

the village

VOICE

FREE

Crash Course

J.G. Ballard Gets a
New Interpreter

BY DENNIS LIM

At a time when so many supposedly independent films are compromised by their directors' bald-faced big-time ambitions, you have to admire the nerve of a first-time filmmaker who chooses to adapt a much-fetishized cult novel that resembles a hallucinatory scientific manual more than it does a work of fiction. When Jonathan Weiss came upon J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, he experienced, he says, a flash of "instant recognition. Everything about it was perfect—the structure, the content, the epigrammatic quality."

Thematically, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (first published in 1970) is quintessential Ballard—phantasmagoric pageants of sex and death set against a media-benumbed landscape—but its form is radical. There are 15 interlocking chapters, with titles like "Why I Want To Fuck Ronald Reagan," each one

further splintered into dense, markedly discrete paragraphs.

Though it screened last month at the Rotterdam Film Festival, Weiss's adaptation has not yet been printed

(the producers Robert Jason and Alex Lasky are seeking finishing funds). An obsessive five years in the making, the film—which, in the loosest possible terms, is about a research scientist losing his mind—is no Hollywood calling card. "The film is predicated on the viewer's creativity," Weiss tells me in his Brooklyn loft (which he transformed to shoot parts of the film).

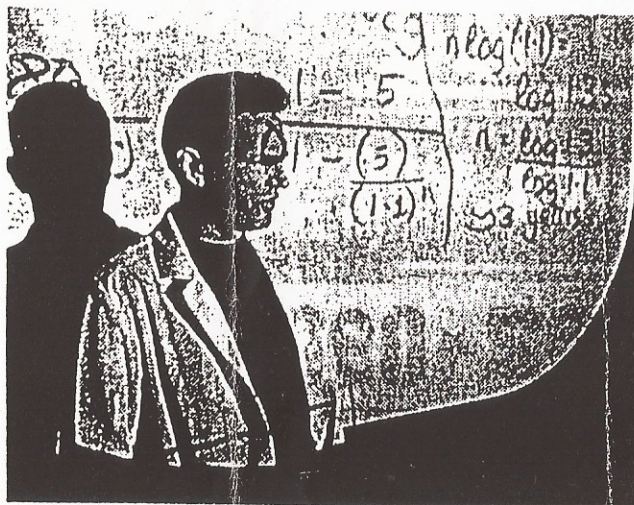
"You're always in possession of enough material to create your own narrative."

The film derives its strange, allusive power from a mesmerizing ambient score (masterminded by Weiss's next-door neighbor J. G. Thirwell, a/k/a Foetus), disquietingly evocative locations (military installations, radar bases), and strategically inserted archival footage (Vietnam bombings, crash tests). "Some of the footage has never been seen before," says Weiss, who cites Tarkovsky's fractured epic *Mirror* as inspiration. "Some

of it is iconic, but whenever you've seen it, there's always been a frame around it. When it's just floating, the context is radically altered."

Ballard recycled bits of *The Atrocity Exhibition* in *Crash*, but stylistically the two books are miles apart. So are the movie adaptations—working with a far more open-ended blueprint than Cronenberg did, Weiss has drastically condensed and reconstructed the text, and yet somehow captured on film the essence of Ballard's writing, at once clinically precise and dreamily free-associative. The author himself approves: "I almost felt that I was reading the book as I watched the film, so close were the two," he wrote in a letter to Weiss.

"It's incredible how overdetermined and oversignified film is today," says Weiss. "There's no way you can get lost—it's like being on one of those Disneyland rides where you're strapped in. If you lay it all out, there's all this space between the most interesting sort of conventional cinema and the avant-garde. For me, this film was just about filling the gap."



Brain tease: Victor Slezak in *The Atrocity Exhibition*

JONATHAN WEISS