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Crash (2004): The Capture of Framework and Production Elements

The film *Crash* (2004), directed by Paul Haggis, has been widely recognized on multiple levels for its social awareness, storyline technique, and star-filled cast. Winning three Academy Awards in 2005, including the category of Best Picture, *Crash* has not only captured taboo elements of the human condition, but has done so in a way that stays with the audience long after viewing the film. The audience is challenged to look at their own prejudices, social conduct, and stereotype classifications. Thus, such elements are what make the film a great teaching tool in civic engagement. Different frames of reference are done through different races, classes, and genders, thus appealing to a wide range of audiences. It is through multiple frames of references, introduction, plot, genre, and specialized elements of production that Haggis is able to reach a wide range of audiences.

According to Art Silverblatt, author of *Media Literacy: Keys to Interpreting Media Messages 3rd Edition*, introduction is the foundation of “foreshadow[ing] what to expect in the course of a media presentation. The opening of a film, television, or radio program acquaints the audience with the primary characters, plot outline, and the worldview of the programming” (135). The introductory scene of *Crash* opens with the visual manifestation of a vehicle accident to give the term “crash” a literal connotation. Detective Graham Waters opens with a reflective analysis about life in Los Angeles, California, that he shares with his partner Ria, which foreshadows the chain of events within the movie. The scene then moves forward to him

discovering a crime scene in which he discovers his dead brother, but this scene falls short of actually disclosing this. Instead, the scene jumps to how the previous day's chain of events leads to this one particular moment, thus laying the groundwork for the plot. There is an element of illogical premise, which Silverblatt defines as 'willing suspense of disbelief' (136), in which the audience has to believe that there is a possibility that the characters involved within the film are all connected one way or another. This illogical premise is the foundation of the main plot and subplots, which works towards the film achieving its affective response.

Likewise, genre also plays a role in conveying the message of *Crash*. Done as a drama, *Crash* consists of formulas to make the audience understand that the subject matter at hand is to be taken seriously. The presentation of the human condition is often a struggle with self in relation to others as characters try to understand their place in society and how they view the world. The director uses the function of this particular genre to allow the audience to manifest feelings and thoughts that are thought of as taboo within any other setting. Silverblatt states that such use of genre "touch[es] a range of primal feelings within the individual" (152). Prejudices, racial struggles, stereotypes, questions of identities, and cross-cultural relations are all presented.

Similarly, production elements of the film contribute to the impact of the message to the audience. Editing, color, lighting, relative position, and movement all play a part to the visual presentation of the storyline. The heavy presence of temporal and spatial inferences editing is obvious in the connection of relationships. Silverblatt explains this method as "media communicators manipulate[ing] time and space as a means of establishing relationships between people, locations, and events. Although narratives generally move in chronological order, media communicators are able to manipulate the order to draw connections between these time periods" (167). Such style is heavily manifested in *Crash* as characters relate to each other. Each

interaction is ironically pieced together to make paths cross. This gives the illusion to the audience that every action that is done or attitude that is presented has the potential to influence someone else's life. Color and lighting in this particular movie play hand and hand. Although scenes are shot during both day and night, the color and lighting take on more of a dull, cinematic color scheme. This, in turn, emphasizes the struggle of life and "produce[s] visual tension which is sensed by the audience" (169).

Comparatively, relative position and movement provide a frame of reference for the audience. Relative position is a key element that is used over and over again in various scenes to capture a particular moment and its context. Silverblatt defines this method as a way that the "media communicator can employ relative positions to draw connections between people, objects, or events" (181). One example of many from the movie *Crash* is when Detective Waters goes to visit his mother after the disappearance of his brother. In the background of the scene is a normal home, but the camera focus on the mother's equipment for drug usage. This helps the audience understand why Waters treats his mother the way he does as well as answer the question as to why he keeps his true relationship with his mother a secret from his partner, Ria. The movement of *Crash* deploys a rhythm that flows from one interaction to another. During each scene, actions and speech of various characters demonstrate how daily actions have a direct or indirect consequence on other people's lives. Such transition gives the audience a bold representation of how the world is connected through intentional or unintentional actions. One example out of many is how the partners in crime Anthony and Peter, who are the most connected characters throughout the film, are linked to the Cabots, Detective Waters, Officer Tom Hansen, Mother Waters, Cameron Thayer, and trafficked Asians smuggled into the United States. Through these coincidental encounters, both men are made to look at how they perceive

the world in reference to others. Anthony learns true lessons in racial pride, helping others, and work ethic.

However, it is through point-of-view and word choice that the audience is able to get the raw, uncensored perception of different people within society. Taken from the perspectives of people from all walks of life, the movie is able to touch on the fears and social pressures that each gender, race, and class struggle with. To illuminate these differences, the director takes a panoramic approach, “in which the perspective is constantly shifting” (186). Each character expresses how they feel through word choice that identifies with their particular situation. A powerful example of this is the fear of Jean Cabot after she and her husband are carjacked by two African American males. Jean expresses loud distrust for black and Hispanic people and begins treating her Mexican housekeeper poorly. It is not until she falls down the stairs and the only person to help her is her housekeeper that she realizes that being a good person is not about skin color, but character. It is through this revelation that the audience gains a glimpse that racist attitudes can be reformed, which opens dialogue for cross-culture conversation and understanding.

All in all, various production styles are used in combination to capture Haggis’s intention in reaching his audience in regard to race relations and social interaction. Frames of references, introduction, plot, genre, and specialized elements of production all play key roles in developing meaning and reaching his audience. It is through these production tools that Haggis was able to develop a well formulated plot in a genre that delivered thought provoking showcase of social cognizance. Along with several editorial choices, audience acceptance of illogical premises also plays a part in conveying his message.

Work Cited

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