

FOREWORD	6
1 BACKGROUND	9
The Setting – Los Angeles	9
The USA	12
The Filmmakers	17
Inspiration	19
2 SUMMARIES	21
3 THEMATIC ELEMENTS	40
Urban isolation	40
Racial & social prejudice	48
Class & class prejudice	55
Cars, guns, doors and magical objects	57
Power/impotence – dignity/humiliation	72
4 CHARACTERS	76
Cast	76
Race	87
Constellations	88

5 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES 89

Circles, symmetries & multiple storylines _____ 89

Irony & absurdity _____ 96

6 VISUAL DESIGN 100

Light and dark _____ 101

Camera movement _____ 106

Objects & set design _____ 109

Transitions _____ 113

7 MUSIC 115

8 CRITICAL RECEPTION 122

ONLINE SOURCES 127

VORSCHAU

FOREWORD

British and American cinema produced a number of ensemble films during the 1990s and early 2000s, including *Love Actually* (2003), *Magnolia* (1999), *Grand Canyon* (1991) and *Crash* (2004). Whatever their individual genres, these were films which used apparently unconnected characters and storylines to explore shared themes. In the case of Paul Haggis' *Crash*, these themes were urban isolation and race in modern day Los Angeles.

The advantage of an ensemble approach to storytelling is that the filmmaker can approach his or her subject from several different perspectives. In the case of *Crash*, with its interest in the chaos and turmoil of modern urban life, this format also allowed Haggis to follow his characters and storylines through the film like fish in a fast-moving river: they are forced along by the rush of events and their situation, crash into one another and are thrust apart again, constantly moving. The themes of the film are reflected in the structure, with its organisation of coincidence, chaos and conflict in a multi-narrative, multi-character format.

The film was released three years after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and cannot help but reflect the increased paranoia and awareness of danger and violence in American society. The still-unresolved black-white racial tension at the heart of the history and identity of the USA, and the continued discrimination and criminalisation of the rapidly growing Latino population, were joined by an explosion in anti-Arab sentiment. But, as Paul Haggis points out in the commentary to the DVD of *Crash*, Americans tend not to differentiate: olive skin and dark hair makes you an Arab, and all Asians are Chinese. Farhad is Iranian (Persian); Choi is Korean; Ria is Puerto Rican-El Salvadoran, but to other characters they are Arab, Chinese, Mexican – the laziest and most obvious term is ap-

THE SETTING – LOS ANGELES

1. BACKGROUND

The Setting – Los Angeles

“We really wanted to shoot in LA because it was a character in the film.”

[Paul Haggis, DVD commentary]

The film *Crash* is set in Los Angeles (LA), the largest city in California and the second largest in the USA. LA is a huge metropolis covering over more than 1,300 km² and divided into more than 80 districts. It has no real centre in the way that Paris or Moscow, for example, have identifiable centres. The sprawling, disconnected nature of the city provides more than a setting and a background for *Crash*: LA is itself a character in the film, influencing the action and creating conflict.

LA – character in the film

It is ethnically diverse and its population covers a broad social spectrum from the ultra-wealthy to the extremely poor. Noted areas include the troubled South Central, Compton and Watts, epicentre of the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and the violence of both gang culture and rioting: Beverly Hills, the surreal home of the fabulously rich, and of course Hollywood, home of Disneyland in Anaheim, famous around the world as the centre of the US film industry. LA is, along with New York, generally understood to be the cultural centre of the American entertainment industry, inextricably linked to show business and the world of glamour and illusion.

But LA also has a long and troubled history of racial tension, and has seen several periods of civil unrest and outbreaks of rioting. Police officers of the LAPD (the Los Angeles Police Department) have often, and very publicly, been accused of racism, corruption and brutality. Landmark incidents include the race riots in

History of racial tension

2 SUMMARIES

Film details:

Original title: *Crash*

German title: *L.A. Crash*

Country: USA

International Première: September 10 2004, Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF)

Première USA: April 21 2005

Première Germany: August 4 2005

Length: 112 minutes

Original language: English

Budget: ca. \$7.5 million

Rating in the USA: R (Restricted – children under 17 must be accompanied by a parent or adult guardian)

Rating in Germany: FSK 12

Filmmakers:

Director: Paul Haggis

Producers: Cathy Schulman, Don Cheadle, Bob Yari, Mark R. Harris, Bobby Moresco, Paul Haggis

Screenplay: Paul Haggis & Bobby Moresco

Cinematography: J. Michael Muro

Editor: Hughes Winborne

Production Design: Laurence Bennett

Costume Designer: Linda Bass

Music: Mark Isham

Cast:

Detective Graham Waters: Don Cheadle

Mrs. Waters: Beverly Todd

angry and indignant but Peter takes it all with humour. Approaching them on the street are **Rick** and **Jean Cabot**. Jean is complaining that Rick is always working, even during dinner. To appease her, he gives her the battery from his phone. They glance up, see Anthony and Peter approaching, and Jean takes Rick's arm. Seeing this, Anthony immediately complains about the racism inherent in the instinctive display of fear, saying that he and Peter as young black men should feel nervous in a largely white area of town. Rhetorically, he asks Peter why the two of them are not scared, and Peter replies that it's because they have guns. They then steal the Cabots' car at gunpoint. Driving away from the scene of the carjacking, Anthony is angry with Peter for fixing his little statue of St. Christopher to the car's dashboard.

09:30–11:00

Anthony and Peter drive past another crime scene, where **Waters** and **Ria** are just arriving. An undercover detective called **Conklin** has shot and killed a black man driving a Mercedes. While the two detectives are investigating the scene, Waters discovers that the dead man is a vice detective from Hollywood, called William Lewis.

11:00–14:18

At the **Cabots'** home, **Daniel Ruiz** is replacing the locks while Rick is working with his staff. Jean is suspicious of Ruiz' ethnicity (Latino), shaved head and tattoos, and demands that Rick have the locks changed again in the morning. She becomes increasingly agitated and when he tries to calm her down she begins shouting, accusing Ruiz of planning on selling their new key to his gangster friends. Ruiz has obviously heard everything: he packs up his tools and leaves, dropping the keys on the kitchen table for Jean.

URBAN ISOLATION

3 THEMATIC ELEMENTS

Chaos of modern
urban life

The themes in *Crash* are clear from the opening scenes: this is a film about isolation, communication, prejudice, violence, guilt and life in the city of Los Angeles. The theme of people being pushed along by the force of events, with little or no control over where they are going and who they will crash into next, can also be seen in the structure of the film itself, with its multiple characters and storylines coming together and shooting off in different directions, presenting, in a compact, story-based format, the chaos and coincidence of modern urban life.

The main themes in *Crash* we will look at in this chapter are:

- **urban isolation,**
- **racial and social prejudice,**
- the significance of certain objects, primarily **cars, doors and guns,** as well as **a few magical objects**
- the oppositional forces of **power/impotence** and **dignity/humiliation.**

These thematic areas all touch on one another and, in the film, cover a lot of related territory. These themes are relevant to many of the characters in different ways.

URBAN ISOLATION

The theme of urban isolation covers a lot of ground and touches on many of the other themes in the film. We see people interacting with one another in various ways – families, chance encounters, colleagues – but there is often a sense of isolation, and an inability to communicate.

URBAN ISOLATION

SCENE	CHARACTERS	CRASH
Gun shop	Guns shop owner and Farhad	Farhad's difficulty with the language and obvious Middle Eastern ethnicity collide with the gun shop owner's racism and hostility.
Carjacking I	Anthony, Peter and the Cabots	The wealthy, white Cabots are confronted with black criminals who steal their car. The attack is sudden and very fast.
Changing the locks	Jean Cabot and Daniel Ruiz	Jean lashes out at her husband about Daniel Ruiz' appearance: knowing nothing about him, she furiously accuses him of being a criminal and of planning to break into their home.
Police abuse of power	Officers Ryan and Hansen and the Thayers	The Thayers, not suspecting anything, run into Officer John Ryan, whose recent angry encounter on the phone with Shaniqua Johnson has increased his already strong feelings of frustration and powerlessness. He takes these feelings out on the Thayers, shocking his own partner and throwing the Thayers into a crisis.
Institutional racism	Officer Hansen and Lieutenant Dixon	Fully expecting to be understood by his black superior officer when he tries to complain about Ryan's behaviour, Hansen is more than shocked when he finds himself backed into a corner in which he has to become the butt of a childish joke.

CAST

4 CHARACTERS

Cast

Detective Graham Waters

Graham Waters is a black detective in the LAPD. He speaks the first line in the film, and his discovery of his brother's body frames the structure of the film. When his partner and lover, Detective Ria, complains that he keeps people at arm's length, she is confirming what he himself says at the beginning of the film about the lack of touch and contact between people in Los Angeles. What we see is that Graham is indeed self-contained, and likes to keep people at a distance: he uses humour to deflect from the real issue when talking to Ria.

Brother of Peter

He does all he can to help his mother, a relapsed drug addict, despite the fact that she obviously loves his younger brother more. Whenever Graham sees her she repeatedly asks after Peter: later, when the two of them have to identify Peter's body at the hospital, she blames Graham, saying that he is responsible for his brother's death.

Graham allows himself to be corrupted by Flanagan: he agrees to lie about the shooting of a black detective, whom he strongly suspects to have been corrupt, in return for a promised promotion and a second chance for his criminal brother. This second chance for Peter is, in a tragic and ironic twist, made irrelevant when he is murdered by Officer Tom Hansen.

By the end of the film Waters has lost much of what he had at the beginning. His brother is dead and his mother blames him for it, and he has compromised himself, morally (he lies about the shooting of Detective Lewis) and professionally (he doesn't investigate what he knows to be a suspicious case).

CIRCLES, SYMMETRIES & MULTIPLE STORYLINES

5 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

CIRCLES, SYMMETRIES & MULTIPLE STORYLINES

The narrative structure of *Crash* – the way the story is told – makes strong use of three strategies:

- a **circular** narrative (at the end it returns to its beginning),
- a **multi-narrative ensemble** (no single central character and storyline: instead there are multiple characters and stories, all equally important),
- and the **symmetry** (reflection) and **juxtaposition** (contrast) of characters, situations and themes – of elements within the narrative (characters, situations) as well as external elements (the audience's expectations and preconceptions).

Each of these strategies, which are used to comment on the subject matter by mirroring and contrasting individual elements, contribute to the idea of intersecting lives and situations within an anonymous urban world.

Crash is structured in a **circular** form: it ends at its own beginning, at night, with Detective Waters discovering what we as viewers later learn is his younger brother's body, and with two minor car crashes (involving Ria and Kim Lee at the beginning, and Shaniqua Johnson at the end).

The circular structure of the film could be interpreted pessimistically: nothing ever changes. We end up right back where we started, with a young black man shot dead by the side of the road and people crashing their cars into one another and immediately throwing racial insults. The film starts and ends at night, with unfocused lights swimming in the blackness. Everyone in the film

Det. Waters finds his brother dead