Crash: Moving At the Speed of Life
Directed by Paul Haggis
Lionsgate Studio 2005, 122 minutes, rated R, $14.98

‘Man, man, I’m just scared of living. It’s killing me.’ (Mickey Spillane, in Spiegelman and Schneider, 1973, p. 103)

‘Life is a rock. And a hard place.’ (Juli Duncan in Spiegelman and Schneider, 1973, p. 103)

Crash (2005) is a film about lives that brush up against each other almost inadvertently in some instances and collide like dueling asteroids in others. Police officers and criminals, the well-to-do, and those on the edge of existence come together in a dance of life and death in a series of coincidences that in some ways appear inevitable. Fear and struggle are central to the characters’ interactions as they try to find meaning between life’s rock and hard place. They are connected, in obvious or hidden ways. As Bo Lozoff once wrote, ‘In truth, we … are all connected; most of us just can’t see the glue’ (Lozoff, 1987, p. 18).

Crash (2005) differs from most contemporary films that touch upon issues of crime and justice. There are no clear-cut heroes and villains or hi-tech forensic scientists. Too often, public opinion and perceptions are substantially influenced by how criminals and criminal justice professionals are portrayed in movies (Dowler, 2003). Director Paul Haggis’s film was portrayed by much of the media as a movie that was racially charged, addressing difficult prejudice issues that are often taboo in the everyday world. While Crash does engage racial and ethnic prejudice, its more profound underlying theme is that we are all connected in obvious and hidden ways. What we do to others, we also do to ourselves. Haggis’s film reminds us that we are all forced to deal with anger, ignorance, and especially fear. Unlike many other crime and justice films, Crash holds out the possibility that transformative change can occur in hero and villain alike.

This film explores personal, social, and institutional contexts for the relationship between power and choice. When the characters in the film face real or perceived social injustice and structural inequities, they are inclined to do what is best for themselves—even if such decisions sacrifice the truth and the well-being of the innocent. A confluence of events moves strangers and acquaintances alike toward a series of encounters that will alter the courses of their lives and change the way they see themselves, as well as how others come to see them.
Two couples, the district attorney and his wife and a successful African-American television director and his wife, are both on their way home after an evening out. Two power couples—one white, the other black—driving the same symbol of wealth and distinction, a large black SUV, believe they are heading home. They are, instead, driving into the shadows of circumstance where one destination leads to another and turns their worlds, and the worlds of other people they do not even know, upside down.

Two police officers and two detectives are prepared to enforce the law. Two carjackers and a slave trader are also set to do their jobs breaking the law—one to sell a van-load of illegal immigrants and the other two to sell a stolen vehicle to a local chop-shop for some quick cash. An Iranian-American shop-keeper who feels like a 'stranger in a strange land' perceives another minority, a young Hispanic locksmith, with suspicion and prejudice.

**Social Bias in the Melting Pot**

Personal perceptions, family dynamics, social relationships, and institutional expectations come together to create an underlying current of bias and prejudice that finds expression in a variety of ways in the melting pot that is America. We judge each other on race, ethnicity, gender, and religion, as well as a host of other factors. *Crash* illustrates such judgments and their unexpected consequences with each adjustment or shift in circumstance, no matter how slight or subtle, adding yet another layer of interconnections that propel the film’s characters toward both benign and malevolent outcomes.

A young African-American carjacker rails incessantly against the institutional racism of ‘the man’ to Peter, his partner in crime, serving up as good a justification as any for his own insensitivity to human suffering and his active, if small-time, criminal career. The Iranian shopkeeper and his daughter feel the sarcasm and prejudice of the gun store owner who cannot tell the difference between an Iranian businessman and an Al-Qaeda terrorist. And both the shopkeeper and the district attorney’s wife are suspicious of the motives and veracity of an innocent Hispanic locksmith. A burned-out, racist police officer proves a worthy counterpoint to the carjacker’s burned-out, racist petty criminal while the officer’s rookie partner, like the carjacker’s accomplice, is more open-minded—their humanity still intact.

Prejudice, whether real or imagined, when acted upon generates its own momentum and consequences. When the two partners-in-crime carjack the district attorney and his wife, they set in motion a chain of events that results in a crash of lives and circumstances with both tragic and transformative outcomes. The actions of a racist police officer tear apart the fabric of an African-American couple’s marriage before he turns logic on its head by risking his life to save the very woman he had harassed and humiliated. The carjacking event serves as a catalyst to intensify the unhappiness and bias of the district attorney’s self-absorbed wife.

Parallel events are also set in motion, seeping into each other’s orbits toward critical mass. An angry, frustrated gun store owner enables an angry, frustrated shopkeeper to
focus blame on an innocent locksmith, with potentially lethal consequences. A drug-addicted mother drives two sons from her and each other—one into crime, the other into despair. An Asian businessman decides to engage in the business of selling other helpless Asian immigrants into slavery.

**Whose Fault Is It?**

While the melting pot of U.S. culture provides a dynamic and often volatile context, it is a system that seeks order in the midst of ambiguity, absorbing and assimilating differences into the black hole of status quo. It becomes too easy for citizens not to vote, police officers not to protect, politicians not to serve the public’s needs, parents not to nurture and teach, and criminals not to live within the law. Our cultural ethos becomes one of entitlement with little, if any, sense of personal responsibility. We imagine ourselves oppressed and imprisoned by this or that system and its particular set of circumstances which lie beyond our control. We come to believe, like many of the film’s characters, that the negative outcomes of our life choices are someone else’s fault up close and the system’s fault at a distance.

An African-American carjacker speaks profusely about being oppressed by white society as he terrorizes a white couple while taking their vehicle from them at gunpoint. A white veteran police officer justifies his harassment and abuse of an African-American couple to his younger partner as the long-term effects of working in the ‘real world.’ During the same time-frame he misuses his authority and power by insulting an African-American HMO administrator who represents a system that will not help resolve his father’s medical condition. His racial rant eliminates any possibility of empathy from the female administrator.

There is also a personal side to the unfolding human drama. The wife of a television director blames him for her victimization at the hands of a racist police officer, which almost results in his death in an unfortunate confrontation with a different set of police officers. A drug-addicted mother blames her successful detective son for the death of his brother. A district attorney’s wife finds fault with her Hispanic maid, projecting her own unhappiness on the work performance of a loyal employee. Finally, an Iranian shopkeeper, overwhelmed by the ethnic prejudice of others and the inability of the police to prevent his store from being burglarized, blames a Hispanic locksmith for his woes. Each of these characters, like the rest of us, sees the culpability of others regarding their difficulties much more clearly than their own contributions to the dilemmas they find themselves in.

In the end, it is in the mix and swirl of life that outcomes, often paradoxical in nature, emerge. All the connections, both apparent and hidden, click into place and things happen. Is it the structural inequities of the system, the social context of circumstance, or personal choice? Or is it the wild card of life bearing down like a meteor from outer space to shatter logic and expectations? A shopkeeper waits to kill an innocent locksmith who has become the object of his blame. A wife’s shame and humiliation pushes her husband toward a potentially fatal last stand of masculine bravado. A district attorney’s wife’s insecurity and self-absorption seduce her into a spiral of despair. When
lives and experience collide, as they do in *Crash*, the fall-out is substantial in both predictable and unexpected ways.

**Back to One: Transformative Possibilities**

‘Moving at the speed of life’ is a lot like driving bumper cars blindfolded at a state fair. We will miss some of the drivers and bump into others. Life’s collisions can knock us down or hold us up, push us out of harm’s way or into its path. While such collisions can represent a brutal and tragic rejection of everything that we are and hope to become, they can also offer us an invitation to a different, more hopeful possibility. We may not always be able to choose the particular collisions life brings, but we do have a choice about how we respond to such events. It is important to remember, as Joan McDermott (1999) suggests, that there are links between the personal, social, and political dimensions of our experiences which have both institutional and even global implications. In addition, structural oppression and violence can make personal transformation difficult. Religious, political, and labor activists have engaged in such a struggle throughout our country’s history. Yet, in the end it comes back to us, to what each of us is doing wherever and with whoever we find ourselves.

Perhaps the primary lesson of *Crash* is the importance of embracing second chances. Second chances come from those we know and from strangers, sometimes from out of the blue. Rabbi Harold Kushner (1981) once wrote, ‘It’s more important where tragedy leads to than where it comes from’ (p. 137). Bad things happen to good and bad people alike. Fear and anger can distort and paralyze our perspective and choices. Discussing violence, Thich Nhat Hanh (1993) writes, ‘[I]t is not they who hold the guns and pull the triggers. Who is really killing us? It is fear, hatred, and prejudice’ (p. 32).

A racist police officer finds a measure of redemption in rescuing the woman he had previously abused from a burning car, thus risking his own life. The officer’s former partner intervenes at a tense traffic stop and saves the woman’s husband from certain death in a confrontation with other police officers. Out of silence he found a voice and gave a frustrated and confused African-American man a second chance, who in turn offered his would-be carjacker another chance. With the words, ‘You embarrass me,’ he evolved from an angry and hopeless victim to a tough-love mentor.

The Iranian shopkeeper is saved from becoming a murderer by the magic of coincidence. From a demonized locksmith to his young daughter’s angelic gesture, the shopkeeper’s bubble of rage and despair disintegrates and he can breathe again.

The district attorney’s wife is no less the recipient of the grace of coincidence than the shopkeeper. Her fall down the stairs offers a loud retort not dissimilar to the shopkeeper’s shot. It is a wake-up call, another chance to see life through a different lens. She comes to realize that she needs a friend, not a maid.

A carjacker goes from being an instrument of exploitation to one of liberation. He chooses not to profit in human misery; when he sets the immigrants free he becomes, at least for a moment, an activist of sorts.

There are other second chances that do not end so well; sometimes the wild card of life obliterates whatever it finds in its path. An off-duty idealistic young police officer
offers a stranger, the good-natured partner of the carjacker, a ride on a cold winter’s night. The officer’s training tells him the stranger doesn’t belong in the neighborhood. The officer’s cultural and social bias reinforces his suspicion that a young African-American male would not be attending an ice hockey game, much less be a fan of country music. As the young African-American reaches into his jacket to show his benefactor a symbol of their commonality, the police officer’s training and beliefs suggest a different more ominous intention. In a flash, fear pulls the trigger and a young man is dead.

The ‘speed of life’ moves us along an uneven path of short duration and there are more collisions than anyone would like but, like the characters in Crash, we can give in to fear and anger or we can embrace the transformative possibilities of becoming more human.

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References


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