Crash
Produced by Don Cheadle, Paul Haggis, Mark R. Harris, Robert Moresco and Cathy Schulman; directed and written by Paul Haggis; cinematography by James Muro; edited by Hughes Winborne; production design by Laurence Bennett; costume design by Linda M. Bass; music by Mark Isham; starring Sandra Bullock, Don Cheadle, Tony Danza, Loretta Devine, Matt Dillon, Jennifer Esposito, William Fichtner, Brendan Fraser, Terrence Howard, Chris "Ludacris" Bridges, Thandie Newton, Michael Pena, Ryan Phillippe, Bahar Soomekh, Larenz Tate and Shaun Toub. Color, 113 mins. A Lions Gate release.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes wondered, "How can one have an intelligent air, without thinking of anything intelligent?" He was posing the question in relation to photography alone, but cinema has certain tricks for generating an air of sophistication, of seriousness and prestige, around films of dubious idealation. Paul Haggis's debut feature *Crash* is one of the best-reviewed films to be released so far this year, and it isn't going away. Judging from those reviews, its makers have successfully generated an air of Importance around it, and this is dangerous, because this pensive ambiance may well mean that the film's slipshod, contrivance-laden 'analysis' of race relations could be mistaken for genuine insight.

Naturally, Haggis's choice of subject matter goes a long way toward establishing both its own relevance and a hard-nosed creative fearlessness bordering on the pugilistic. *Crash* tackles race relations in the U.S., using present-day Los Angeles as its rolling laboratory. Haggis must surely be aware that any such film project will be accorded a degree of respect simply by dint of addressing this topic. Since Hollywood generally avoids the unpleasant truths of American racism, any film that dives into this particular wreck must be brave, bracing, and controversial. Selecting L.A. is a kind of no-brainer here, for a few basic reasons. Not only does it give the impression that the Hollywood machine is taking a hard look at itself, digging up the bones in its own backyard, but it also provides instant historical cachet. ('What, if anything,' Haggis implicitly asks, 'has changed since the Rodney King verdict and the L.A. uprisings?') And it leads a nominally informed viewer to expect at least a cursory engagement with the artistic and political reckoning with those events. ('Where do we go from here?') In short, *Crash* is presold as a piece of liberal artistic intervention, and in this way the entertainment industry is paradoxically rewarded for its timidity. By avoiding controversy most of the time, a risk-averse Hollywood can sell its own periodic 'daring' as a product unto itself, and *Crash* fits the bill beautifully. It has an air of truth, without ever saying anything truthful.

The plotline of *Crash* could be described as a riff on Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, with racial hatred replacing the sexual coupling. There are two major events around which most other occurrences in the film circulate—the murder of Peter (Larenz Tate), a young African-American criminal, and the titular car crash in which Christine (Thandie Newton) overturns in her SUV. Sgt. Ryan (Matt Dillon), the racist cop who sexually molested her during a traffic stop the previous night, is the officer on the scene who pulls her from the burning car. Throughout the film, characters encounter and reencounter one another in highly convenient ways. For example, Peter's brother Graham (Don Cheadle), an LAPD detective, discovers Peter's dead body in the desert. Prior to learning of his brother's death, Graham is strong-armed by the D.A.'s office into suppressing evidence that may partially exonerate a white police officer charged with killing a black cop. The D.A. (Brendan Fraser) is looking for a conviction that would help endear him to the black community, since he is trying to manage a potential media scandal. He and his wife (Sandra Bullock) were carjacked in Sherman Oaks by two young black men—none other than Peter and his friend Anthony (rapper Chris "Ludacris" Smith). In a distinct but intersecting circle of coincidence, each of the two cops responsible for pulling over Christine and her husband Cameron (Terrence Howard) is later shown performing a good deed. Sgt. Ryan rescues Christine from her SUV, and Officer Hanson (Ryan Phillippe) intercedes on Cameron's behalf during a police standoff. Presumably this is intended to complicate the heinous behavior we witness elsewhere in the film. (Officer Hanson, in fact, is Peter's killer.) The film tells us that no one is all good or all bad. This is a facile, obvious notion, and ironically, one *Crash* propounds only by showing human behavior at its polar extremes.

As the above should make clear, implausible coincidence and leaden script contrivance are the heart and soul of *Crash*. Characters land up in situations that beggar belief, and, once within those situations, they rather conveniently behave in wholly artificial ways in order to foreground this or that thesis on racism. This pawns-on-a-chessboard approach to human relations is the single most frustrating element of the film. And one of the most baffling aspects of *Crash*'s mostly-positive cultural reception is the fact that it has been lauded as the gritti-
est of realism. Something about Haggis’s construction and arrangement of pat falsehoods has rendered them largely impervious to reality-testing. How does Crash accord itself this air of realism? In addition to the dominant cultural assumptions already mentioned (almost by definition, a movie addressing racism equals ‘gritty reality’), I think there are some basic ways in which a film like Crash coincides—both formally and politically—with certain desirable images liberal America has of itself.

Crash departs only slightly from the standard Hollywood visual style, and despite its nominally unconventional chronology, there is nothing remarkable about its editing scheme. Crash does incorporate handheld camerawork, however, along with a slightly overwarm orange suffusing many of the interiors. This scheme, adapted from the hand-tinting of early silent cinema, has experienced a revival of late. It has been popularized by American ‘Indiewood’ cinema, as in Steven Soderbergh’s Traffic (2000), but anyone familiar with popular TV of recent years will recognize this style immediately—the CSI programs use it, as do many police dramas on HBO and F/X. Like any other esthetic device (e.g., the Dogme 95 style), it ceases to draw attention to itself when its iterations reach a saturation point. And in the contexts typically deployed by the cop shows, what should be an obtrusive stylistic flourish (departing from traditional color) has evolved into a kind of shorthand. Apparently this is how one now depicts ripped-from-the-headlines urban reality, and Haggis uses this slick, processed sheen to imbue Crash with the appropriate veneer of harsh street truth.

And this is all the better for helping ideology to go down smoothly. Part of Haggis’s political misfire pertains to the blinkered assumptions of American liberalism, a well-intentioned worldview that serves to occlude the structural roots of inequality. One of the effects of Crash’s format is to foreground a collection of individual encounters in a highly structured manner. Unlike a work of Brechtian counter-cinema such as Lars von Trier’s Dogville (2003), which attempts to show that all individual choices are constrained by the demands of structural inequality, Crash uses the roundelay format to treat individual decision-taking as the dominant structure. One comes away from Crash with a very liberal, localized understanding of how racism works. You see, everybody’s a little bit racist, and you never know when you’ll find yourself in a situation where and where your racist nature will emerge. Or, as Sgt. Ryan says to Officer Hanson upon the dissolution of their partnership, “You think you know who you are. You have no idea.” It’s worth noting that this is a slight variation of the tagline for MTV’s “Diary” program, a reality show that allows Jennifer Lopez’s or Usher’s publicists to sculpt an off-screen persona for their stars, which is then presented as the unfiltered real-deal.

The dominant illusion that Crash’s form attempts to convey about its own narrative is that each character does something virtuous in one situation, and something unconscionably racist in another. But this isn’t true. Some characters are exemplars of pure good. Latino locksmith Daniel (Michael Pena) exists solely to incur racist threats and insults from other characters, then to belie their opinions through his role as the most upstanding of family men. Other characters display no redeeming traits whatsoever. Bullock’s Jean Cabot is depicted as a self-involved rich bitch who is there to speak the unspoken ‘truth’ when justifying her fear of black men. She stops just short of calling Daniel a wetback, and eventually undergoes a laughable faux-transformation predicated on her inability to understand that her housekeeper Maria (Yomi Perry) is nice to her because she’s paid to be.

Crash’s form also gives the impression that everyone gets equal time in a sort of round-robin of racism, but again, this isn’t true. Haggis devotes negligible screen time to most of his female characters (Christine is something of an exception), subtly sending the message that the racism we need to worry about is a man’s affair. Graham’s partner/lover Ria (Jennifer Esposito) is afforded no fully-developed characterization, but is subject to one of the film’s crudest racist slur/laugh lines. HMO bureaucrat Shaniqua Johnson (Loretta Devine) is similarly placed—a cipher and a target for bigoted macho taunts. Likewise, not all races are given equal time in Crash. While Daniel’s character is the main focus of the third, smaller circle of interactions, paired with an angry Iranian shopkeeper (Shaun Toub) who blames him for the vandalism of his store, Latinos and Persians are generally relegated to afterthought status in this narrative thread. Or worse, their less-than-integrated narrative function bespeaks a racial-quotas, show-of-hands presence that falls prey to the worst tendencies of identity politics. The simplistic rendering of these characters (Daniel as the vato with the heart of gold, Farhad the shop- owner as misguided, impotent rage) only underscores this impression.

Asians fare even worse in Haggis’s L.A., as venal background characters and occasions for the deployment of those ever-popular R’s-for-L’s mispronunciation jabs. Throughout Crash, slurs are bandied about with a towering, faux-transgressive naughtiness, marking the characters who speak them as insensitive jerks while allowing the audience the luxury of laughing at racial stereotypes with impunity. Basically it’s the Howard Stern theory of disavowal—“I know I shouldn’t say this, but come on, we all know it’s true.” To point to the fact that stereotypes are seldom true is, in this scheme, to mark oneself out as a deluded left-wing prig.

The falsehoods mount as Crash proceeds. Christine accuses Cameron of “shucking and jiving” for the cops, instead of defending her honor like a man. A mother responds to the death of one son by taking the opportunity to upbraid her other son in the meanest, most premeditated fashion. The burning-SUV rescue, with its body contortions and spilled fluids, operates as a kind of vicarious miscegenation, essentially allowing Sgt. Ryan (and, presumably, the audience) the desired and dreaded coupling that his earlier roadside finger-fuck only hinted at. But the lie that serves as Crash’s esthetic and political dominant is the one that ensures its success with liberal audiences: the individualist ideology that pretends all races are created equal, and that as individuals we can simply opt out of racism, as though it were a set of ideas and not a set of historically aggregated material structures and institutional practices.

If the characters in Crash were real people, in the real world instead of Haggis’s cor donned-off fantasy L.A., we’d see that they are not equal. Especially in the present atmosphere of backlash against so-called ‘political correctness’—an atmosphere Crash exploits to the fullest—people often get huffy when a person of color points out the difference between racism and prejudice, like it’s mere sophistry or special pleading. But it’s true—only white people in America are able to systematically organize the world in accordance with their own racial biases. To actually address this would entail systemic change, well beyond the ken of liberals and their voluntarist cult of the individual. In the middle of the film, Daniel assuages his daughter’s fear of gunshots by offering her an “invisible cloak” of protection, given to him by a benevolent fairy. Later, in an apparent act of God, father and child are shot at close range and yet they are not harmed. The little girl exclaims to a stunned Daniel, “It’s a really good cloak.” The same could be said for the privileged liberalism represented by Haggis and Crash. As long as the system is only shooting blanks, you’re A-OK.—Michael Sicinski
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