Along the Great Divide: *Crash, Desperate Housewives,* and the Wisdom of Rodney King

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**Not So Quiet on the Western Front**

Each of the world’s major cities is known in the movie world as the exemplar of a specific mood, atmosphere, or spirit and the natural setting for particular kinds of movie stories. Paris, London, New York, and Chicago have their respective types of picture. Los Angeles has such an urban personality in imagination. Those distinctive story lines are identified with their respective cities, but the conventional stories also change over time and in accordance with historical events, so that a Los Angeles story of today is noticeably different from one of a half-century ago.

Los Angeles, as the long-time capital of the movie industry, has a vivid image in our minds because it has been filmed so often and for so long as the background for so many different stories. Chicago is the model of a city in the history of social research, and New York is the locale of intellectual essays on American culture. However, Los Angeles is the model of American life for movie culture.

During the middle of the 20th century, Los Angeles was portrayed as a place where ambition, ruthlessness, and self-indulgence prevailed, hidden behind a surface of glamour, false bonhomie, and smooth talk. Later, it was the capital of a new youth culture that focused on the Southern California specialties of sun, surf, and highways, a world by and for young people dedicated to the joys of adventure, speed, and the present moment. Toward the end of the century, the history of Los Angeles drew our attention, offering the thrills of civic corruption, the greed of rich people, and a regime of violence free of the ethnic complications of the mob worlds east of the mountains.

However there is another Los Angeles in the movies, one born after riots, police scandals, and random eruptions of individual violence. This Los Angeles was the imaginative location of a disorganized, lonely, disappointing, and menacing culture, not softened or relieved by the affluence, good weather, and ease of life. What shall it profit a city if it gain the whole world and lose its own soul? That is the question raised by this contemporary Los Angeles movie genre.

This kind of modern urban blues occurs everywhere in America and even in the rest of the world. Why should it be presented with such insistence in the new imagined Los Angeles? It is a city of overnight self-created successes and the many who aspire to live such a story. The climate is benign, the evidence of prosperity and status is everywhere on display, and the population expands and sprawls with recent immigrants. It is hard to find a common civic culture that can make life liveable for the urban crowds who must abide one another’s company. The Southern California dream is individual
liberation. When all are fulfilled, they do not need to worry about the others. A culture is not required when there are no adversities to survive together.

That dream is long gone, leaving a new nightmare of individual desperation and social isolation. In an earlier period, the existence of a police culture was the final defense against the ills that might befall the solitary citizen. In the novels of Joseph Wambaugh and the movies made from them, the small, burdened corps of protectors in blue saw themselves as all that stood between the people of the city and lethal chaos, the war of all against all that Thomas Hobbes saw as the state of nature. See especially The New Centurions (Chartoff, Winkler, & Fleischer, 1972). Now, Los Angeles is a place where the police are another component of the unknown and dangerous wasteland that the people must navigate through.

Many still prosper in the land of the setting sun, but their happy ending can disappear at any time, without warning. That impending doom has drawn from some of Hollywood’s brightest and best rewarded creators visions of disaster. Writers in Hollywood have always condemned the city for the horrors they could not bear. Now, the horrors can descend on those who are doing just fine.

**Slings and Arrows**

_Crash_ (Cheadle et al., 2004) is the latest of the troubled movies about this loss of human kindness. Earlier notable examples include _Falling Down_ (Harris, Kopelson, Weingrod, & Schumacher, 1993) and _Grand Canyon_ (Grillo, Kasdan, & Okun, 1991). In these movies, the ordinary texture of daily life decomposes in reaction to a random, unexpected, unprepared-for catastrophe. These catastrophes are not of the Hollywood epic variety; there are no erupting volcanoes, tidal waves, or earthquakes, no prehistoric monsters, alien invaders, or ghastly mutations. This Los Angeles is not the postapocalyptic world that has become a popular genre in itself.

Instead, these are personal disasters, routine misfortunes that leave individuals shaken, confused, and grief-stricken. When we cling to deeply rooted cultural systems, they can help us to weather these vicissitudes. However, in this ahistorical, featureless, unrooted city, there is nothing to break the fall into an abyss of despair. Here is an everyday world of job disappointments, robberies, humiliating encounters and transient menaces, traffic jams, rude small tradesmen and customers, and stubborn bureaucrats. The list of these ills and grievances resembles the list to which the Prince of Denmark thinks death preferable.

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time.
The oppressors wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
The pangs of dispariz’d love, the law’s delay,

The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? (Shakespeare, trans. 1942, II, 1, lines 70–76)

Those who suffer them cannot (or at least do not) put these defeats behind themselves and get on with their lives. They also are not even sufficiently aroused to take the philosophical suggestion of suicide. Their protests and rebellions are short lived and inconclusive.

Particularly in _Crash_ (Cheadle et al., 2004), people are not merely uprooted and bereft of cultural props. They are also alone. Even the longest, deepest, and most intimate relationships do not relieve this solitude. Each sufferer in this imaginary Los Angeles must suffer in silence or without confirmation or understanding from someone close. The voices are full of complaint and condemnation; the moments of mutuality occur with small, brief, silent gestures, across a distance. Shared understandings are not available to help them cope; neither are understanding companions.

**The Kindness of Strangers**

Nevertheless, _Crash_ (Cheadle et al., 2004) has more surprises of a positive kind. As arbitrarily and randomly as the misfortunes arrive, so unexpectedly do saving acts of generosity, benevolence, and heroism spring from strangers, even bitter, bigoted strangers. This is not a movie about the rotteness, destructiveness, and blood-thirstiness of human nature. Against all odds, isolated individuals with no cultural or social encouragement save the day, spontaneously and impulsively.

In fact, they seem to have no choice. Their actions are automatic, as though the goodness is always on tap, capable of gushing forth at any moment. The Los Angeles movies, curiously, seem to rely on irrepressible human decency to ameliorate the catastrophe of moral chaos. These sentiments are not seen as inevitable and triumphant, only as occasional relief from the general sense of menace and abandonment.

However, these rays of sunshine are brief and unreliable. The young cop who is the most consistent and principled in trying to do the right thing, even at risk to himself, eventually causes the most brutal and heart-breaking result, in the midst of an episode of warmth, relaxation, and fellow-feeling. Human nobility is present and effective, but it is not enough to create a social life that is safe, welcoming, and vigorous. Good fortune likewise is an aid to a good life. However, those cheery phenomena are not enough. A strong, mutually accepted culture is the only thing that can carry communities through good times and bad. A culture is hard to
build in a day, even if everyone recognizes the need for it.

Happy Warriors

Not all depictions of self-preoccupation, cutthroat competition and social isolation are so gloomy. Some are altogether comical. Funny stories about the descent of ordinary people into the unmediated warfare of “the jungle” are standard in popular culture and, in fact, in all culture. Some experts believe that all comedy is based on it. Television from its earliest days has thrived on our cheerful delight in characters who are uncivil, predatory, and malicious.

The movies, beginning with Laurel and Hardy (e.g., Roach & Bruckman, 1927) and including more recently The War of the Roses (Brooks, Milchan, & DeVito, 1989) and Serial Mom (Fiedler, Moran, Tarlov, & Waters, 1994), have found use this device. The personal dispute escalating out of control produces fascination and hilarity. Although we may recognize some trace of our own angry impulses in these movies, we put as much distance as possible between them and ourselves.

Dallas (Jacobs, 1978), the famous prime time soap opera, became more comical as it went along, making the most of its audiences appetite for vicious sentiments and bad behavior. With the introduction of racism and bigotry, Norman Lear expanded the range of nastiness in our comedic diet in All in the Family (Lear, 1971) and its many spin-offs. Some years later, the brief run of Buffalo Bill (Patchet & Tarses, 1983) demonstrated the comic possibilities of bad character and our reluctance to identify with such antisocial traits in a main character, unrelied by any redeeming virtues. In recent days, the most popular television comedies have used the selfishness and cruelty of main characters, even ones we loved, as a sure way of getting laughs. Seinfeld (David & Seinfeld, 1990) became universally famous for assuming the shallowness, coldness, and vindictiveness of its merry group of friends to be the defining characteristics of its humor. Conservative critics saw in it the doom of good values in contemporary American culture. These commentators were at once shocked and infuriated at the easy enjoyment of these vices by the mass audience. Sex and the City (Star, 1998) ran for many years on the premise of four young metrosexual women who were mostly united in their common commitment to their own separate victories in their various struggles for self-aggrandizement.

However, these shows portrayed a world of relatively harmless ambition. The display of these ungenerous attitudes in Friends (Crane & Kauffman, 1994) and Everybody Loves Raymond (Rosenthal, 1996) advances the theme by presuming the subtle sadism and mutual explo-
The world remembers the plaintive voice of Rodney King reacting to the social eruptions that grew from his individual situation. He is not the only one to wonder why we cannot just all get along. He is one of the few who would say it aloud, because the rest of us are aware of its obvious revelation of naïve irrelevance. The mournful inhabitants of the Los Angeles cultural wasteland presented in the Los Angeles movies despair in the same way. However, the zealous strivers of Desperate Housewives (Cherry, 2004) are not troubled for one moment. It is very difficult but still conceivable that we can find a way to all get along even when we have to build cultural agreements from scratch. However, no, Rodney, we cannot, if nobody wants to.

References


We must stand in unity. When one person’s voice is silenced, it is up to the rest of us to cry out. Justice is not a flexible tool. It must be applied to all and it must be applied equally. This is a shared planet, and until we can learn to respect and tolerate one another’s differences, we risk the continued loss of our freedom, our dignity, and the chance to create a peaceful world for our children.

—Leonard Peltier, In the Spirit of Crazy Horse