

Crash (2005)

Major Credits:

Director: Paul Haggis

Screenplay: Paul Haggis and Bobby Moresco

Cinematography: James Muro

Music: Mark Isham

Cast: Don Cheadle (Det. Graham Waters), Matt Dillon (Sgt. Jack Ryan), Jennifer Esposito (Ria), Thandie Newton (Christine Thayer), Terrence Howard (Cameron Thayer), Sandra Bullock (Jean Cabot), Brendan Fraser (Dist. Atty. Rick Cabot), Ludacris [Chris Bridges] (Anthony), Larenz Tate (Peter), Michael Pena (Daniel), Ryan Phillippe (Officer Tommy Hanson), Shaun Toub (Farhad), Karina Arroyave (Elizabeth), Tony Danza (Fred)

Background:

Crash marks the directorial debut of Peter Haggis, who had just won the Academy Award for screenwriting (*Million Dollar Baby*). The film, co-produced by Don Cheadle, was made for less than \$7 million, approximately one tenth of the average budget for a major studio production. Reviews were generally positive, but several critics (most notably A.O. Scott in *The New York Times*) chastised the screenplay for being contrived and obvious, “full of heart,” in Scott’s words, “and devoid of life.”

Like Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Crash* is a cinematic essay on racism, influenced by the intervening decade’s events following the O.J. trial. The racial epithets that circulate in nearly every scene can be viewed as a naturalistic elaboration of the celebrated five bigoted tirades that interrupt the narrative in Lee’s film. *Crash* also follows a recent spate of movies (*Monster’s Ball*, *House of Sand and Fog*, *21 Grams*) in which various ethnic Americans are connected by serendipitous events to dramatize the so-called “cultural wars” that have divided the nation. The film also can be linked to a number of complex narratives centered around Los Angeles in which diverse characters are coincidentally linked (*Magnolia*, *Grand Canyon*, *Short Cuts*, *Mulholland Drive*). The influence of, first, Robert Altman and then Quentin Tarantino seems apparent in Haggis’ and Mroesco’s screenplay. Perhaps the closest of these multiple-plot, culturally diverse films, however—although not recognized by reviewers or acknowledged by the screenwriters—is Alejandro Gonzalez Inárritu’s *Amores Perros* (2000), which begins with a car accident and works forwards and backwards with three separate story lines involving different social strata in contemporary Mexico City.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Editing: Of course, *Crash* relies on cross-cutting to bring together the multiple story lines, but note how the frequent use of matched cuts (e.g., door-to-door) underscores the connectedness among the characters.
2. Lighting: Haggis frequently points the camera directly into bright light, distorting or obscuring our vision and thereby underscoring one of the film’s central themes, the difficulty of seeing one another directly and clearly. Note, too, the lighting effects of the opening credit sequence, as the abstract pattern of illumination gradual resolves into a comprehensible image of nighttime traffic.

3. Music: Mark Isham's electronic score and the haunting song in an unidentifiable foreign language (Welsh, according to the DVD commentary) provides a unifying element in a film that relentlessly explores social divisions and enhances the emotional impact of the narrative.
4. Set Pieces: In a film marked by cross-cutting and complex story-telling, several scenes—the locksmith's fairy tale, the rescue from a burning car, the shopkeeper's confrontation with the locksmith—are allowed to play out for an extended time in order to fulfill different dramatic objectives. Note the different editing and lighting styles on each of these occasions.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Compare this film to Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. Which film is more entertaining? Which seems more intelligent?
2. Granting its visual pleasures and narrative drive, does *Crash* ultimately offer any new ideas on the vexed question of race in America? Can any work of art—movie, literature, painting—actually affect an audience's attitude towards a complex topic like race and class in contemporary America?
3. Despite its obvious concern with Big Ideas (race, cultural diversity, class), *Crash* makes no effort to avoid sentimentality: the bedtime scene with the locksmith and his daughter, the parallel scene with the cop and his father, the dialogue between the detective and his mother. Do these moments interfere with the rational consideration of the film's political themes, or do they add something significant to our understanding of the larger social problems?