

Martin Holman

## I have this terrible feeling. Heavy and black

*What's David Austen doing making films? Martin Holman enters this world*

At the outset of production of his second film, David Austen knew one thing: 'I thought this film should be baffling in as clear a way as possible.'<sup>1</sup> For all the apparent contrariety of this remark, his meaning is immediately grasped. Like his paintings *Crackers* is stylised and crafted, the viewer's attention being drawn to signs and references that may or may not pull significance out of word and image: shown the hat, we wait for the rabbit. Bringing words to the foreground as this work inevitably does, the painter's resort to film-making is akin to a poet catching up with his own beginning. As with most other instances during Austen's career, language recoils from the outsider's attempt to yield a direction through the private mental landscape.

What Austen also knew from the start was that the actors would perform in a beautiful room. He had the first line of dialogue, too; the number of characters – two; an image of what they wore and the tattoos on their hands; and the knowledge that a murder had already been committed. It was, he admitted, the kind of film he would want to see, 'like something found under Stanley Kubrick's bed'.

And it would be in black and white. Given its story, the search for reasons behind this decision is short-lived. Placing his twin protagonists in a bleak, anxious monochrome world might recall the tense surroundings in *The Killing*, Kubrick's 1956 thriller that brought him to the attention of Hollywood. Another analogy fuelled by the visual and aural atmospheres of *Crackers* is with the verbally constructed milieu of predators, conmen and desperadoes nurtured by the inter-war London street-culture fiction of Patrick Hamilton, a writer Austen likes. What is more, black brush marks have distinguished Austen's harsher works on paper from the screen of colour in his paintings and delicate watercolours. These images have signalled an extreme, impulsive brutality, hopeless tenderness and urgent, physical passion that resemble a storyboard or primer, a fixation with functions in perpetual dependence. So, was that it?

What *Crackers* does is intersect with Austen's thought patterns in other media rather than simply parallel them. Not surprisingly, Austen had cinema on his mind; less expectedly for the viewer, he began to think of *Crackers* during the thirty drafts and two

years of its preparation as aspiring to be the short-running sequel to *Some Like It Hot*; it also owed much to Laurel and Hardy. That may be a further baffle engineered by its author, but it is clear. And it is as credible as any other that is there to explore. Billy Wilder's inspired version of Michael Logan's comedy unfolds, of course, around the fugitive witnesses of the St Valentine's Day massacre of 1929. Black and white evoked the era as well as the gangster movies to which Wilder plays subtle but open homage (an irony since, had the make-up on the two male leads not ghosted green in camera, *Some Like It Hot* would have been completed as originally planned in full colour).

Joe and Jerry, Wilder's struggling musicians, are under sentence of execution by Spats Columbo's mobsters when they fall in with the all-girl band. Both men woo ukulele-player Sugar and finally escape the gang's clutches to millionaire Osgood's yacht. Austen's Tin and Heart could be Joe and Jerry – or their alter-egos, ghosts or reincarnations – but with futures more troubled than Wilder ever admitted: no boy-gets-girl, boy-gets-man at the end after all, but a sinister turn for the worse. 'I spoke to Bear,' announces Heart soon after they arrive with English accents in the Regency interior where the drama takes place. 'Are his lads still looking for me?', asks Tin in reply. Still on the run, the two have adopted a new disguise.

Which clearly they enjoy. Despite the perilous position of being unable to leave the ever-so-white [its not really white its quite grubby with raw plaster walls but it is filled with stark shafts of white daylight through the wooden blinds over the windows](#) room until after dark, Tin and Heart display a delicious vanity. In a setting designed for showing off, they pat their hair and brush their sleeves, noisily. If instead of a painting there had been a mirror on one of the patched and faded walls they would have looked into it. As Austen writes about them in the screenplay, 'the artificiality of their appearance is just the wrong side of weird'. Their clothes and their speech each play a role: what got Joe and Jerry into cloche hats, silk stockings and nightgowns has landed these fellows in bowlers and heavy coats, silk scarves and leather shoes, celluloid shirt collars and short-cut jackets.

In danger they may be, but they like their hands. Wrists hang from white starched double-cuffs; nails are painted black; fingers fold and unfold objects – a clipping from a newspaper or a heavy woollen coat; hands hold, stroke, console and disappear into pockets; arms make lovely shapes. Walter Sickert painted concert parties on the beach at Brighton in 1916, performers cut in silhouette against a sky bruised by the sun setting and deepening shadows. In frock coats and boaters, gloved hands

and baggy trousers caught in mid high-stepping dance, they front the wartime punters sunk into prom deckchairs with a determination to entertain. Austen also found that 'thing' that Tin and Heart could be, touring rep performers in gorgeous attire soiled by the dust and powder that circulates around stage-life; wearily hanging in the air, it settles on costumes like dramaturgical pollen.

It is dirt that fertilises further anomalies. Power points punctuate the skirting boards behind the two men; cable coils out of holes in the wall where it was tied back in loops by unknown hands; Tin remembers neon signs. Suspended between two complementarily-coloured black and white modern chairs precisely placed on worn white fitted carpet is a mobile object, its seven [eight globes all same size](#) globes in two sizes, alternately black and white, hanging almost to the floor from two [a chain and steel bar](#) chains. Not a single word is said about it. Beneath it and just a bit behind sits another anachronism, a GPO standard telephone in black. The type 746 design (introduced in 1967, its robust and reliable design made it a universal favourite in homes and offices around Britain) is tethered by a flex that meanders laconically to the wainscoting; it never rings. When Tin lifts the telephone receiver, no one answers him.

Perhaps no one could once Austen shattered the essential theatrical unity of time; that is, of course, assuming that Tin and Heart are in a place where time has meaning. The seaside dandies belong to one era and the Georgian [Regency](#) room to quite another. Time in the room is a third, or it is a place where there is no time at all, or colour. Time's immaterial presence is a convention of sound, a medium so strong in this film that its absence, when it occurs, is truly shocking.

As well as temporal, sound is spatial and important enough in film to affect the individual experience of the viewer. Outpacing the standard achieved in much audio-visual work by artists, the exceptional sound quality of *Crackers* fuels the film's ambiguities with sensuous clarity that never threatens to introduce a third voice in the way music may have done. Because hearing voices allows us to analyse the speaker's psyche (the example of Stan Douglas stalks an art-insider's appreciation of this film), sound resuscitates memories that are personal, shared or unrealised. Cocooned from everyday noises, Tin and Heart's story plays out in a technologically enhanced atmosphere that constitutes corporeal and psychological effects. A sound hard to place permeates the background, a tone that rumbles like distant city traffic and has the droning soundtrack of a building's service plant, the muffled roar of a furnace. 'I feel cold', complains Heart, 'It's bloody freezing in here.'

Which begs another question: who got Sugar? ‘She hates me... complete contempt. Loathing,’ Tin blurts about an unidentified ‘she’. ‘She would cross the road if she saw me coming... I waited too long and now it’s too late.’ It didn’t work out, then? The memory of Osgood’s maxim as Wilder’s tale closed comes to mind: ‘Well, nobody’s perfect’. So does a chilling twist: was Sugar’s the murder that has already been committed?

Baffling, and neither a clue nor a red herring. Since Austen said a few years ago that ‘There is a symbiotic relationship between colour, image and text in my paintings,’ he can justifiably add film as a medium. Voicing his pre-occupation with birth, death, love and human vulnerability in film, Austen extends the thread that links his media. Just as *Crackers* began life with a line of dialogue, so have his paintings for over twenty years emerged from language. The primacy of wording sentences, conventional signs open to misreading and oaths as the expression of vehement feelings, drives the impulse towards the material language of colour and form. From these essentials Austen’s imagery has progressed with words tending towards their own most suitable format. There is a sense in which Tin and Heart audibly populate the previously mute world that Austen has mapped with the signs, figures, vegetation [bit of an odd word could it be trees flowers or landscape?](#), walls, screens and objects that have been given shape in paintings both representational and ostensibly abstract, in works on paper and photographs, and with books and objects.

Edge, surface, drawing and mark have established the constraints of these images. The film’s structure displays the same eye and mind: Austen quickly noticed that the [classical](#) proportions of the room provided a natural [formal](#) frame. The widest [wide](#) shots sustain single takes from the same angle of several minutes’ duration that intensify the dialogue and the bold silhouettes of the players. The technique appears rooted in theatre; indeed, Austen had first envisaged *Crackers* as a play for the stage. Because the stage – and its equivalents of the cinema, television, studio – can stand for the mind, any portal on to these domains is like a door into a head for this artist. His career represents an exquisite vindication of the fertility in studio-based practice.

The theatrical experience electrifies Austen’s imagination: he mentions, as an example, the actor’s detachment from the world of the audience, imagining the open screen of the proscenium as the fourth wall of the set. That make-believe also applies to cinema and television, like the half-hour dramas in the *Play for Today* slot on the BBC up to the early 1970s, the ones [as a](#) serious-minded [teenager](#) Austen watched. At that age, we did

not know the writers – Alan Plater, David Mercer, Alan Sillitoe are just the best known – but their tone and concentration were memorable: working-class drama; bourgeois break-up; drama and humour; alarming wallpaper; humour in drama. Originally filmed lived and watched by millions, these plays may have latterly been transmitted in colour (for those families, like Austen's, already with colour sets) but their feel was monochrome. The funny side is there in *Crackers*, the way it is installed in Austen's output: quite naturally, that is and in recognition that humour and tragedy co-exist in life, at almost the same moment. Just consider the title: its see-sawing meanings prance about like images in a flickbook.

And you can hate the one you love. Austen makes work about what frightens him. 'Aggression is my subject matter, I don't know why,' [Did I say that? I think I would mean fear or violence or bad luck](#) he explains before providing a cogent reason. Relishing the language brandished by its best writers, he reads a lot of crime fiction, a genre where multiple identities are common among the authors alone: [Newton Thornburg's 'Cutter and Bone' and David Goodis 'Black Friday' influences.](#)

[McBain/Cannon/Marsten/Hunter/Abbott, for example, and ...](#) Thriller writing can supply the best lines that Austen wished he had thought of in text paintings; more significantly, stories typically place the reader into a small world where the fragmented existence of a handful of characters, removed from reality, is scrutinised, managed and often brutally curtailed.

The Regency Town House in Hove propelled the project irretrievably into film: offered the property, Austen hatched the prospect of a movie made in a room built for entertainment. No storyboard was created because Austen's text remained central. Paintings progress from text, so why not a film? was a position with which cast and crew creatively concurred. During its writing he read the screenplay over and over to himself, measuring its pace and sounding its cadences. Words are repeated over and over, repeating themes that have been found in his work from the start. Austen claims that clues about stagecraft came to him from years of reading plays – [Tennessee Williams](#), Samuel Beckett, Henry [do you mean Arthur](#) Miller, David Mamet (think of *Edmond*) – although in practice it was no easier than shaping any artwork.

Gestures, amplified in their latency by being pared down, are one beneficiary of the High Definition video, used in this film in preference to the more expensive and cumbersome 35mm stock. Heightened in contrasts of colour and lighting, they emerge with deeper resonance than maybe even Austen intended. Sometimes images are simply beautiful and others contain a

seed from the photographs Austen alludes to by artists such as Many Ray, Robert Frank and Manuel Alvarez Bravo; and some details of movement and surface [motes of dust picked up in the light](#) are fortunate products of the material and process. Austen accepts them all, co-authoring with the crew those that curiously corradiate with details of the roughened, tarnished elegance in the room.

This second film was in production when his first, *Smoking Moon*, was premièred in London; which was his actually debut in the medium?[what do you mean?](#) can remain a debate for buffs and theorists.<sup>2</sup> Its duration [13 minutes](#) was determined by the burning cigarette that Austen's moon-dressed white face smokes against a black background. Avoiding pastiche and parody (including of the artist's own stuff), and inspired by an [ancient sounding](#) recording from the 1920s of Osip Mandel'shtam reading his subtly ironic poetry, this Dada conception none the less retraces the imagery that has intrigued Austen for two decades. Stars and planets unlock enough associations to lead in any number of directions that the viewer can supply. Forms recur in different media like transcriptions of thoughts looped in the artist's head; as one door closes another opens and in the structure of *Crackers*, Heart and Tin could walk through them for an eternity. His next film is already in mind, with singing, perhaps five adjacent stories [the stories will be in black and white and only fall into outrageous colour for the ending in a luscious botanical garden](#) taking shape in a luscious botanical garden and be outrageously colourful, [the first parts will be very bleak full of loneliness and sadness subdued violence](#) and aggressive. 'It'll be like the end of the world,' Austen reflected. 'I was thinking of calling it "Earls Court".'

The elements of Austen's communication can be teased out like the wiring on an old-fashioned circuit board. One route may be discovered late in the day although in some shape it has been present from the beginning or else the equipment would not work. Taking the mass-media devices of film projectors, audio amplifiers and speakers and using them for purposes other than a mass market complies with the scale and ambition of Austen's strictly fine-art activity since the mid-1980s. His method embraces disproportionality, like waking to discover a dream fantasy picked out on a motorway hoarding set up in the bedroom.

Large-sized canvases, installations embracing a museum's collection or a gallery wall of framed ink drawings have always implied the artist's willingness to narrowcast very large ideas to the individual viewer. The audacity of Austen's art, its evasion of categories and carnal need to seep into several media simultaneously, is in its essential simplicity. Patti Smith famously

described her music, with its passion and rage spat out in lyrics, as ‘three chords and the power of the word’. Her phrase characterises Austen, too: the poet of form, colour, surface and language.

<sup>1</sup> *Crackers* was first screened as part of Austen’s one-person exhibition at Milton Keynes Gallery, 10 February – 25 March 2007. London première by artprojx at Prince Charles Cinema, 16 May 2007. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes by the artist in this article come from a conversation with the author, London, May 2007.

<sup>2</sup> *Smoking Moon* was first screened at Camden Arts Centre, London, x November 2006 – x January 2007.

### **CRACKERS**

Written and produced by David Austen, 2007, 38mins.

Cast: Toby Kebbell (Heart), David Leon (Tin). Sound: xx

Camera/ Direction: Ben Pritchard ...

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