White Power: An Analysis of Racial Tensions in *Crash*

by Tori Goyette

In 2004 Paul Haggis directed the Oscar winning film *Crash*, a drama fundamentally about race and its effects on various people in Los Angeles. The acclaimed movie earned rave reviews from average viewers, as it asked hard questions about racism on an individual level and showed some harsh realities that are usually avoided on the big screen. The movie promotes racial awareness, but like any conversation about race, it demands close inspection. Upon telling a friend I was watching the film and was struck by how heavy the material is, he responded, "It's reality." I am not so sure. *Crash* shows realities, but in a not-so-realistic way.

We do not learn very much about each character in *Crash*, but we know enough to figure out how Haggis wants us to understand them. We see a variety of African American men and women, several Hispanic characters, a Persian family, and several Asians. A scene will switch to another only because the initial character's story line is intersecting with that of the next. We meet the Cabot family because two young black men, stars in the scene, steal their car. Likewise, the Hispanic locksmith looking to make a living for his family is hired at the shop of the Persian man struggling with life as an immigrant. These are the lead characters, all intertwined in their daily lives. This technique of interconnected characters keeps viewers watching. The audience is not stuck with one story or scene for too long. An idea or event is presented from the perspective of one person or family, and then the same event is expanded on by another character's connection to it.

Critics receive the film very differently. Victor Villanueva, in *College English*, wrote about the limitations in Haggis's attempts to present racism: "Most of the characters are provided

life circumstances to help us see where they are coming from…" (4) The circumstances include Officer Ryan's sick father, Jean Cabot's depression, and the shopkeeper's struggle with being a new immigrant. Each serves as an excuse for the character's racism (or at least a way to lessen its severity). He continues, "…but those life circumstances are themselves most often made up of the cheap rationalizations for racism." (4) Villanueva argues that illness, depression, fear, and poverty do no make racism excusable. These are to him insufficient attempts to find reasons for immoral behavior. The film's effort to rationalize intolerance leaves its potential for a powerful message about racism feeling incomplete and shortchanged. *Crash* presents many races and their intersections, but the white characters appear to be less complex, and ultimately more forgivable, than the other races. I have chosen to analyze Haggis's objectives with the portrayal of white characters.

The first white characters we meet are Jean and Rick Cabot, an L.A. District Attorney and his wife, played by Brendan Fraser and Sandra Bullock. These are beautiful, confident, well-off characters whose social status is evident at first sight. Jean grabs her husband's arm upon seeing two young black men in the street and Anthony, played by Ludacris, notes she is a typical racist white woman for expressing her fear in such a safe place. Anthony goes on to steal her car. In a sense, Haggis demonstrates Jean's racism by having her clutch her husband for security, but goes on to right her decision when the black men actualize her fears. We do not leave the scene feeling her actions were reprehensible. This is not the first time, even within the same character, that Haggis conveys approval of the white character's racist action. Sangeeta Ray, also in *College English*, criticizes this scene, which "always gets a lot of laughs, but what exactly does it confirm? Our fears, our prejudices are correct, and spatial segregation is a necessary evil." (3) As the scene plays out, Jean reaches for her husband in fear because she apparently *should* be afraid

because her car *is* going to be stolen. In just a short scene, Haggis allows the worst to happen. No breaking down of stereotypes takes place, in fact quite the opposite. She continues, "To me, this assertion by the black characters … about their own propensity for violence … is the clearest example of the film's inability to delve critically into the construction of whiteness..." (3) Though I cannot agree that Haggis believes Jean Cabot's fears are legitimate, the reactions of some viewers would suggest so. Watching this scene one would first identify Jean's behavior as highly prejudiced, and then upon seeing the car stolen, would be left wondering if she was right all along.

Ultimately the movie doesn't leave us with a bad feeling about Jean while she progresses as a stereotypical white, privileged woman who doesn't work. Towards the end, Jean complains tirelessly about all the different domestic helpers (who we are supposed to assume are not white) and why they aren't meeting her demands. She speaks in a way that both suggests and affirms her white privilege. In this scene she realizes it is not the people and the world around her, but in fact she is simply an unhappy woman. She begins to cry, and we see her change. Next she is giving her Hispanic housekeeper a hug and calling the woman her best friend. The scene takes this white character and paints her in a more positive light. I personally do not believe personal troubles to be an excuse for racism, and Haggis may not either, but all the same he presents this chiastic structure with white characters: they act with racist behavior, and then ultimately undo it after a certain breaking point (in Jean's case, falling down the stairs).

As a white majority audience, we are on some level asked to forgive Sandra Bullock's character. This presents a lot of questions about white society. Why can we accept and forgive a character's reprehensible actions the instant she claims personal difficulties? As with many Hollywood story lines, she has money, realizes she doesn't have happiness, and enters a time of

crisis. *Crash* makes it seem as if we are so familiar with this sequence of events that bad people, in this case racists must simply realize the lack of substance in their lives and they are forgiven by the audience. It is clear Haggis is not allowing the white characters to be villains for his white audience.

We see this again with Matt Dillon's character, John Ryan. We meet him when he is on the phone in a diner making tasteless racist comments to the receptionist at the doctor's office. He ridicules her name, Shaniqua, and she hangs up the phone. Upon meeting this woman he apologizes and then proceeds with something of a sob story about his father's health and hard work. We sympathize with him too, knowing full well he is a racist. While Haggis presents more than one side of many characters, it is especially important to note how he ends with each character. By the time we are made to see the good in Dillon, he has molested an innocent black woman earlier in the movie to establish his racial dominance and authority. How a character of that nature can ever been seen positively after that is dumbfounding, but it happens in moments of sadness surrounding his father and when he saves a life.

For the rest of the film, the audience sees this horrific man interact with his father. He is tender and child-like to someone he clearly loves, acting nothing like the man in uniform we see at the beginning. Likewise, Dillon ends up saving the woman he molested in a dramatic and nearly fatal act of heroism. This decision asks viewers to forgive him for what he did to her before. It appears that we are to feel like he gives her life at the risk of his own, and thus cannot be the racist sexual assaulter he once was. Our last view encounter with him is as he is suffering alongside his sick father. He, once again, is last seen as a compassionate man, as if his familial difficulty is behind all of his malice, and we should see and forgive that. Ultimately, Haggis

seems to understand that white audiences will forgive someone with problems similar to their own despite that person being overtly racist.

Regardless of their pasts, white characters in *Crash* come out on top. It may be subtle, but these two characters we are made to hate turn out to be the ones we forgive. Christine Farris, also in *College English*, offers discontent with the presentation of and what is being presented to whites. She says, "The problem with parables is this: the intended lesson is not always the lesson learned. Rather than analyze the heterogeneity of experiences among members of various races and ethnicities, ultimately the film invites viewers to supply what's missing in the stories by looking to their own experience." (1) Haggis does not unpack the characters in a way that gives evidence of their individual transformations; we merely see them going through tough times and, as Farris says, respond according to empathy we feel towards them based on experiences in our own lives. In the case of Officer Ryan, perhaps his resentment of affirmative action resonates with white audiences because the system still creates controversy. Likewise, it could be that seeing Dillon's dying father unable to get the health care services he needed helps us sympathize with the "bad cop." The movie plants seeds though and leaves character development and judgment up to the viewer. Farris goes on, "This 'hopeful' treatment of racism seems especially designed to appeal to white audiences…rather than to examine the systemic causes and effects of a racist patriarchal system. Viewers might take comfort in the notion that everyone is a little bit racist." (1) *Crash* is not filled with accusations; it is a film of dismissals. The message seems to be that everyone has racism in them, but everyone can still be a good person. Haggis does not condemn instances of racism as major character flaws, but as part of being a normal person.

Haggis is entertaining a white audience; he chooses not to put their race at fault. This is not a movie about systematic racism in a white-dominant culture, and it certainly could be. It

may be that Haggis foresaw the popularity of the film and thought depicting white people as villains might hurt his favorable reviews. In an interview in *Sight & Sound*, Haggis shared that *Crash* came about after his own car was jacked as he walked with his wife. He said, “I kept wondering who these kids were who’d stuck guns in my face.” (2) He claimed the movie was initially supposed to be about fearing strangers, but turned into a movie about race. I cannot help but speculate that his car-jacking experience may have influenced his perception of race and racism. Whatever the reasoning, in a film meant to leave a mark and ignite relevant and important conversations about race, white people are let of the hook in *Crash*, as it happens in real life.

Works Cited

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