

The essential things go unexplained

By Joanne Laurier
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Crash, directed by Paul Haggis, screenplay by Haggis and Robert Moresco

Veteran television and film scriptwriter Paul Haggis, who gained a reputation on the basis of his screenplay for Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*, makes his directorial debut with *Crash*. In the film, Los Angeles is portrayed as a city of an ethnically diverse population so alienated that meaningful human contact only takes place when individuals literally crash into one another.

In the film's opening scene, the play of blurry lights—like randomly shifting automobile high-beams—creates the sensation of regaining consciousness after a trauma. "We're always behind metal and glass [a car]," muses police detective Graham (Don Cheadle). "It's the sense of touch. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other just so we can feel something." Graham is not being poetic. He is actually referring to colliding vehicles in the mega-freeway metropolis.

The film is structured as a series of vignettes set during an unusually cold Southern California Christmas, spanning a 24-hour period. The dual elements of accident (literally and figuratively) and coincidence connect the various stories, which are intended to prove that people form harmful prejudices from a combination of impressions and individual psychoses.

This theme plays out in the different segments: African-American Graham is sleeping with his Latina partner, Ria (Jennifer Esposito), but is chronically confused about which country she's from. An Iranian-born shopkeeper becomes so paranoid and mistrustful as a result of the post-9/11 conditions facing people of Middle Eastern descent that he becomes abusive to everyone around him.

A white cop, Ryan (Matt Dillon), exhibits racist tendencies caused apparently by negative encounters with affirmative action beneficiaries—the most recent episode involves his ailing father victimized by a black HMO bureaucrat.

A black television director (Terrence Dashon Howard) is driven by a series of racially motivated indignities into a near-suicidal rage when he is confronted for a second time by white policemen. And the example of white rookie cop (Ryan Phillippe), who is initially disgusted by the pervasive racism in the Los Angeles Police Department, proves, by the film's end, that deep inside everyone, according to the film's logic, lie the seeds of homicidal xenophobia.

The stream of human folly and sin continues: two young and articulate African-American men, while bemoaning white stereotyping of blacks, go on to commit a crime, the carjacking of the city's district attorney (Brendan Fraser) and his angry, prejudiced wife (Sandra Bullock). The latter, in turn, verbally punishes a mild-mannered Mexican locksmith (Michael Pena); for his part, the locksmith spends his off-hours having to assure his terrified young daughter that she won't be killed in a drive-by shooting. This is all topped off by the final twist of a Korean hit-and-run victim who turns

out to be a smuggler of illegal Thai and Cambodian workers for local sweatshops.

Around the point when witnessing any further instances of man's inhumanity to man might be unbearable, the film shifts gears and presumes to offer advice on how to break this supposedly closed circle of racism and alienation.

The film's production notes offer something of a clue to Haggis's vision of social life in Los Angeles. Describing the filmmaker's experience of being carjacked at gunpoint several years ago, the notes cite Haggis's comment that the film is about "fear of strangers." Pointing the finger at everyone—rich and poor—for society's ills, Haggis states: "I hate the fact that as Americans, we just love to define people. We love to say, 'Good person. Bad person.' In this film, at least, I didn't want us to be judging others. I wanted us to judge ourselves."

As if the film's message needed to be further driven home, actress Sandra Bullock asserts: "If you leave this film and don't see a piece of yourself, you're a liar, an absolute liar. It may not be your time to see it yet if you don't see a piece of yourself and just acknowledge it."

Such a notion of "collective guilt" is a poor starting point for a film or any other artistic work. With such a misguided view of social dynamics, it is hardly astonishing that *Crash* fails to capture the genuine atmosphere of a complex city like Los Angeles. The film never even bothers to ask: what is the source of the city's tensions?

If the filmmaker had thought deeply about that problem, he might have turned, first of all, to certain demographic and economic facts of life. The Los Angeles metropolitan area has a population of 16 million. It is home to more poor people than any other urban area in the US; some 2.1 million residents, including one of every three children, live in poverty. The city is home as well to extraordinary and extravagant displays of wealth, particularly associated with the entertainment industry. A study conducted several years ago at the University of Southern California argued that income inequality is "the most disheartening part of the Los Angeles story today." Added to this volatile social polarization is one of the world's most diverse, both legal and undocumented, immigrant populations.

If the film's creators had taken the time and effort to confront these elementary social questions, their work might have taken a different turn. As it is, given the current state of intellectual confusion and laziness that dominates the Hollywood milieu, it is hardly astonishing that the filmmakers instinctively gravitate towards the figure of the cop, who is assigned the task of keeping the lid on this social powder keg.

Los Angeles as a city is a fascinating subject for art. Any serious treatment of its complexity would be welcome. Haggis's film, unfortunately, is largely a potpourri of superficial impressions. Although occasional moments ring true, most of the film is unserious.

Largely deluding themselves that their work is a self-critical look at urban life with universal applicability, the creators of *Crash* are actually more in the business of lecturing and moralizing to, or even more to the point *about*, the “lower” classes.

In Haggis’s universe, one scratches the surface and everyone’s a racist—two people bump into each other and it becomes a violent confrontation. There would be a daily bloodbath in Los Angeles and every other major American urban center if this were the actual state of affairs!

The most damaging (and unstated) prejudice working within the film is not the ethnic stereotyping practiced by its characters, but a social prejudice indulged in by the writer-director. Haggis’s negative and *deeply stereotyped* view of the urban poor is perhaps best exemplified by his depiction of policeman Graham’s family. The cop’s mother is lazy and drug-addicted; if she’s not a “welfare cheat,” the idea is clearly implied. For some unaccountable reason, she blames the responsible, hardworking police detective for the failure of his younger brother, a carjacker. In fact, Graham’s mother is resentful and views her son’s progress up the social ladder as a kind of a betrayal.

One feels that she is abusing the underappreciated policeman for breaking with some imaginary inner-city “cycle of dependency.” It’s rather distasteful, nearly as distasteful as the cartoonish portrayal of the heroine’s “poor white trash” relatives in Haggis’s script for *Million Dollar Baby*. In both films, Haggis demonstrates a deep-going disdain for a large swathe of the American population. Further, the characterization of the paranoid Iranian is so devoid of background and context (presumably his abuse as an “Arab” in the wake of the September 11 attacks) that it comes perilously close to reinforcing the reactionary vision of a Muslim fundamentalist or even “terrorist.” (After all, he is the only character in the film who attempts to carry out cold-blooded, premeditated murder.)

Haggis tries in a ham-fisted fashion to compensate for these failings by injecting the Hispanic locksmith—a beatific and pseudo-Christ-like figure, habitually turning the other cheek—into the picture. On neither end of the good/evil character spectrum does the filmmaker attempt to examine behavior with any real complexity. Haggis apparently holds the view that those from the “lower depths” who are not hard-working cops or saintly, quiescent laborers must be drug addicts and carjackers. (There is also some of this shallow dichotomy in *Million Dollar Baby*.)

Why do most of Haggis’s characters act as loathsomely as they do? The director claims that people have a “fear of strangers.” Which people? If he has this fear, he should tell us more. Ordinary people in Los Angeles don’t creep about, in terror of one another. Crime and social tension are real issues, but when Haggis speaks about this amorphous “fear,” again, he is speaking of a class sentiment. He should be a bit more forthright. One suspects that he is not made afraid by people in his neighborhood, or by those at his local Starbucks. He has in mind, although he won’t spell it out, upper-middle-class fear of “the great unwashed,” especially those of darker complexions. This problem can’t be tackled by moralizing, but by getting to the root of the social problems in American society, above all, the vast inequality of wealth, which infects every social relationship and situation.

Even if one were to accept Haggis’s premise about this generalized fear of others, *Crash* treats both the problem and its solution in a largely arbitrary manner. If Sandra Bullock’s character, Jean, had not fallen down the stairs and been refused assistance by everyone except

her Hispanic maid, she presumably would have remained a pathological racist. If the ultra-racist cop Ryan had not been on the scene of an accident and heroically risked his life to save the same black woman whom he had previously sexually molested, he never would have woken up to the damage caused by his bigotry. And so on. It all remains on the level of the accidental, because there is no grasp of social necessity driving any of the action.

The notion that the solution to problems of prejudice and racism is “reaching out” to one’s neighbor, whether he or she is above or below one’s social status and ignoring his or her ethnicity, is the fare of every program during official “brotherhood and sisterhood” celebrations, and just as banal and futile. *Crash* proves that promoting this type of individual gesture in the face of great social tribulations is not convincing dramatically or artistically.

Moreover, this is the argument of the essentially complacent and socially satisfied. No spirit of protest animates *Crash*. Nor is there any suggestion that one needs to think, to analyze, to *struggle* in order to make sense of the world and its difficulties.

Not everything in *Crash* is crudely schematic, which makes its essential thrust all the more deplorable. After his carjacking by two black men, the district attorney cynically complains that once the incident becomes public it will either cost him the black vote or the law-and-order vote. In another sequence, city officials coerce Graham into corroborating a lie about the shooting of a black cop that will be used to manipulate the voting public. If Haggis is able to see that race is used in this manner for political advantage, then he must understand that it is not the central issue in American society, that something else lies behind it. But this is never pursued. Presumably he feels that educated and elite thinkers use racism to their advantage—in effect, standing above it—while the population at large is utterly and inextricably dominated by it.

Few of the film’s moments of insight go very deep and one is generally left cold by its attempts at humanism. The overall feeling is that the project is adamant about absolving the social system of blame. One is not insisting that Haggis must adhere to any particular political or ideological view of life in the US, but an artistically and intellectually honest and serious approach would inevitably propel him toward the great social divisions dominating American society.

The role of art is not simply to reproduce the surface of phenomena. In any case, even to accurately reflect the surface requires an understanding of the depths! Idealizing or prettifying the oppressed is no better than making them into grotesques. The artist will never get anywhere unless he or she begins to treat behavior as a social and historical product. Otherwise one is left with the old drivel about “original sin.”

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