

Karen Beckman, **Crash: Cinema and The Politics of Speed and Stasis**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 336 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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Karen Beckman's *Crash* examines how car collisions are utilized in films and how they can transform the audience experience. The author explores the relationship between speed and mobility, and how it has been translated on the screen since the advent of cinema. Drawing on examples from pop art form, slapstick comedy, and industrial safety films, Beckman argues that each collision "produces an overwhelming level of dramatization and fantasy that makes an attempt to explore why the fantasies, anxieties, and traumas associated with the automobile and its collisions have been so closely aligned with cinema" (p. 8).



Chapter 1 builds on the expression "jerky nearness" to describe how collisions are experienced, while also examining the correlation between the image on screen and the viewers' feelings. Beckman uses Cecil M. Hepworth's one-minute short film, *How it Feels to Be Run Over*, to consider how proximity and movement heighten a physical experience for the audience. Within the film, a transforming image can lead to a subjective state in which images of collisions stimulate the audience to a greater sense of their own role. For example, an image of a car crash may suggest a sense of responsibility, victimization, fear, or other emotions associated with such a tragedy. These descriptions account for real feelings that are experienced when watching a collision.

The second chapter looks at the "Roaring Twenties," when the car became the central symbol of the vehicle. Early cinema introduced the public to the "technology of motion that created a fantasy of an utterly transparent American landscape and citizenry" (p. 58). Beckman dissects films in slapstick comedy of the silent era to illustrate when vehicles became sources of social and moral representation, and not just commodities. During the 1920s, the vehicle became a social motif. Beckman focuses on the influence of crashes in Harold Lloyd's films as visually significant entertainment aids. The movies of entertainers such as Lloyd transformed the vehicle from a symbolic visual device to an object of fascination by depicting it as a "comedic prop and a mischievous machine" (p. 68). Specifically, she hails the film, *Hot Water* (1942), as a perfect example of a slapstick comedy that introduces the "rules of the road," as she describes. She elaborates on the various ideologies that come about through the representation of "automobile destruction," and how the characters engage on the road (p. 77). While critically dissecting scenes of the film, the reader better understands how the car playfully addresses technology, while officially introducing the automobile into cinema.

When automakers began to fund and sponsor films and television commercials to publicize auto safety, the meaning of the automobile and that of a "crash" changed. Instead of looking at driving as just a pursuit of pleasure, the operation of a vehicle was now portrayed as a responsibility, which demanded

certain necessary precautions. Chapter 3 discusses how "Industrial-Safety films, Accidental-Motion Studies, and the Involuntary Crash Test Dummy" were introduced as a visual spectacle to provide dramatic reenactments of collisions and their impact to the human body.

Chapter 4 discusses historical events illuminated by the cinema. Specifically, Beckman draws on the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Andy Warhol's film *Since* (1996). By referencing the Zapruder film of the tragic event itself, Warhol gives a vivid portrayal of the assassination of JFK through contradictions raised by temporal sequences. This analysis allows the readers to revert to a time in history through an artistic interpretation. Beckman also reviews J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash*. In Chapter 5, the author elaborates on both sexuality and pop culture as leading topics, and further pinpoints how sexual encounters become bound to the novel's efforts to translate the materiality of film into words. As it was deemed, "The Best Complement to Warhol in Fiction," *Crash* succeeds in translating a cinematic collision to words, while thoroughly describing certain movements and themes. By providing a description of an alternate medium, Beckman uses Ballard's novel to exemplify consistent themes.

Chapter 6 examines "cinematic mobility." While early cinema drew on comedic, slapstick images, later films revealed more images of trauma and the repercussions of various calamities, from car collisions to assassinations, on the human body. Beckman elaborates on scenes from the Mexican film, *Amore Perros*, discussing frame by frame the relationship between the photographic image and the camera in motion. She argues that the combination of images and the camera in motion can be so powerful that it can allow for the experience to feel as though it were real. Beckman's decision to critique a foreign film reveals her knowledge on film across cultures, therefore increasing the credibility of her argument.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Beckman discusses the afterlife through Jean-Luc Godard's films, such as *Weekend*. Here, the aftermath refers to the experience of "living on" after a disaster (p. 205). Specifically, Beckman references Godard and his use of automobiles. For example, as she analyzes *Contempt*, she discusses how car collisions were more stylized than personal because they relied on stardom for its success. Rather than trying to make a meaningful scene, they were too concentrated on abiding by the "do's and don'ts" of the Hollywood studio business. *Weekend*, however, is a documentary style of filmmaking, which inevitably steers the automobile toward a "cynical direction" (p. 208). Beckman also compares *Weekend* to Nancy Davenport's *Weekend Campus* (2004), noting that although there are many references to *Weekend*, Davenport's work differs through its intricate and formal comparison of the cars in the traffic jam sequence. Davenport resists Godard's cynicism and uses her characters to portray emotion.

Beckman does a thorough job depicting the history of the car crash throughout the years of cinema. Her passion for mobility and stasis is engaging through her timeline of the evolution of the automobile. *Crash* will appeal to those in film and media studies, as well as to lovers of cinema. By combining literature, film, history, and art, she provides not only a good read, but also room to think.