In the opening sequence of Crash, a collage of interwoven stories exploring contemporary race relations, actor Don Cheadle plays a police detective who observes that in Los Angeles (or fill in the blank with your favorite urban metropolis) people collide into one another “just to feel something.” Trapped behind the glass and metal confines of our cars, we are so starved for intimacy—and a chance to reach beyond our narrow ethnic enclaves—that we seek a connection almost despite ourselves.

It’s an intriguing, albeit familiar premise. Alejandro González Inárritu’s critically acclaimed Amores Perros, released in 2000 to international audiences, begins with a violent car accident in Mexico City. The film’s plot revolves around the intertwined lives of the car accident victims—who hail from three very different social strata—serving as a lens into Mexico’s polarization and urban anomie. What makes Crash unique is that it’s based on the life experience of writer/director Paul Haggis, the Academy Award-nominated screenwriter and producer of Million Dollar Baby. A Canadian transplant to Los Angeles, Haggis was once carjacked outside his neighborhood video store. When he managed to get home, he frantically changed the locks on all his doors. Over time, he found himself wondering about the men who stole his car. Had they been friends a long time? What did they do for fun? Did they consider themselves criminals? But it wasn’t until after 9/11 that Haggis figured out how to adapt his experience to the big screen.

“Because the movie isn’t really about race or class, it’s about the fear of strangers,” Haggis writes in the film’s production notes. “It’s about intolerance and compassion; about how we all hate to be judged but see no contradiction in judging others.”

Knowing that back-story is essential to understanding what makes this unblinking and provocative gaze at race relations at once so uncomfortable, hilarious, heartbreaking and authentic. (Crash has very few false notes. One that seems worth noting is the African-American police chief who turns his back on racism in his department in a “boys will be boys,” kind of way.)

Crash tells the story of an angry white housewife (Sandra Bullock) and her district attorney husband (Brendan Fraser). It’s the story of a mistrustful Persian storekeeper (Shaun Toub). It’s the story of two police detectives (Don Cheadle and Italian-American Jennifer Esposito) who moonlight as lovers. And it’s the story of a Mexican locksmith (Michael Peña) and his little girl who, frightened by the random violence of her neighborhood, hides under her bed and asks, “How far can a bullet go?”

It’s Peña who delivers the film’s most heart-warming performance. As a tattooed locksmith he is quickly typecast as a hardened gang member, mistrusted and feared by nearly everyone he encounters. With subtlety and grace, Peña plays against stereotype, seemingly oblivious to the provocations of those around him, and he exhibits pure magic when he concocts a pair of fairy wings to ease his daughter’s fears. It’s a promising hint of what’s to come from this Chicago-born Latino who most recently starred opposite Hilary Swank and Morgan Freeman as Omar in Million Dollar Baby.

The film’s most disturbing sequence involves a racist cop played by Matt Dillon who uses the carjacking of the district attorney as a pretext for racial profiling, pulling over an affluent African-American couple and raping the wife (Thandie Newton) in her husband’s presence. It’s the kind of scene that most likely prompted Haggis to write an unusual disclaimer at the start of the film’s production notes, issuing a plea for tolerance and a dispensation from political correctness.

“I did not set out to offend or to ignite controversy, but to look at many different people, each with his or her unique perspective,” Haggis writes. “Film enables us to walk, however briefly, in the shoes of strangers. In that sense, I hope that Crash succeeds not so much in pointing out our differences, but in recognizing our shared humanity.”

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