

Vancouver Crash

A car hurtles down the road and CRASH: blood and metal meet; bone is crushed as the steering wheel thrusts into the driver's chest.

This horrible scene is the inspiration for *Crash*, or *Nullstadt* (literally translated "no city"), a dance, video and image event that represents a new extreme in the Vancouver trend towards the incorporation of film and video with dance.

The show was presented as a "work in progress" at Vancouver's Fire Hall Arts Center in March. On stage, three video cameras are choreographed with four dancers. At the front of the stage seven large monolithic props obstruct much of the audience's view. Built into the tops of the seven marble-painted props are TV monitors which radiate three channels of images of the dancers, two monitors per camera with the dominating center monitor shifting visual priority to one camera or another.

The dance uses intense, disturbing sexual overtones of flesh and machine melding for a moment in final union as a metaphor for the way humanity has crashed with technology. The conception of this presentation emerged from ideas, art forms, technology, and tradition between film instructor/media artist Henry Jesionka and Vancouver-based choreographer Monique Giard.

Jesionka is an intense media type. One could almost accuse him of technolust, of being a media junkie cooking up a technical event for his media fix. Like any junkie, he needs more toys, more spectacle, more ways to confound, capture,

engage and amaze a media-saturated, cynical 1980s audience. Like most of that audience, he loves American TV. But not so much *Dynasty* as crazies doing video art at 4 a.m. on a cable channel. He laments how, in Canada, the corporations and CRTC keep things under control. Currently a member of the film faculty at Simon Fraser University, Jesionka has taught at Ryerson Polytechnic, created multi-media events around North America, and recently staged his own death in the Toronto outlaw edition of *Cinema Canada* (#156).

Giard, assistant professor of dance at SFU, hates TV. She formed *La Compagnie de Danse Monique Giard* last year to create modern multi-media dance presentations "that demand of their audience as they demand of their dancers." She has had to compress and adapt her powerful expressive dance movements to fit the confines of the small video box.

"It's very difficult for me to choreograph for TV because I hate TV; I don't watch it," says Giard who finds the challenge of choreographing for the box similar to the classic conflict between acting for the stage and acting before the camera. She has to come up with a way of expressing her dance work in a way which works as images fed to the audience.

"I'm interested in creating images that you can't get with live performance," she says. "I'm totally interested in electronic dance."

Jesionka says he collaborated with Giard because "Monique is the only choreographer who is interested in what is happening outside dance and referring to things outside itself." He contends that "Dance in 1989 is in serious trouble as a relevant medium."

That attitude, and the way Giard's dancers are reduced to "a metaphor for a living body...the body becoming a product" translated by

Jesionka's "density of simultaneous information"... have offended the senses of Vancouver's dance community.

One of those offended is Hilda Manning, director of Networks, a new Vancouver dance company also dedicated to encouraging an interdisciplinary approach.

Manning, involved in an early phase of *Crash*, put on a dance in December using an old movie theatre in Vancouver's skid row area. *Still* used film projected behind, and choreographed with independent dancers. While *Crash* literally placed a wall of electronics between the dancers and audience, *Still* was meant to blur and dissolve the boundaries between the media. Manning wanted the audience to participate in stripping off layers; Jesionka built up those same layers.

"It seems like they were in completely opposite directions," says Manning of *Crash*'s dance and video combination. "I got numbed by watching hours of TV."

In contrast to *Still*'s soft, passive participation by the audience, *Crash* is a visual onslaught of Jesionka's "simultaneous perspective."

"Different editing strategies are being employed to create a hierarchy of information," says Jesionka, whose "electronic/choreographed spaces are merged as one into a single information field, or made separate to work independently and in conflict with the dance. The media information is in conflict with choreographed information."

While Giard and Jesionka (dance and TV) crash and contradict each other on stage, the dancers do one thing and the camera sees another thing. Depending on where you sit in the audience, you have a different piece of the stage you can see, a different monitor you'll be watching more of, providing a sort of interactive pallet of information with which you construct your own image.

Your senses are confused as you watch the composed images of the dancers playing to the cameras, while craning your neck to see what's happening on stage.

On camera, the dancers appear to be violently making love. On stage, it's just a dance. The juxtaposition between the media image and the stage reality is even more apparent in the last of the four movements, when, on camera, the dancers appear to be performing surgery on each other with blunt objects. On stage, the reality is even more distorted as the 50 percent-transparent mylar plastic, in front of the dancers, distorts and reflects a strange, ghostly double image.

Throughout the show, to the left of the audience, are a vivacious woman striking stereotypically sexy poses and a man in a bathing suit flexing his muscles.

While the stage is lit to cut all color, the cliché media images of the couple are lit in full color. The effect is that the live image appears far less real than the video image.

While all this is going on, composer Bruno Degazio's soundtrack sweeps its stereo effects across the scene building tension, accompanying movement, and adding an appropriately modern soundscape to this sea of clashing and combining visual images.

The end result is a strange sort of distortion as the mind tries to compensate, the eyes try to see, and the head tries to make out what is real and what is illusion.

It all depends on where you sit, what you see, and what media you trust, or distrust, the most. The disquieting meaning of "The Medium is the message," the old McLuhan phrase, comes through like a meat cleaver in *Crash*, as the differences between what we think we see and what is really happening can be worlds apart.

Ian Hunter •

Crash - dancers dealing with the confined space and the intervention of video

