*Crash*: Film Noir in Post-Modern LA

By Wallace Katz

**Crash**

**Directed by Paul Haggis**

LIONS GATE FILMS

*Crash* is a movie about racial divisions and conflict in Los Angeles, a metropolis that now has a larger and more diverse minority-majority population than any city in the country, including New York. Asians, native and immigrant blacks from Africa and the Caribbean, Latinos from the Caribbean, Latin and Central America and especially Mexico, as well as newly arrived white immigrants, particularly Russians and Iranians, now comprise LA’s demographic majority. *Crash’s* ostensible or initial message is that these minority groups cohabit but do not cooperate; indeed, they dislike and fear one another as much or more as they dislike and fear white Angelenos.

Everybody in the film, one way or another, is or turns out to be a racist, which makes for a disturbing movie. Don Cheadle plays a conscientious and decent black police detective who nonetheless describes and thereby offends his Latina lover (and police partner) as Mexican, when she is in fact El Salvadoran and Puerto Rican. Matt Dillon plays a white cop who stops an upper-middle-class black couple, knowing full well that the van they are driving is not the one reported stolen. Dillon’s character then creates a situation in which he can humiliate the man—a TV director in Hollywood—and grope the woman. The cop justifies his racist behavior in this instance by the fact that he caught husband and wife having sex in public in their big black van. Two young black men are amateur car thieves who work for a chop shop run by a Russian immigrant. One of them is constantly mouthing prejudice against whites, even as he fears them, and it is probably out of racial hatred and fear alike that, on the spur of the moment, he and his pal highjack the SUV of a white couple in a white neighborhood, Westwood, a venue usually off-limits to angry lower-class black youths. The white couple is not harmed, but the woman (Sandra Bullock) and her spouse, coincidentally the District Attorney of Los Angeles (Brendan Fraser), are stunned. The woman is portrayed as nasty, imperious, self-pitying (it is obvious that her husband, the DA, is cheating on her with his gorgeous young black aide) and a racist to boot. When, after the car theft, a Latino locksmith shows up to replace her house locks, she tells her DA spouse—the locksmith is within hearing distance—that it is another immigrant and olive-skinned gangster who will now have duplicates of her keys to distribute to his “homies.” The DA is also a racist, but in a very special way that shows him as a political player, a man of power who will do or
say anything to get ahead, but with little regard for the public good or for trivialities like justice or truth. What bothers him about his car being hijacked by two black youths with guns is that he needs black votes and black support for his political career and he fears that if he makes a big deal of the robbery he will seem like a law-and-order and anti-black politician. What is more, in the face of considerable contrary evidence, he wants to make an example of a white cop who has killed a black cop in the line of duty, just so he can make points with blacks. Lastly, there is an Irani shopkeeper who is both the object of racism and a murderous racist himself. When he goes to buy a gun to protect his shop against theft, the gun store proprietor insults him by calling him Osama. Later in the film, this same Irani shopkeeper is robbed because he fails to fix his back door. When his insurance company refuses reimbursement for the robbery because of the broken door, the Irani blames everything on a Latino locksmith who installed a new lock but also advised that the door be replaced. The Irani goes after the Latino locksmith (the same one who came to fix the locks on the DA’s house) with gun in hand and intent to kill.

Paul Haggis, the director, has clearly laid out a complicated story involving many characters of diverse and divided races. This is a good start, but, happily, Crash gets better. It is a great film because it is about many things equally as important as race—for example, socioeconomic class and status. The DA’s wife is not so much a racist as a classist; she despises herself and uses her high position in society to project her anger and self-hatred on immigrant servants—maids, locksmiths, etc. In Crash, class distinctions can be subtle and intra-racial as well as interracial: after a scene in which the upscale TV director saves the life of one of the car thieves, he tells the young hood: “You embarrass me”; and, more important for the kid’s self-understanding and later transformation—“you embarrass yourself.”

Crash is also about the city of Los Angeles itself, especially the spatial geography of this sprawling polycentric metropolis. Contrary to what many people who have never been there think, Los Angeles is not a suburban or exurban city or an aggregation of so-called “edge cities.” It is about the extension of the urban in all directions on an apparently never-ending basis. Think New York and you envision Manhattan’s skyscrapers rather than any of the four boroughs. Think Los Angeles—as Crash does—and everything happens in so many places simultaneously that, without necessarily losing context, it’s as if one were traveling in space from planets near the sun to those far away, and at the speed of light. It is the Los Angeles context, in fact, that accounts for and is reflected in the film’s extraordinary velocity from scene to scene. And, of course, what is Los Angeles without the automobile? Angelenos have more cars per capita
than any humans on the globe and they spend more time in their cars than anybody else. At the very beginning of the movie, Don Cheadle’s character, the police detective, says something to his partner and Latina lover which might be taken as the theme of the movie: “In LA nobody touches you, because you’re always behind metal and glass. We miss that touch so much that (in order to touch) we crash into each other.” But this remarkable statement is only part of what the movie is saying. Quickly, Cheadle’s partner responds dialectically to his remark, saying simply “you are losing context,” which is another way of saying—Los Angeles has its own unique character and virtues, focus on it instead of looking elsewhere.

*Crash* is likewise about the quality and character of moral life in contemporary society, all those ambivalent choices that we are obliged to make and that may, in a matter of moments or seconds, transform our lives and the lives of those we love, for good or ill. The racist white cop’s father is sick with prostate cancer, painfully misdiagnosed as a minor urinary tract infection. The cop disses a black woman named Shanikwa—the name and the skin color of course go together. Unfortunately, she directs his father’s HMO and, because of the cop’s racism, she decides to show indifference to the father’s fate. Both the racist cop and the huffy black professional are comic characters because their priorities are screwed up; they are almost as or more preoccupied with their mutual antipathy than with the needs of a sick and perhaps dying man. Except that in this situation, one of many ironic moments in *Crash*, it is the offended black woman who has power over the racist white man and she uses it badly.

*Crash* is also a film about power. Cheadle’s character has to deal with and finally bends to the power of the DA; he is forced to compromise with truth and justice to help his own brother, a drug addict, who is wanted by the police and later OD’s and dies, making Cheadle’s sacrifice of professional authority to political power meaningless. But it is not simply the power of ambitious politicians that is at issue. Los Angeles is one of those world cities in which the global power of capital and of imperial expansion and dispossession exerts its force over and is rooted in the local. We see this in the film when one of the black kids steals a van in which he discovers, chained to the walls of the truck, illegal Thais, human beings who have been smuggled in from Southeast Asia as sweated labor and who are to be bought and sold until they wear out. When the kid brings the van and its prisoners to the Russian owner of the chop shop, this greedy bastard is eager to sell the slaves for all he can get. But the kid, perhaps transformed by an earlier reminder of his better self, takes the van and the immigrants to Hollywood, close by the Pantages Theater and the walk of the stars. There, in the place that the movies have made famous, he releases the stunned Thais into freedom. This is one of the high points of the film and, at the same time, a moment wrought with tremendous irony. The scene begs the question of freedom in a world economy where democracy and capitalism often seem in total contradiction.

*Crash* also derives from a cinematic tradition that is especially identified with Los Angeles—“film noir.” A good
part of its genius relates to the way it builds and even improves upon classic Los Angeles films by directors such as Roman Polanski (*Chinatown*), Curtis Hanson (*LA Confidential*), Robert Altman (*Short Cuts* and *The Player*) and Lawrence Kasdan (*Grand Canyon*).

Classic “film noir” or what might be called “old noir” is always about crime and/or corruption and about dark secrets and lies relating to wealth, power, and politics hidden behind the sunny paradise that is the public face of Los Angeles. It is out of “noir” that the private detective or shamus (Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade, or Jack Nicholson in *Chinatown*) emerges as a tough but bumbling seeker after truth who understands and perhaps reveals that LA’s corrupt underbelly—the secret world of power and money—belie our sacred illusions about democratic government and social equality in America. Cops—the notorious LAPD—are part of the corruption, and sometimes, as in *LA Confidential*, themselves criminal actors. *LA Confidential* is interesting because it is both a retro film—it tries, through costume, makeup, set design, vintage automobiles, attitude and architectural venue, to recreate LA in the forties and fifties—and a transitional movie, in the sense that when the cops become outright criminals and murderers, when the good guys literally are the bad guys, the city becomes a world of chaos.

The image of chaos is key for the second type of “film noir,” which may and usually does include crime and corruption, but is mostly about chaos. The new “noir” shows us a Los Angeles megalopolis that is out of control both ecologically and socially, and not so much ill-governed as ungoverned. This is the Los Angeles that everybody has come to hate, a megacity where nature is a fiendish enemy and public and private security have ceased to exist. Nobody does chaos like Robert Altman, so it is not surprising that in two companion films made in the nineties—*Short Cuts* and *The Player*—he gives us an LA disordered from bottom to top. In *Short Cuts*, which is about ordinary folk, everything is rotten, from the fruit flies (they feed on garbage and decay) that invade the city to relations between husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, to the callous indifference of campers who find a woman’s dead body in the lake where they are fishing and continue fishing, or the waitress who runs down a little boy and, because she is hurrying to work, fails to take him home or to hospital. In *The Player* Altman satirizes an up-and-coming Hollywood executive who has no moral scruples whatsoever, who commits murder and gets away with it and who assumes a posi-
tion of leadership in our principle media industry without even a trace of interest in producing good films or simply doing good. Altman is parodying LA and Hollywood here with a larger object in mind. It is from Hollywood that America's leading politicians absorb the image of a ruling class that does not rule, of a politics that is all style but no substance, that is about running for office rather than using office to protect and enhance the public weal.

Crash and Lawrence Kasdan's Grand Canyon both focus on the social, economic, and cultural disorder that results from racial prejudice and class divisions. But Grand Canyon is by far the weaker film, because it tries the impossible: to resolve the problems of a chaotic Los Angeles at the personal and moral level.

Haggis does not attempt to resolve the chaos that is Los Angeles. Rather, he exploits chaos to take us to a point where we encounter real tragedy and catharsis: for example, the black police detective's family, in which the good and successful son can't please his mother—she envies his success—and can't help his drug-addict brother, even when, to do so, he compromises his own vocation. Haggis reaches beyond tragedy to a level of spirituality based on the understanding that where there is darkness, there also, dialectically, is light. The Irani shopkeeper attempts to kill the Latino locksmith. The locksmith's little daughter gets in between them, and the Irani shoots. She is not shot; she does not die. Earlier, to allay her anxiety about drive-by shootings, her father invents an imaginary cloak that will always protect her. It is this cloak that saves her and her father and exculpates the Iranian. Is this a miracle or an answer to Rodney King's plaintive question, "why can't we all get along?"

It is in this sense that Crash resonates with a hopeful spirit about the future of Los Angeles as a place where something good may arise out of chaos and darkness and conflict. Conflict can promote fragmentation, but also democracy. What exactly Haggis has in mind I can't even guess at. But we do know that in the last decade in Los Angeles there have been alliances formed to combat environmental racism, janitor's and bus rider's strikes to resist the global real estate interests who thrive on making the metropolis ever more chaotic; and now, via a progressive coalition of unions, many diverse ethnic groups and immigrants and white liberals, Los Angeles first Latino mayor, Antonio Villagairosa. Can local struggles alter and resist the course of global neoliberalism or neoconservatism? Crash does not say this and it is too subtle and rich a film to argue clearly for any one ideological or political direction. Instead, it makes the case that if you allow yourself to suffer darkness and struggle to understand it, in time and with hard work, hope and order will revive. "Tomorrow," as the poet sings, "to fresh woods and pastures new" (Milton's Lycidas). Ecce Crash; ecce Los Angeles.