cronenberg's adaptation, Ballard changed his stance.

Ballard wanted to be a consultant on the script, but Cronenberg, in direct contrast to Spielberg, insisted on writing the script himself. Ballard, according to Baxter, took issue with this (2011, p. 310).

In his critical study of Cronenberg's adaptation, Sinclair explains the initial differences when compared with Ballard's original text. Elizabeth Taylor, whom Sinclair labels rightly as "the key motivating element," disappears. The dirt on-screen would "achieve an unlooked-for elegance." The "faecal matter" Ballard focuses on in the novel, bordering at times on coprophilia, would go the way of the late actress as well. Toronto would be a stand-in for London (Sinclair, 1999, p. 11).

It is in this final contrast of Sinclair that Cronenberg, in a way, achieves what Ballard failed to do in his 1978 *Telegraph* piece explaining the either/or options facing a writer:

Faced with the suffocating character of English life, the writer has two stark choices – internal emigration, following the route laid down by Kafka, or a one-way ticket from the nearest airport. Now that Britain shows all too many signs of becoming an afterthought of Europe, it may be that the only best writers of the present day [. . .] are forced by internal necessity to seek their imaginative fortunes elsewhere than in their own countries. (*User's Guide*, 1996, p. 139)

Or was Ballard, with Cronenberg's assistance, making it out of England? It is a point returned to later.

Sinclair regards the film as "a digest, certain elements and sub-plots in the novel had been removed, and chronology altered" (1999, p. 21). In regard to the "loose" versus "faithful" dichotomy of adaptation, little, if anything, has been added *to* the film. Rather, upon examination, much has been excised. The book begins in flashback:

Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash. During our friendship he had rehearsed his death in many crashes, but this was his only true accident. Driven on a collision course toward the limousine of the film actress, his car jumped

the rails of the London Airport flyover and plunged through the roof of a bus filled with airline passengers [. . .]. Holding the arm of her chauffeur, the film actress Elizabeth Taylor, with whom Vaughan had dreamed of dying for so many months, stood alone under the revolving ambulance lights. (Ballard, 1973, p. 7)

The death of Vaughan, played by Elias Koteas, *does* involve jumping over a flyover and crashing into a bus below. However, this results toward the end of the film, from trying to kill Ballard's wife Catherine by rear-ending her vehicle, with all of the inherent allusions to anal penetration that entails (Cronenberg, *Crash*, 1996).

That said, the film, as a result, begins in a completely different manner. Two key plot elements that introduce the book are altered. One was altered for reasons of narrative while the other was altered for reasons both logistical and legal. In contrast, the film begins with Ballard and Catherine both engaged in acts of infidelity. Catherine is depicted, skirt hiked up, sprawled across an airplane wing, as her flight instructor penetrates her from behind. Ballard is seen, called back to the film set mid-coitus with a female production assistant. The reasons for starting with these dual acts of marital infidelity is "to foreground a growing sympathy, through Sadean gamesmanship, between Ballard and his wife" (Sinclair, 1999, p. 22).

Sinclair's outline lays bare just how stripped to the novel's "nervous system" Cronenberg's adaptation truly is. Following the Ballards' dueling acts of infidelity, Ballard suffers the car crash resulting in the death of Dr. Helen Remington's husband. Catherine visits him in an abandoned trauma ward used for airplane disasters "where she does some moody smoking while distractedly offering a handjob" (p. 65). Ballard meets Dr. Remington as well as Vaughan shortly thereafter. Sinclair dismisses the dialogue as "sporadic, abrupt; non sequiturs and programmatic monologues culled from the *Crash* novel" (p. 65).

Hereafter begins Ballard's induction into the cult of car crash fetishists. He has sex with Remington after a ride to the airport. It is a scene in which Ballard goes into *graphic* detail, spread over the course of *five* pages of text, reiterating the joining of flesh with machine and the resulting loss of humanity throughout. Though for purposes of space it is impossible to reproduce the whole of the depiction here, a sample from the text reads:

Elements of her body, her square kneecaps below my elbows, her right breast jacked out of its brassiere cup, the small ulcer that marked the lower arc of her nipple, were framed within the cabin of the car. As I pressed the head of my penis against the neck of her uterus, in which I could feel a dead machine, her cap, I looked at the cabin around me. This small space was crowded with angular control surfaces and rounded sections of human bodies interacting in unfamiliar junctions [. . .]. (Ballard, 1973, p. 80)

Thereafter, the two attend a performance piece where Vaughan restages James Dean's car crash.

When police arrive to break up the event, the two return with Vaughan to his "workshop" where they meet other followers of the motorway messiah. Though Ballard was not able to film the hybridization of the automobile with his partner Claire Walsh, he wrote the script in great detail for Cronenberg to pick up the mantle of decades later when introducing Gabrielle.

Depicted in the film by Rosanna Arquette in a costume that brought in elements of the dominatrix with black leather as well as the cyborg such as the prosthetic thigh where she housed a spliff, her description in the source text reads like a sexual cyborg rising phoenix-like after her accident:

This agreeable young woman, with her pleasant sexual dreams, had been reborn within the breaking contours of her crushed sports car. Three months later, sitting beside her physiotherapy instructor in her new invalid car, she held the chromium treadles in her strong fingers as if they were extensions of her clitoris. Her knowing eyes seemed well aware that the space between her crippled legs was constantly within the gaze of this muscled young man. [. . .]. The crushed body of the sports car had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality, releasing within its twisted bulkheads and leaking

engine coolant all the deviant possibilities of her sex. (p. 99)

Gabrielle has evolved physically as well as sexually in Ballard's twisted logic.

Teetering on the brink of monotony from the outset, the film finally falls when Sinclair writes:

[T]he principal characters [. . .] engage in most of the obvious sexual combinations: Catherine Ballard with Vaughan (while Ballard drives), Vaughan with an airport prostitute (Ballard again as voyeur/ chauffeur), Ballard with Remington, Ballard with [. . .] Gabrielle (by way of a wound in her thigh), Remington with Gabrielle [and] Vaughan with Ballard. (Sinclair, 1999, pp. 65-66)

In between James and Catherine attempt sex with each other and "to contextualize their affairs as Sadean dialogues" (p. 66).

Elizabeth Taylor was not the only character to be excised from Cronenberg's adaptation. Sinclair highlights another character excised from the film, Ballard's mistress Renata. In the text, Ballard and Renata have sex before his accident. Following the crash and his recovery, Renata becomes another female integrated into his fusion of the physical and technological. After parking the car at the site of the crash, the two have sex. Ballard reminds her, "I saw you just before the accident [. . .]. Do you remember? We made love" (Ballard, 1973, p. 56). She responds, "Are you still involving me in your crash?" While she did make it into the published script, she is not present in the film that was released. Sinclair believed "Cronenberg did not [wish] to detract from Holly Hunter as Dr. Remington" (1999, pp. 37-38). Sinclair notes that the shooting script, that being the one that still contained the aforementioned subplots, was at sixty-five pages in length. The film in its final form, clocks in at a little over ninety minutes. According to Sinclair, "[It] aspires [. . .] to the condition of one of Ballard's compacted novels of the [19]60s" (p. 65).

Sinclair notes another lost subplot of the original text. Not only does Renata disappear, but the *ménage-a-trois* between Ballard, Catherine, and Karen is also absent. This renders Catherine as the only non-bisexual participant in this orgy of “auto-eroticism.” In the text, Catherine regularly asked Ballard during sex to visualize her having intercourse with Karen, whom he described as “an unsmiling girl with silver lipstick who spent the entire office party before Christmas staring motionlessly at my wife like a pointer in rut” (Ballard, 1973, p. 33). Catherine became so obsessed with Karen that she was unable to achieve orgasm without “an elaborate fantasy of a lesbian sex-act” with her (p. 35).

In the film, the only homosexual relationship Catherine envisions is that between Ballard and Vaughan, which *does* take place in both the film and the novel. Sinclair believes the episodes with Karen are regarded as important only due to “their position in a chain of erotic encounters. Everything in the novel is experienced through the psychopathic/visionary consciousness of James Ballard” (1999, p. 45). One should also note that the film is not told in the first person in the same manner as Ballard’s novel.

Sinclair describes the film as “evenly paced, no highlights and few climaxes (in any sense), until Vaughan succeeds in killing himself [. . .] and Ballard repossesses the wrecked Lincoln” (p. 66). Ballard pursues Catherine in the Lincoln and runs her off the road. The film ends with Catherine merely injured but not dead, being penetrated by Ballard from behind in the same sexual position in which she began the film. Ballard reassures her, “Maybe the next one” (Cronenberg, *Crash*, 1996). This “near rebirth of emotion between this damaged golden couple is Cronenberg’s crane shot conclusion” (Sinclair, 1999, p. 66).

Choosing to end in this manner, Cronenberg alters Ballard's source text again. The novel ends on arguably more of a down, and certainly more *disgusting*, note with Ballard wandering through the impound yard, having briefly engaged in the sexual act with Catherine, his hand full of semen. Arriving at the Lincoln, Ballard smeared the semen on the controls and the dashboard "defining for the last time the contours of Vaughan's presence on the seats [. . .]. I spread my semen over the seat, and then marked the sharp barb of the steering column [. . .]. Already I knew I was designing the elements of my own car-crash" (Ballard, 1973, p. 224).

Despite all of the cuts made to Ballard's novel in Cronenberg's adaptation, as Spielberg engaged in embellishment, Cronenberg was not immune to similar indulgences with his adaptation. Among the differences between the novel and film adaptation of *Crash*, Sage (2008) also notes that the film closes with James performing anal sex with Catherine while she masturbates against the car's window frame. Additionally, he notes that Cronenberg expands the scene where the permanently injured Gabrielle seduces a car salesman. In the book, Ballard writes:

She provoked a young salesman on the Mercedes stand to ask her to inspect a white sports car, relishing his embarrassment when he helped her shackled legs into the front seat. Vaughan whistled in admiration of this. (p. 174)

Sage describes Cronenberg's expansion as taking "one deadpan line of the novel" and amplifying it into a scene where Gabrielle "reduces [the] car salesman to a[n] erotic jelly." (p. 46).

What of Sinclair's critique of *Crash*? He cites a review of the film Gerald Houghton wrote for *The Edge*. Houghton states, "The true genius of Cronenberg's approach [. . .] is to use limitation to its advantage" (Sinclair, 1999, pp. 62; 64). Cronenberg achieves this via a "pared-

down progression of short scenes, alternating partners, [and] familiar locations” (p. 64). Sinclair argues that Cronenberg’s adaptation simultaneously “makes its own space while remaining true to the last comma of Ballard’s original” (p. 64). For Sinclair, the viewer/reader allegedly has to concede that no privileging of one text, be it the film or the novel, can happen. The book and the film “come together in parallel universes” (p. 64). To justify his case further, Sinclair cites Ballard’s declaration that “an author [. . .] can no longer preside like a magistrate over his characters” (p. 68). The direction of the adaptation is set in the first tracking shot going into the airplane hangar. Hereafter “the characters grind against each other like perpetual motion machines” (p. 65). Ballard cedes control to Cronenberg, “happy to let [him] improvise in any way he wants” (p. 65).

To shift attention to the production, Howard Shore’s minimalist score presents, “edgy [. . .] aural motifs” echoing Hermann’s work for Hitchcock (Sinclair, 1999, p. 45). The first tracking shot of Catherine in the overlit hangar breaks off from the first-person narrative, finalizing the divorce from the source text. With no one present but Catherine and her flight instructor, “the sexual performance is being staged for the benefits of an audience” (p.46). The rear entry of Catherine at the opening sets the precedent for the way Cronenberg shoots *Crash*. According to Sinclair, “Couples do not face each other. This is very important to Cronenberg. The film’s forward impetus is delivered through a precise articulation of heads within the rectangle” (1999, p. 47). The actors stare out of frame and speak without ever making eye contact.

Blankness appears to be the overriding emotion, or overrides emotion, with the actors. Sinclair describes Ballard’s portrayer, James Spader, as “a good enough actor to leave nothing in

his face. It's uninhabited" (p. 58). In addition to Shore's musical score, he finds another parallel to Hitchcock in Unger, whom he compares to one of Hitchcock's "ice women" (p. 58). The traffic also takes on elements of Hitchcock, "coming and going like Hitchcock's birds, sometimes massing [. . .] sometimes, more ominously, vanishing from sight" (p. 59).

Contrasted with Rosanna Arquette and Deborah Unger, however, Holly Hunter's performance was criticized as "too meek and dowdy" (Baxter, 2011, p. 311). Despite her role as Catherine, Unger, as a newcomer, takes, fittingly, a back seat to her fellow actresses, though they are in supporting roles, hence her absence from the publicity stills for the picture (Sinclair, 1999, p. 59). As a result, most of the criticism regarding the female cast members focused on Arquette and Hunter due to their "name" status.

The steadicam (short track) shot dominates the film with threesomes dominating, either implied, as in the opening shot of the film, or present, as in Ballard's personal favorite from the film, the car wash scene, where Ballard watches in the rear view mirror as Vaughan and Catherine have sex (Sinclair, 1999, p. 70). Ballard, in contrast, according to Sinclair, focuses on the minutiae in a scene, or "zooms in," in a manner bordering on obsessive in the source text. One need only recall the description used in Catherine's visit to Ballard in the hospital to note the contrast.

In addition to Elizabeth Taylor's expulsion from the script, one of the glaring results of Ballard's ceding of control was the shift in location from London to Toronto. Whereas Spielberg with his Hollywood clout fought tooth and nail to film as much of *Empire* in Shanghai as he could, *Crash* would not be bound by the location in which it took place in Ballard's source text. Those coming before Cronenberg took issue with his removal of the text from the London

suburbs, feeling that it could *not* be filmed anywhere else. Had Lieberman's production come to fruition, he would have filmed in London "[w]ith a good Elizabeth Taylor double" (Sinclair, 1999, p. 87). Petit was shocked by Ballard's reaction when the two discussed the vision Petit had for his adaptation. He wanted to use the London suburbs, but Ballard, according to Petit, "sees *Crash* as much a Tokyo novel or a Toronto novel as a London novel [. . .]. I disagree" (p. 87).

Petit and Lieberman's disgruntlement illustrates another issue with adaptation discussed by Whelehan (1999), given their emotional attachment to the text. Unlike the "earnest middlebrows" who flocked to *Empire*, *Crash* was never likely to be a mainstream concern. Of its nine million budget, the film only earned a third of it back at the box office (IMDb, 2015). Given *Crash*'s fringe nature, Whelehan notes the nature of the fan as critic. She writes, "[F]ans in relation to cult texts [remind] us that these readers/viewers automatically set themselves up as critics who feel that part of their critical activity is best expressed in a rewriting or reframing of the 'original'" (1999, p. 16). In doing so, these fans ape the function of the scholarly critics "who always find more to add to their analyses of the text, until our academic understanding of a classic literary work becomes in more ways than one the sum of its commentaries" (p. 16). For them, given their position, moving the location out of the London suburbs was blasphemy.

Sinclair reasons that Ballard did not take issue with Cronenberg moving the film location to his native Toronto because in doing so it "took the heat out of it. *Crash* would be further distanced from any distracting autobiographical aspects, from the probing of noxious journalists" (1999, p. 87). It became, as Ballard impishly referred to the film, "Cronenberg's *Crash*" (p. 87).

In an interview with Sinclair, Ballard championed Toronto as the ideal location to film the book. He described it as “the paradigm of North American cities” (p. 87). Ballard elaborated further, saying, “Toronto is anonymous, and most of Cronenberg’s films have been set there. Part of the eeriness of his early Toronto films is because you don’t know where you are” (p. 87). The geographical detachment from any one place mirrors the detached nature of the five main characters in Cronenberg’s adaptation.

As stated earlier, Ballard referred to Cronenberg’s adaptation as “Cronenberg’s *Crash*.” While the authorship of the adaptation of *Crash* is not subjected to the same amount of “too many chefs” affecting *Empire of the Sun*, Sinclair presents the problem of determining who has the strongest claim to *Crash* post-adaptation, though the authorship remains split between Ballard’s source text and Cronenberg’s adaptation. Is it an even split? Of course not.

As one might expect, given the commercial tie-in between the film and the source text, Sinclair points to the fact that subsequent editions of the novel would have James Spader and Holly Hunter’s images on the cover with the film credits on the back cover. With this, Sinclair aligns his thoughts with McGann and the nature of texts over time. According to McGann:

The textual condition’s only immutable law is the law of change [. . .]. Every text enters the world under determinate sociohistorical conditions, and while these conditions may and should be variously defined and imagined, they establish the horizon with which the life histories of different texts can play themselves out. The law of change declares that these histories will exhibit a ceaseless process of textual development and mutation – a process which can only be arrested if all the textual transformations of a particular work fall into nonexistence. (1991, p. 9)

True, the cover of the current stateside edition published by Picador no longer mirrors the cover of the DVD release of *Crash*, but those copies featuring Spader and Hunter remain in the text’s DNA as part of its evolution.

Additionally, one sees the theories of Genette and paratexts at play. Genette acknowledges that a text “rarely appears in its naked state” without some accompanying texts, such as the author’s name, a preface, illustrations or other elements. Those elements aid in the presentation, reception and consumption by audiences of the work. To those elements, Genette applied the term “paratext” (1991, p. 261). According to Genette, paratexts aid in “a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading – more pertinent, naturally, in the eyes of the author and his allies” (p. 262). Modifications to the paratext appear unending, depending on “periods, cultures, genres, authors, works, editions of the same work, with sometimes considerable differences of pressure” (p. 262). With this, Genette echoes McGann.

That said, to focus on Genette’s mention of the author, *who is* the author of the novel, given the paratextual images from Cronenberg? According to Sinclair, “J. G. Ballard fades, willingly taking on the role of spectator, voyeur at a spectacle of his own making. And Cronenberg is revealed, at last, as the paradigm of the author” (1999, p. 20).

Sandy Lieberson expressed the difficulty of adapting *Crash* as a film, particularly for the mainstream audience. When the filmmaker falls into what Lieberson labels as “the trap” of trying to cross over, then the filmmaker fails both Whelehan’s aforementioned purists who worship the novel and the general audience who usually limit sexual gratification in automobiles to something to do when bored with the film at that endangered species, the drive-in (Sinclair, 1999, pp. 13-14). Lieberson continues:

So it’s either one or the other. To fall into that netherland is to court disaster. The adaptation is such an attraction for film-makers, because we always have the pretensions of wanting to do something of a cult or classic nature. So what’s the easiest way to do it? You take a cult or classic novel. (p. 14)

In this light, Cronenberg's *Crash* fails both the purists as well as the general audience who were never going to see the film, given its NC-17 rating.

Recalling the harsh reviews of *Crash* the novel, matters did not improve for its film adaptation. Christopher Tookey stated that Cronenberg's adaptation displayed "the morality of the satyr, the nymphomaniac, the rapist, the pedophile, the danger to society . . . even a liberal society should draw the line" (Baxter, 2011, p. 100). Alexander Walker in *The London Evening Standard* went on a campaign against the film, stating it contained "some of the most perverted acts and theories of sexual deviance I have ever seen propagated in mainstream cinema" (p. 100).

At the time Luckhurst was writing *The Angle Between Two Walls*, reports were coming in from Cannes regarding the outrage caused by Cronenberg's film adaptation. He cites a report in *The Independent* where, during a press conference about the film, Ballard stated that the moral of the film was "always wear a safety belt, and if you have sex, do it in the back seat" (1997, p. 188).

The Daily Mail called for *Crash*'s outright ban. Westminster Council demanded cuts be made to the film prior to being shown. When the distributor refused, the film was banned from being shown in the crucial first-run theaters in London's West End. By contrast, neighboring Camden allowed the film to run intact (Baxter, 2011, p. 317).

When Turner found out about the content of the film, he went about distancing himself from the project with immediate effect, even going so far as seeking to have it shelved. While Ballard freely admitted to the pornographic nature of the novel, Cronenberg defended his film adaptation, saying, "Pornography is created to arouse you sexually and has no other purpose. It's obvious *Crash* is not pornographic. People say it's sexual, but not erotic, as though that was a

criticism” (Baxter, 2011, p. 310). The film would go on to win a Special Award at Cannes (p. 312).

Of *Crash*'s cast, Holly Hunter emerges as the most vocal supporter of Cronenberg and Ballard alike. According to Baxter, Hunter had long wanted to work with Cronenberg and would have accepted any role given to her in the film. Ballard recounted an incident at Cannes when a journalist, not recognizing Ballard in Hunter's company, asked her, “Holly, what you doing in this shit?” Ballard said, “Holly sprang to life and delivered a passionate defence, castigating him for his small-mindedness and provincialism. It was the festival's greatest performance” (Baxter, 2011, p. 312).

In the years since *Crash*'s release, the film, according to Depper, has come under attack for opposite reasons. Depper (2008) cites Sinclair's critique that “Cronenberg's film tames the unruly quality of Ballard's work into something more closely resembling commercial pornography, stripping it of the subversive charge that made the original such a disturbing work” (p. 61). At first blush, the coldness inherent in Cronenberg's work would seem a perfect fit for Ballard's novel. However, Depper charges that:

[Cronenberg's] film now seems strangely anaemic – the fashions and the cars are a decade out of date, and its premillennial anxieties, in repeated shots of depopulated [. . .] freeways [. . .] evokes an essentially 1990s version of the twenty-first century. (pp. 61-62)

This is particularly unfortunate, considering the grotesque fusion of flesh with technology that is the novel's subject. It is a target of which Cronenberg hit the bull's eye previously with his film *Videodrome* and his remake of *The Fly* starring Jeff Goldblum (p. 62).

Ultimately, Cronenberg's adaptation fails, but it was not due to the protests over the film's content. Rather, *Crash* failed due to how much from the source text failed to make it into

the film. One could dismiss the sub-plots involving Ballard's mistress Renata and Catherine's secretary Karen as simply more sex scenes and not essential to the film, but when the source text teeters so close to the brink (if not falls over the cliff) of being blatant pornography, the least bit of character development is character development no less. Interestingly, the character of Seagrave, Vaughan's henchman in the text, is glimpsed only twice in the film. Once during Vaughan's staging of James Dean's car crash and again dead in his attempt to restage Jayne Mansfield's car crash (Cronenberg, *Crash*, 1996). Additionally, the removal of the text from the London suburbs to Toronto, a fatal flaw according to Lieberman and Petit, amputates the psychogeography present in the novel. The removal of Elizabeth Taylor, even in a younger stand-in actor, so central to the source text, strikes the final knock-out. While it would be easy to argue that her placement in the film would render Vaughan a crazed stalker, which Cronenberg attempts, he also admits that Ballard's novel predates the concept as part of our culture. Mark David Chapman was still a little less than a decade from infamy when Ballard wrote *Crash* (Cronenberg, 1996, p. 333). If one keeps in mind Ballard's statement of Cronenberg's adaptation stripping the novel down to its central nervous system, consider all that is missing from the anatomy. No bones hold the structure together. No muscles act with the bones to move the body forward. Never mind that all of the necessary organs, particularly the heart, are not present.

CHAPTER FOUR

OTHER ADAPTATIONS

When asked about possible similarities between Spielberg and Cronenberg, Ballard believed none existed. The two were as different as *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash* were different books/ films. Ballard did concede that “Cronenberg, Spielberg, and myself do share something in common, in that we all spent a large part of our careers in our own versions of science fiction [. . .]. I’ve been very, very lucky to have two of the greatest talents in present-day cinema adapting novels of mine” (Love, 1996, p. 326). That said, the two movies and their directors could not have been more different in how they approached the source novels.

Though *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash* are the most recognized of Ballard’s novels to be adapted to film, they are not the only film adaptations. The scarce amount of scholarship on Ballard is, unfortunately, mirrored in the accessibility of other film adaptations. In 1983, Sam Scoggins produced a twenty-four minute, sixteen millimeter film based loosely on Ballard’s novel *The Unlimited Dream Company*. Equal parts documentary and arthouse film, the film was produced in association with the Royal College of Art School of Film and Television. Not widely available at the time, let alone in the thirty-two years since its production, Scoggins provided a synopsis to Vale (1984) when Vale was putting together the *RE/Search* anthology on Ballard. If one accepts the synopsis as reliable, it appears to follow a similar trajectory as Cokliss’s adaptation of *Crash*. Ballard is interviewed in close-up, looking straight into camera, intercut with a man in a ragged flight-suit, wandering amidst “Ballardian” landscapes, specifically a jungle, a wreck yard and a beach.

In each of the landscapes, the pilot constructs a portrait of Ballard from found objects. In the jungle motif, meant to represent the past, he constructs a portrait from feathers. In the second, representing the present, he constructs the portrait using, unsurprisingly, crashed cars. For the final section, the future, he draws a giant spiral in the sand. The three sections were shot in black and white and printed in a different monochrome, red, green, or blue, for each one.

Other elements included in the film were tracking shots of the London suburb of Shepperton which ended in front of Ballard's home, with him standing in the front of it. This is also repeated, but shot in negative color while Ballard discusses the novel. Additionally, in a segment where Ballard discusses television, single framed images from television are employed. In one segment where Ballard is asked the ninety questions of the Eyckman Personality Quotient, all yes or no in nature, a very slow zoom in from Ballard, in a head and shoulders shot, lasting six minutes in duration, finishes on his eyeball. Finally, there is a zoom out from a shot of some clouds to the whole Earth. This dissolves into Ballard's eye as the outward zoom continues until Ballard's whole head is in the shot.

Scoggins' purpose for making the film was:

On one level, I hope the film is a fairly straightforward introduction to Ballard and his work, but on another level, the film (at least for me) is concerned with two things: 1.) How can you make an adequate picture of someone; 2.) The way in which the imagination/film transforms "reality." (Vale, 1984, p. 170)

From the synopsis, it is safe to assume the film has very little to do with the novel, outside of the motif of the pilot in tattered gear. One would not be in danger of having the film supplant Ballard's source text about the social misfit Blake and his extended death dream after crashing his hijacked plane into the Thames (1979).

In 2002, Solveig Nordlund, a Swedish filmmaker based in Portugal, filmed an adaptation of Ballard's 1971 short story "The Low-Flying Aircraft." Running at an hour and twenty minutes, Nordlund's version of *The Low Flying Aircraft* featured mainly at film festivals. With cinematography by Acácio de Almeida and musical score by Johan Zachrisson, this was a professional production, unlike Scoggins' artfilm/documentary production of *The Unlimited Dream Company*. However, Nordlund remained constrained by a low budget. Thus, her original plans to shoot the film in English using an international cast were scuppered (McGrath, 2008). According to Sellars and O'Hara (2012), Nordlund "brought a European art-house sensibility to Ballard, mixing a striking colour scheme (chemical blues, reds and greens, refracted from queasy neon and industrial skylines) with a downbeat, philosophical narrative" (p. 224). The film was allegedly successful in translating the aforementioned "downbeat, philosophical narrative" of Ballard's story (p. 224). The authors commended Nordlund, particularly for her use of real-world locations, including a Portuguese resort that was no longer in use (p. 224).

Earlier still, Nordlund did an adaptation of Ballard's 1964 short story "Thirteen to Centaurus" as the 1986 film *Journey to Orion*. The film was a short shot on one of the ferries between Stockholm and Helsinki, due to Nordlund's belief that the interiors of ferries and spaceships look the same. *The Low Flying Aircraft* is only available on DVD in Portugal, though Nordlund said she wanted to subtitle the film in English, if anyone had an interest (McGrath, 2008).

Two years earlier, Jonathan Weiss' adaptation of *The Atrocity Exhibition* was produced. Made for fifty thousand dollars, most of the film's budget went to securing the rights for documentary inserts (Sinclair, 1999, p. 102). The film, according to Sinclair, is "a painstakingly

faithful transcription of Ballard's text" (p. 102). Ballard's feelings on the film appear divided. As with *Crash*, he referred to the film as "Jonathan Weiss' *The Atrocity Exhibition*," but at the same time, he recounted, "I almost felt as if I were reading the book as I watched the film, so close were the two" (p. 102).

Shot over the course of two years, the film, according to Sinclair is, "so deferential to the original that it is virtually proof of time-travel" (p. 103). Elaborating further, Sinclair describes the film, writing:

The film moves with the impetus of an academic thesis, cutting between archival footage and immaculately staged representations of Ballard's drama. The visual language of Weiss' *The Atrocity Exhibition* is an attempt to duplicate the texture and rhythm of Ballard's prose. (p. 103)

For Sinclair, the film adaptation "[tamps] down the excitement" that came from reading Ballard's book at a period when its risks were still active "[achieving] the intended effect of listening to secret transmissions" (p. 103). Unfortunately, access to the film, like Nordlund's, is cruelly next to nonexistent. The film is only currently available in PAL format on the secondary market and at an exorbitant price to where only those with high degrees of dedication, disposable income, or both, might be able to view it.

Thankfully, Sellars and O'Hara's interview compilation included a transcription of the DVD commentary which consists of a conversation between Ballard and Weiss (2006). In it, Ballard commented that Weiss did not face the same issues of narrative that Spielberg and Cronenberg confronted. For Ballard, "[I]t is never clear in the course of the book what exactly is going on. And I think the readers who really persevere with the book begin to grasp the underlying logic" (p. 448). Weiss responded that it was due to the novel being non-narrative in nature from the outset. This aligns with how Ballard wrote the individual stories that would

make up the source text.

Recalling the time in which he was writing, Ballard said:

I wanted to get away from the ‘A plus B plus C’ kind of narrative because it didn’t reflect the world in which we actually lived. We were being bombarded with imagery of a very intense kind from advertising, TV, magazines, cinema, commercials. Life had become more and more discontinuous. (Weiss, 2006, p. 450)

Do not think, however, that the source text anticipated postmodernism in cinema and showing a film out of narrative sequence. Those films have, nonlinear though it may be, an underlying narrative structure. None may be found in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. One only has the words of Weiss, Sinclair and Ballard to go on, but it appears to mimic Ballard’s suggestion of how to approach the text in the updated introduction to *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1990):

Readers who find themselves daunted by the unfamiliar narrative structure of *The Atrocity Exhibition* – far simpler than it seems at first glance – might try a different approach. Rather than start at the beginning of each chapter, as in a conventional novel, simply turn the pages until a paragraph catches your eye. If the ideas or images seem interesting, scan the nearby paragraphs for anything that resonates in an intriguing way. Fairly soon, I hope, the fog will clear, and the underlying narrative will reveal itself. In effect, you will be reading the book in the way it was written. (p. vi)

Commenting further on the film, Ballard said, “I think [it’s] surprisingly faithful. I think the temptation to impose some sort of narrative, some sort of evolving character who learns from the last five minutes or the last ten minutes, as characters tend to in films – that temptation is resisted” (Weiss, 2006, p. 452).

Additional frustration greets Ballard’s comment that the question posed in the film/book, “What does it mean to be sane in an insane world?” is allegedly clearer in the film adaptation “because so much of the imagery in the book is strongly visual, but of course it is handicapped by the fact that I’m merely describing visual scenes [. . .] whereas in the film, you’re showing

them directly” (Weiss, 2006, p. 452). Weiss responds, “The book reads like a film script for this film. It was very easy for me to adapt it because from the very first page that I read of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, this was something that you see in your mind’s eye” (p. 453). Ballard considered Weiss successful, stating “I think your film is so impressive because what were, as you say, scripted outlines, scripted intentions, in the book, are actually brought into the real world in the film. It’s one thing to talk about a crashed car, it’s another to show newsreel footage of people barely alive in the mangled remains of their Buicks” (p. 453). Sadly, all one has, until the film is given wider access, if ever that should occur, is Weiss and Ballard discussing it.

As of this writing, another of Ballard’s novels is being adapted as a film. *High-Rise* (1975) depicts England as a microcosm, with each of the floors in the then recent-architectural wonder of the tower block descending into barbarism as the tenants become increasingly cut off from the outside world:

The old social subdivisions, based on power, capital and self-interest, had reasserted themselves here as anywhere else.

In effect, the high-rise had already divided itself into the three classical social groups, its lower, middle and upper classes. The [tenth] floor shopping mall had formed a clear boundary between the lower nine floors, with their ‘proletariat’ of film technicians, air-hostesses and the like, and the middle section of the high-rise [. . .]. This central two-thirds of the apartment building formed its middle class, made up of self-centered but basically docile members of the professions [. . .]. (p. 56)

Filming took place in Northern Ireland during the summer of 2014.

The cast includes Tom Hiddleston as Dr. Robert Laing, the first person greeted in the text. As with the novel version of *Crash*, *High-Rise* opens in flashback with Laing “sat on his balcony eating the dog,” specifically an Alsatian he had roasted over a stack of burning telephone directories (p. 1). Luke Evans plays documentary filmmaker Richard Wilder, the literal social climber in Ballard’s text. An ex-rugby player, Ballard describes the aptly named

Wilder, writing, “With his loud voice and rugby-scrum manners [. . .] his powerful sexual aggression was overlaid by a tremendous restlessness. No wonder his wife [. . .] seemed permanently exhausted” (p. 10). Laing concluded, “Wilder was real enough, but hardly belonged to the high-rise” (15). His sense of class inferiority culminates in his aforementioned scaling of the tower block, regressing further into savagery until he reaches the top level where he is slaughtered by his wife and her fellow tribeswomen who form a female separatist clan.

Jeremy Irons is cast as the tower block architect, Anthony Royal, with all the inherent connotations present and correct in his last name, as is the case with Wilder. Ballard writes:

[H]e knew that he despised his fellow residents for the way in which they fitted so willingly into their appointed slots in the apartment building, for their over-developed sense of responsibility and lack of flamboyance. Above all, he looked down on them for their good taste. (p. 90)

Rounding out the cast is Sienna Miller as his assistant Charlotte, the recently widowed mother of a six-year-old and half-hearted love interest of Laing (p. 8), and James Purefoy, who portrays “upper-class nitwit” Pangbourne (Hewit, 2015).

How will such a film fare in a post-“Occupy” society? The tower block and class war marked by physical violence would, at first approach, appear to freeze the text in 1970s England as much as Robert Maitland’s lacking of a mobile phone to call for help after crashing his Jaguar freezes Ballard’s other non-*Atrocity* related novel of the period, *Concrete Island* (1974) in forty year old amber. The film’s director, newcomer Ben Wheatley, thinks otherwise. He states, “The book makes as much sense now as it did then [. . .]. It was written in the [1970s], projecting itself into the near future, but we live in that future now. We’re almost in a new version of the [1970s]” (Hewit, 2015).

Unlike Cronenberg, Wheatley appears determined to keep the film adaptation rooted in

England. According to Child (2014), Wheatley set up camp in the British Library where he studied the notes and letters of Ballard in the holdings there. The British Library acquired the documents via an agreement reached with Ballard's daughters, Fay and Beatrice, for tax reasons (Baxter, 2011). According to Wheatley, the film would be "true to Ballard," retaining its setting in England (Williams, 2013). "It is such a rich and interesting time that it seemed a shame to set it anywhere other than England" (Child, 2014). Despite the growing class consciousness in the United States after the Bush administration, it is difficult to disagree with Wheatley on this point.

Wheatley's desire to film the text aligned more with Spielberg's desire to adapt *Empire of the Sun* in the affective nature the source text had on him. Where Spielberg felt he had, at some point, been uprooted from a home to which he never returned, Wheatley felt immediately *at home* reading Ballard's novel. He recounted, "I was born in 1972, three years before the book was written, so one of the attractions of the film that I kind of imagine myself as one of the kids running around on the estate and my parents as the adults" (Child, 2014). Did he see himself one of the Wilder children?

As with *Crash* and *Empire*, *High-Rise* has experienced a labored gestation. Producer Jeremy Thomas had first attempted to get the film made in the late 1970s with, as was the case with Lieberman and *Crash*, Nicholas Roeg's involvement (Williams, 2013). A script was written by Rudy Wurlitzer, known for his work on *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. However, the script remained in development limbo for years. Prior to Wheatley's involvement, Cronenberg's fellow countryman Vincenzo Natali sought to do a loose adaptation of *High-Rise* that was, instead of "actually adapting the novel, [. . .] spinning off from it." Initially working with Wurlitzer's script, Natali ultimately abandoned it for a new version by Richard Stanley (Williams, 2013).

Fortunately or unfortunately, as time will tell, time ran out for Natali, at which point Wheatley stepped in. The script by his wife Amy Jump allegedly remains faithful to the source text, which Wheatley describes as “a glorious book with great cinematic possibilities” (Williams, 2013). Is it though?

Will *High-Rise* suffer the same fate as *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash* at the box office? If one follows Marsh (2013), the prospect looks grim. According to Marsh in his piece in *The Paris Review*, film, as an aesthetic medium, “seems ill-equipped to convey the density of great prose, to illustrate externally the inner life articulated with nuance by words. Film is bound to a certain literalism: the indexical relationship between the image and what it communicates is direct.” If one follows Marsh’s logic, film can only describe this “inner life.” It cannot show it. Marsh’s argument appears clouded over by emotion in privileging the text over film. As an example, how does Ballard describe the rape scene between Wilder and Charlotte in the text?

The first time he struck her, cuffing her to the bedroom floor, he tried to record her gasp, but the reel had jammed. He freed it carefully, bent down and slapped her again, only stopped when he had recorded her now deliberate cries to his satisfaction. He enjoyed terrorizing her, taping down her exaggerated but none the less frightened gasps. During their clumsy sexual act on the mattress in the child’s bedroom he left the tape-recorder switched on beside them on the floor and played back the sounds of this brief rape[.] (p. 147)

Where is this “density of great prose” and “inner life articulated with nuance by words” of which Marsh speaks? Not that anyone, outside of the severely disturbed, *would* want to see this, but on the page as on the hypothetical movie screen, it is fairly easy to grasp what is going on and what is being felt, disgusting as it is.

Marsh (2013) falls back on the concept of medium specificity, or what distinguishes literature from cinema or another branch of the arts. When translating a text for film, “the

specificity of the art must be translated: it may be about the same thing, but, to paraphrase Roger Ebert, how it's about what it's about needs to be reconceived." Turning attention to Ballard's prose, Marsh believes it "resists translation [due to] its almost poetic sense of rhythm and meter, for the elasticity of sentences, for the density of the page." Keep in mind that the section Marsh cited as an example was the opening scene with Maitland roasting the Alsatian dog on his balcony.

Forecasting what shape the film adaptation might take, Marsh asks, "What are you going to do, shoot a writhing mass of ex-bourgeois maniacs in the corridors of an oversized apartment? How painfully literal. Certainly the images are there in the work." The tone of these last two sentences alone would justify dismissing Marsh's critique as not worth the bother. Where Marsh sees any potential adaptation failing is the material one cannot film. He asks, "[W]hat about the pungency of the air, the encroaching lunacy of the mind?"

What about it indeed? If the rape scene involving Wilder and Charlotte were not enough evidence of this "encroaching lunacy of the mind," examine how Wilder is described in the scene where his long overdue retribution is delivered courtesy of the female separatists:

Wilder waited for them to speak to him. He was glad to be naked and show off his body with its painted patterns. At last the woman kneeling by the fire looked over her shoulder at him. Despite her change of dress he recognized her as his wife Judith. He was about to run forward to her, but her matter-of-fact gaze, her unimpressed appraisal of his heavy loins, made him stop [. . .].

The circle of women drew closer [. . .]. From behind their sunglasses the women were looking intently at Wilder, as if reminded that their hard work had given them a strong appetite [. . .]. In their bloodied hands they carried knives with narrow blades. Shy but happy now, Wilder tottered across the roof to meet his new mothers. (p. 192)

Given Ballard's earlier description, Wilder was never far from regressing to that of a caveman, but having reached the top of the tower block, his regression is not only complete but also shot

through with infantilism in the description of his happiness at showing off his naked, painted form. Could Wheatley show this “encroaching lunacy of the mind” on screen? Of course!

According to Marsh (2013), three things are conveyed in the source text in ascending levels of difficulty. Telling the story is simple enough. The next tier to tackle is imagery, which Marsh considers “manageable.” The difficulty arises when one comes to “the tone or tenor of the writing.” Marsh cites a recent interview with one of Ballard’s contemporaries, Martin Amis, regarding film adaptations of literature. According to Amis, “The better the prose in the novel, [. . .] the less likely that a successful film will be made of it. You really want something that’s written like *The Godfather*, where the prose is nothing much.” When the text is described in a plain and simple fashion “as if in preparation for the inevitable film,” the screenwriter and director are faced with a much easier task of translating the story and its images to celluloid. According to Marsh, “[I]n general, poorly written books lend themselves better to the act of adaptation – if for no other reason than there is less to fail at and less to lose.” He cites Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* as an example.

In contrast, Ballard’s prose, in its alleged “elegance and sophistication [. . .] which seems to spill out over the sides of the page, won’t be contained by a screenplay or an image so easily – it must be whipped into a very different kind of shape” (Marsh, 2013). Where is the “elegance and sophistication” in Ballard’s description of Laing, as he descends into savagery like the rest of the tenants?

Laing stripped off his grimy sports-shirt and washed himself in the last water flowing from the shower. He shaved and put on a fresh shirt and suit. If he visited the medical school looking like a tramp he might give away to some sharp-eyed colleague what was actually going on in the high-rise. He examined himself in the wardrobe mirror. The gaunt, white-skinned figure with a bruised forehead standing awkwardly in an over-large business suit looked totally unconvincing, like a discharged convict in his

release suit blinking at the unfamiliar daylight after a long prison-sentence. (Ballard, 1975, p. 113)

Marsh lacks so much in objectivity. The only thing in this passage *is* image described in the “plain and simple fashion” betraying the cinematic influence on Ballard as a writer.

Wheatley’s adaptation of *High-Rise* enters a different world from that which greeted the two previous mainstream adaptations of Ballard’s novels. With Ballard dead for nearly a decade, he will not be consulted in the script’s development this time either. He will also not be able to give his commendation or condemnation of the film adaptation to the press in the same manner in which he referred to the adaptations of *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition* using the possessive form for each film’s respective directors. Will it, *can it* be “Ben Wheatley’s *High-Rise*” if Ballard is not present to label it as such? Can it stay J.G. Ballard’s *High-Rise* once Wheatley’s film is released? To what degree or extent would the placement of the actors and/or film credits on the cover of the novel, altered to tie in with the film, as was the situation with *Crash*, remove Ballard’s authority over the text? True, one might ask Fay and Beatrice their opinions on the film adaptation, as they have power of attorney over his estate (Baxter, 2011), but their only tie is that of being blood relation. What about Ballard’s longtime partner Claire Churchill? Matters remain the same.

How will *High-Rise* fare? Without any intended slight toward Bale, Malkovich, Spader, Hunter, or any other members of the casts of *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*, the cast has marquee recognition based on the involvement of Irons and Miller alone. Will that be enough? Up until *Empire of the Sun*, the only blemish on Spielberg’s record was another World War II piece, *1941*, a comedy, but for all the wrong reasons. Again, given the subject matter and the non-mainstream appeal of Cronenberg, *Crash* was guaranteed never to bother the Academy or topple

the latest mass destruction served with a dollop of sarcastic quips action film clogging the Cineplex like its concession stand popcorn “butter” clogs arteries.

It is a shame that the film productions by Scoggins, Nordlund and Weiss are not readily available to generate some semblance of discourse about Ballard’s film adaptations. Arguably, a slim stack of scholarship on Weiss’ adaptation is beginning to bubble. However, the majority of scholarship on the film adaptations remains focused on *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*, both of which were failures critically and commercially.

But why *did* they fail? To return to Marsh’s discussion, where does the blame fall in the three categories to which he referred? *Crash* suffers the greatest in the attempt by Cronenberg to adapt the book as a film. Seemingly the removal of Elizabeth Taylor, thereby removing the murder-suicide attempt Vaughan works toward the entirety of the text, would be the scissors at the novel’s puppet strings. So central is Vaughan’s obsession to the novel. Things fall apart. The center cannot hold, but with that crucial excision, what center *is* there to hold to initially? The removal geographically from the novel’s setting in the London suburbs across the Atlantic to Cronenberg’s Toronto is another major removal. Last, recall the subplots removed involving Karen and Renata, the extramarital lovers of Ballard and Catherine prior to Ballard’s automobile accident with Helen Remington. If the first goal is to tell the story, then here is where *Crash* fails. Too much of the original story has been removed. Thus, it should be of little surprise that the imagery is scant. Really, what imagery is there to show? What is seen in *Crash* other than the arguably limited configurations of Ballard, Catherine, Vaughan, Helen and Gabrielle crashing cars and copulating after the fact?

For the sake of argument, if one accepts both story and imagery are present, what of

Marsh's third category? Is *Crash* "great prose" and therefore incapable of being translated effectively from literature to cinema? Cronenberg *was* initially put off by the cold medical terminology Ballard employed when describing the sex scenes in the novel. Think back to the passage where Ballard described smearing his discharge on the parts of Vaughan's crashed vehicle in the scrap yard. Is *this* "rich, robustly literary stuff [. . .] difficult to envision translated faithfully to the silver screen"? Would one *want* to see James Spader smearing his semen all over a junked car? Such an activity is best left to the Farrelly Brothers.

What about the sex scene between Vaughan and Catherine in the car wash? In the text, it reads:

Water jetted on to the car, clouding the windows and shutting us into its interior, lit only by the lights from the instrument panel. Within this blue grotto Vaughan lay diagonally across the rear seat. Catherine knelt across him, skirt rolled around her waist, holding his penis in both hands, her mouth no more than an inch away from his. The distant headlamps, refracted through the soap solution jetting across the windows, covered their bodies with a luminescent glow, like two semi-metallic human beings of the distant future making love in a chromium bower [. . .]. As the rollers drummed against the roof and doors, Vaughan began to drive his pelvis upwards, almost lifting his buttocks off the seat. With clumsy hands Catherine settled her vulva over his penis. In the mounting roar of the rollers around us she and Vaughan rocked together, Vaughan holding her breasts with his palms as if trying to force them into a single globe. (pp. 161-62)

This *was* Ballard's favorite scene in Cronenberg's adaptation. Considering Marsh's condemnation of Meyer's *Twilight* series and Deborah Unger's blank expression predated Kristen Stewart's, one could be forgiven for greeting Marsh's theories with stifled laughter.

As for *Empire of the Sun*, it does have the story of the displaced child, unable to return to his homeland physically or his prior existence mentally ever again. It was this story that drew both Spielberg and Stoppard to the piece but drove Lean away from it because he failed to see

any dramatic shape, though the U-shaped narrative favored by Spielberg and Stoppard is easy enough to see in the finished product. What of the imagery? Spielberg recounted that he saw the movie in the scene in the novel where the Mustangs were attacking the airfield next to the camp.

Is *Empire of the Sun* an example of “great prose” either? The scene involving Jim’s resurrection of the Japanese pilot reads:

The chipped teeth closed around his finger, cutting the cuticle [. . .]. He wrenched his hand away, aware that the corpse of this Japanese was about to sit up and consume him. Without thinking, Jim punched the pilot’s face, then stood back and shouted at him through the swarm of flies.

The pilot’s mouth opened in a noiseless grimace. His eyes were fixed in an unfocused way on the hot sky, but a lid quivered as a fly drank from his pupil. One of the bayonet wounds in his back had penetrated the front of his abdomen, and fresh blood leaked from the crotch of his overalls. His narrow shoulders stirred against the crushed grass, trying to animate his useless arms. Jim gazed at the young pilot, doing his best to grasp the miracle that had taken place. By touching the Japanese he had brought him to life[.] (pp. 270-71)

It may seem beating a dead horse, but where is this “elegance and sophistication” of which Marsh speaks? No, Spielberg did not depict this on screen in so graphic a manner, lest the film be grouped in with the endless string of George Romero zombie films running at the time to which Gormlie alludes. However, in the years since, when the likes of *Saving Private Ryan* and Spielberg’s own *Schindler’s List* have graced movie screens, it is no great leap to imagine this scene in both imagery *and* the tenor Marsh considers so elusive to cinema being depicted were Spielberg or another filmmaker decide to remake the film for the twenty-first century.

Lest one think that the dismantling of Marsh’s critique of attempts to adapt Ballard’s novels for the cinema verges on the sadistic, it should be kept in mind he is, in a way, aligning with what Ballard said originally in 1982 when he expressed relief that *Crash* had yet to be adapted to film (Sinclair, 1999, p. 10). Ballard feared that any film would take precedence over

the original novel, thereby suggesting that the book should have been a film all along. Both privilege the text over the film. The problem with Marsh's approach rests with his belief that Ballard's prose has some sort of intellectual/artistic superiority over any filmed version of it. Upon closer inspection, it really does not.

The text is all surface, which also calls Weiss' praise for *The Atrocity Exhibition* into question, when compared with Ballard's other works of fiction. True, *The Atrocity Exhibition* does not have a central narrative, but it, in its way, resembles a shooting script as much as Ballard's other novels, which all appear to be variations on the same story. Sinclair (1999) decimates Ballard's fiction brilliantly, writing:

[A]ll the texts [. . .] are part of one project, the same names reappearing [. . .]. The cast usually includes: a burnt-out doctor, a rogue scientist (with fabulous sexual charisma), a displaced journalist, a nurse, a psychiatrist, an air hostess, and a man in a flight jacket (combat vet). There is also an underclass of airport prostitutes, home pornography making, art and drug dealers and poets who don't write. (p. 49)

All of the works also end with the main character heading for his (always his) personal form of oblivion.

Though Spielberg's version of *Empire of the Sun* verges on the Disneyesque, with Jamie reunited with his parents, the source text suggests a psychological fragmentation that "only part of his mind would leave Shanghai" (1984, p. 279). The present fragmentation suggests further worsening of Jim's psychological state. His psyche will never be reintegrated. In the novel version of *Crash*, Ballard states, "Already I knew that I was designing the elements of my own car-crash" (1973, p. 224). The film closes with James Spader/Ballard assuring the wounded Catherine, "Maybe the next one" would result in *le grand mort* as opposed to *le petit mort* (Cronenberg, 1996).

Though Wheatley's film has yet to be released, at the end of the novel version of *High-Rise*, with Royal and Wilder both murdered, Laing remains alive, but for how long? He occupies his apartment with his sister, Alice Frobisher, and Elanor Powell, a secondary character introduced late in the novel. Their apartment had been visited previously by Helen Wilder and her murderous band of female separatists. However, they left, believing Laing was a prisoner to Elanor and Alice. Thinking on it, Laing wondered if that was actually the case (1975, p. 197). How long would it be before Laing's blood mixed with Wilder's on the knife blades of the women in the tower block?

To Ballard's dismay, and the opinions of the cult of fans-as-critics aside, *Crash* and *Empire of the Sun*, due to visual media tainting Ballard's writing style and subject matter from the outset, *should* have been films all along. As with the charge Amis levies against Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, unjustified though it seems, there is not much on the page with which to begin. Yet, as films, both failed for different reasons.

Ballard believed Weiss' version of *The Atrocity Exhibition* worked due to not being hampered by the narrative. The narratives of the respective films represent the root of why both failed. For Cronenberg, the removal of too much of from the source material in his adaptation proved a fatal error, particularly as there was so little present in the source text initially. For Spielberg, the flaw comes not in the content of the message, but how the message was received. The type of film he wanted to make, and the type of film which *Empire of the Sun* was, was not the type of film the viewing public wanted after *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* being sandwiched between the first two Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones films, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Taylor & O'Brien, 1999, pp. 166-69). *The Color Purple*

arguably only skated past due to, on one hand, the rising popularity of two of its cast members, Whoopi Goldberg and Oprah Winfrey. On the other hand, the downplaying of the lesbian relationship present in Alice Walker's source text to make the film palatable to mainstream audiences also delayed Spielberg in receiving the castigation he received for *Empire of the Sun* (p. 169). With Cronenberg, the problem rested with the film's conception. With Spielberg, the problem rested with the film's reception. "Maybe the next one," Wheatley's adaptation of *High-Rise*, will turn the tide in a short list of failed and/or seldom seen adaptations.

No matter what the outside factors, Ballard helped neither Spielberg, Cronenberg, nor Weiss by saying their adaptations had nothing to do with his novels and/or referring to the films using the possessive form of each director's name. "Possessive" actually proves a damning adjective when applied to Ballard. To recall Luckhurst's question-- "Prophet or Pervert?"-- to how one should regard Ballard, a third option of "saboteur" needs adding to the list. Ballard engaged in sabotage, essentially, distracting audiences to varying degrees lest they discover just how little *was* there in terms of the source texts. They *should* have been films all along. Add a fourth option of "failed screenwriter," as well.

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