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Investigating the Crash Scene
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Guest Commentator

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In coming semesters, this year's winner of best picture at the Academy Awards likely will become one of the more frequently discussed films in American higher education. Because Paul Haggis's *Crash* offers a convenient and generative entryway into myriad discourses swirling around the ever-interrogated category of race, many instructors and professors in the humanities and social sciences will undoubtedly turn to it in reference, or screen it as a surefire text in the perpetual quest for meaningful classroom discussion. With an appealing and accomplished ensemble cast, slick production and climactic moments in plenty, this movie about a difficult subject has appealed to diverse, youthful audiences and inspired many earnest conversations. I knew I needed to see *Crash* when I found myself in a large group of twenty-somethings who all had informed opinions about it. However, since watching it for myself, I seem to have developed some ideas about the film that don't fit neatly into the *Crash* conversation.

Those who appreciate the film frequently feel that it has made them think about race in a new way, or they are intrigued by the way in which some aspect of it resonates with their own experience of race; the film's detractors are often dubious of its implausible plot and the heavy-handed, "in your face" method it uses to explore its subject. While I find points of agreement in both camps, my primary reaction to *Crash* is all but absent from the discussion the movie seems to provoke. Perhaps I am alone in my position that, even as this year's "best picture" attempts to address the contemporary race problem, it also relies upon and covertly promotes social narratives that are problematically racist. Some of my students will immediately attack this as a paranoid thesis. To this I can only respond with the force of argument and a question recently asked by Dave Chappelle: "What is a black man without his paranoia?"

Admittedly, my appraisal is somewhat counter-intuitive; it's a bit like accusing an investigative-reporter of complicity in a crime that he brings to the front page of the newspaper. But, I want to put it into the mix in order to complicate some of the worthwhile discussion taking place around *Crash* following its success at the

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Academy Awards and the NAACP Image Awards.

For a large, racially-mixed cohort of Americans, the movie offers an inspiring dose of "gritty," yet cathartic, racial confrontation. Its frank, insistent engagement with provocative racial themes has proven palatable for such a large audience primarily because of its seemingly even-handed critique of the many forms of racial prejudices and stereotypes that it depicts. Almost all of the film's characters – black, white, Latino, Asian, Middle-Eastern – seem similarly flawed and yet equally noble. Its magnanimity leaves audiences feeling that, in America's contentious racial landscape, there are few genuine "bad guys," but a multiplicity of complexly charged social relationships. In exploring these relationships, the clever narrative manages to avoid harsh judgment of its principle players while balancing several plotlines that repeatedly crash into one another at nodes charged with racial tension.

The film keeps its indictments unspecified by making them ubiquitous. Salon.com declared that *Crash* is "grasping you by the lapels, like that uncle you generally avoid at family gatherings, and screaming into your face: 'My God! The contradictions!' It virtually throbs with meaning, and it's the kind of migraine throb that approaches meaninglessness." Although this sarcastic critique devalues the meaningful conversations that can be spurred by that discomfiting uncle, its primary point is undeniable. *Crash* is teeming with paradoxes, reversals and implications that are numbingly difficult to organize.

Yet, for me, there is an itch that makes its way through the throb. It begins with the movie's central act of gallant heroism in which a white police officer risks his life in order to rescue a black woman helplessly trapped in a car that will explode just moments after they escape from it. Perhaps I should not make much of the irony that registers in my paranoid mind as a movie with a diverse cast, apparently marshaled to disrupt simplistic thinking about race in America, reserves its greatest moment of sacrificial bravery for the white, male representative of law and order. But, this hackneyed scene is emblematic of the ways in which *Crash* trades in some of Hollywood's problematic racial (not to mention gender) tropes while trying to convey its many messages.

The film's heroic police officer – played a little too-believably by Matt Dillon – also happens to be its biggest bigot. He is introduced to the audience during a phone conversation with a stubborn HMO representative who will not authorize medical services needed by his ailing father. When Officer Ryan learns that his antagonist proudly bears the ineluctably African-American name "Shaniqua," he expresses his disgust saying, "Big fucking surprise that is." In seeming retaliation for this bad experience with a black person, Ryan pulls over a married black couple and sexually assaults the woman during a vigorous body search. This is, arguably, the most viscerally racist act of the movie. Yet, as the thread of the narrative involving Officer Ryan develops, he is steadily redeemed. Several scenes later, when he has a face to face meeting with Shaniqua from the HMO, we are meant to understand why Officer Ryan has the capacity for such racial hatred. It is because his father – who has a urinary tract infection, the effects of which the audience must bear witness to in more than one scene – toiled in his own janitorial business, worked side by side with his black employees, paid them a fair wage, but then lost "everything" when the city began giving its contracts to minority-owned companies. The audience is virtually instructed to pay close attention to this anti-affirmative-action saga by Shaniqua, who listens to Officer Ryan intently, waving away a security guard that attempts to escort him out of her office.

Once our judgment of the police officer has been softened by his tale of woe, he goes on to perform his heroic rescue. It just so happens that the black woman he will save from certain death is the same black woman he assaulted earlier. There is something perverse about the structures of this strained coincidence. For one, the black woman – played by Thandie Newton – is again powerless and must be acted upon by the figure of white male authority. While she is terrified when she first recognizes her liberator, the mortal circumstances dictate that she accept his help. However, as Officer Ryan calms her hysteria and nestles close in order to cut her free, it seems that something more than acceptance has developed in Newton's character. Because of its

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intimacy (their lips nearly brush), the rescue becomes their second, forced, quasi-sexual encounter and by the time it is over the black woman is grateful for it. Once they are clear of the wreck, she clutches Officer Ryan in a further expression of her helplessness and gratitude before the bigoted lawman.

What meaning can audiences take from all this? Well, it seems that Officer Ryan's character is meant to demonstrate that even horrible racists are complexly formed: they love their fathers (sometimes they are racist *because* they love their fathers) and they are capable of very good deeds. While *Crash* does not explicitly ask us to exonerate racists like Ryan, it certainly suggests that we should be more understanding of their flaws – even if they include sexual violence. It seems that, upon finally reaching an era in which polite company forces most to acknowledge that racism is inexcusable regardless of circumstance, America's favorite "race movie" is now asking us to temper our judgment of the embattled figure of the bigot.

In its equal-opportunity charity, the movie also implies that we should be more forgiving of black men who, like Officer Ryan, are criminals. Peter (Lorenz Tate) and Anthony (Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges) are carjackers whom we come to like because of their inchoate moral sensibility and their comic banter – at moments they are bumbling blacks with a long Hollywood history. Like Officer Ryan, they seem to believe that when someone's life is at stake, race isn't important. After literally running over an Asian man with an SUV they have stolen – "You're saying there's a Chinaman under this truck?" – they deliver him to the hospital despite the risk it entails. However, while the possible motives of white racism are methodically explained through Officer Ryan's monologue about his father, there is no painstaking apology for the criminal lifestyle that Peter and Anthony have adopted. At one point in the film, an exasperated white character does sum up the causes of black dereliction in ten and a half seconds: "I know all the sociological reasons why – per capita – eight times more black men are incarcerated than white men. Schools are a disgrace, lack of opportunity, bias in judicial system, all that stuff." But, this hasty accounting insinuates that America's systemic racism is old news, hardly worth mentioning and it stands in stark contrast to Officer Ryan's careful description of "reverse discrimination."

If the film does not want us to dwell long on the complicated "sociological" reasons that black men too often end up on the wrong side of the law, it does finally give us a more tangible and easily-dramatized explanatory symbol. In the final movement of the film we deduce that Peter may have turned to crime because he is the child of a drug-addicted, black single-mother – one of Hollywood's more recent bugaboos. She is a minor character in the movie, but more than once we observe her in a state of strung-out torpor. Thus, in the subtle metrics of the film's narrative, the self-inflicted suffering of Peter's black mother is weighed against the undeserved affliction of Officer Ryan's white father.

The failures of *Crash* as a rigorous anti-racism text have, arguably, allowed it to become a successful Hollywood picture. Despite all the commentary suggesting that the movie is "hard-hitting" and "daring," *Crash* too-often reinforces conservative thinking about race and fails to challenge racist narratives that are deep-seated in the American imagination. While it may be unrealistic to expect any Hollywood product to mount a truly radical critique of race-thinking in America, there should be room for such a critique in the conversation that has been stoked by the limited audacity of the *Crash* project.

Unfortunately, the film itself encourages audiences to dismiss thinking that is revolutionary in its distrust of conventional social narratives. Anthony, the carjacker, is the movie's paranoid black man. He thinks that white, corporate America may stand to benefit from the rampant use of the word "nigga" in contemporary hip-hop; he wonders why the names of black revolutionaries have been lost to history; and, although he's a thief, he doesn't want to steal from his own people. These are thought provoking ideas. Yet almost as soon as they are uttered, *Crash* makes them laughable. The politicized commentary of the paranoid black man is framed in such a way that it ends up becoming the movie's most consistent source of comic levity.

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Of course, the true comedy is somewhat tragic, and it registers, not in the movie itself, but in the congratulatory hoopla that deems *Crash* a radical achievement in high-principled American cinema. The discussions that are prompted by *Crash*, fortunately, have the opportunity to move beyond the limits of the film. As these dialogues find their way into our classrooms, we need to sort through the movie's wreckage, seeking those tools that will help us to build a challenge to the problem of racism that is more trenchant and sincere than the one mounted in *Crash*.

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