Seger Notes #8: CRASH

Story by Paul Haggis
Screenplay by Paul Haggis and Bobby Moresco
Directed by Paul Haggis
Academy Award, Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Director

Crash is a very complex film, interweaving various storylines that seem to be unconnected to one another, but all relating to the theme of identity, racism, and the crash of cultures. It takes place "Today" and "Yesterday" in Los Angeles and follows a murder, robberies, a sick father, various loving and unloving relationships, conflicts in work situations and harassment. We see stereotypes reinforced, and stereotypes broken. Each story ripples outward and begins to intersect with other stories as the film explores the tensions, conflicts, and struggles of coping with the disharmony of life in LA.

The racially diverse cast of characters includes a black detective, his Hispanic partner who is part Puerto Rican and part Salvadoran, two black thieves, several white cops and other law enforcement figures, an Iranian shopkeeper and his wife and daughter, a Mexican locksmith and his wife and daughter, a black social worker, a black television director and his wife, an Asian woman and her husband, and illegal immigrants. The film covers class divisions as well—there are upper-class whites and blacks; middle-class blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, and Middle Easterners; and lower-class blacks and Hispanics.

With its small story and strong characters, *Crash* has a European feel to it. Like many European films, it's driven by theme more than plot. Every choice of storyline, scene, conflict, confrontation, and story movement toward a climax relates to the theme of racism. Although we often find this type of philosophical, thematically-oriented film in other countries, rarely are American films so driven by one central idea.

Crash explores the many aspects of racism: the stereotypes, the expectations, the injustices, the sadness, the fury, and the dangers. The film shows how racism is embedded in our attitudes and our actions, and how in highly stressful situations it is apt to move from our unconscious and subconscious to the conscious level, spilling out into actions that are based on inaccurate perceptions. The film crashes one perception against another, constantly forcing stereotypes to rise to the surface, to be confronted, to do their damage, and eventually, for some, to reach resolution and even transformation. It shows us that racism is endemic to people of all ethnicities, and demonstrates how this petty racism diminishes them. Some of the characters are able to get past their racist attitudes. Others are not.

The film establishes the stereotypes in Act One, explores them in Act Two, and resolves them in Act Three (having started resolving some of them late in Act Two).

Los Angeles is a fit setting both because of its racial mix and because the city is compartmentalized, so that the races need not mix. It's a car-based society, in which whites rarely have to drive through Koreatown, or Watts, or South Central L.A., but can take the freeways instead. Other ethnic groups can avoid the areas where they might be stopped just for being non-white, such as Beverly Hills and Bel Air. Los Angeles is a city of distinct neighborhoods, where people can easily be segregated from one another. Each can fairly easily stay within their own world. And without an intersection, a crash of cultures, stereotypes can remain undisturbed.

In the first lines of the film, a black cop, Graham, explains this isolation:

GRAHAM (V.O.)
Any real city, you walk, you're bumped, brush
past people. In L.A., no one touches you . . .
We're always behind metal and glass. We crash
into each other just to feel something. (p. 1)

As the story develops, the characters are forced to collide. Sometimes this collision happens in the course of ordinary life, because society can't keep a total separation. People collide through their jobs, as in the police force. They collide through love and sex, as we see with Graham, the black detective, and his Puerto

Rican partner and sometime lover, Ria. They collide through dependence upon the skills of another, as we see when Jean, the DA's wife, and the Iranian shopkeeper, Farhad, both hire Daniel, the Mexican, to fix their locks; and when a white cop, Ryan,is forced to talk to his father's black social worker. Yet, in the rare moments when people of different cultures do come together, the stereotypes continue to be clutched, as if one's own identity depends on holding to inaccurate perceptions of another's identity.

As with any of the "isms" (ageism, racism, sexism), the stereotype clearly delineates who's in, who's out, who's up, who's down. The film suggests that these stereotypes are held on to because of the lack of intersection. It takes tragedy, or near tragedy, for a stereotype to be broken.

How Does This Multiple-Plotline Structure Work?

Crash uses a rare and highly complex structure which I call an Interweaving Structure. Individual stories start their journeys and then weave in and out of other stories, which are connected to them not by plot or character but by theme. As the threads of one storyline begin to intersect with the threads of another, connections between journeys which seem to be unrelated are uncovered.

The Interweaving Structure is similar to a structure I call the Parallel Journey story, in which different characters have storylines that don't seem connected until, at some point in the story, they come together. This coming together often starts at the First Turning Point, or perhaps at the Midpoint (although *Sleepless in Seattle* is a Parallel Journey story where the two journeys don't join up until the Climax). Unlike most films, Parallel Journey stories and Interweaving Structures do not focus on a single protagonist. The most common narrative structure shows a protagonist going on a journey; various subplots intersect with and support that primary narrative line, but they do not function separately from the protagonist's journey. In Parallel Journey stories, the various plotlines are played out separately from one another. Two or more protagonists continue on their separate journeys for one, two, or three acts, then intersect at times, and then may diverge again.

Spike Lee used this structure in *Do the Right Thing*. *Traffic* uses a series of parallel journeys that are all connected to the drug trade. *Syriana* and *Babel* use a similar structure, each exploring three stories. *Bobby*, about Robert F. Kennedy and his assassination, weave together a number of stories of people who were all at the Ambassador Hotel in 1968. The Macedonian film *Before the Rain* tells several different stories which don't seem to have an obvious connection. *Pulp Fiction* combines six storylines and rearranges them into a nonchronological order. In each of these movies, as the story moves forward and more intersections happen, we come to understand the intrinsic connections between what seem at first to be drastically different plotlines. All of these structures use a common connecting device for their stories: drugs in *Traffic*, oil in *Syriana*.

Rarely is this complex structure successful. *Babel* seemed to me to have too few connections. In *Traffic* and *Syriana*, a significant amount of time elapsed before the various stories intersected. A multiple-plotline structure can easily become confusing, because we're asked to be interested in each story separately while we wonder what one story has to do with another. Both the Parallel Journey structure and the Interweaving Structure usually work best when the intersections begin in Act One or at the First Turning Point.

I consider *Crash* the best example of the Interweaving Structure since it puts the focus on the intersections of the stories rather than on the separate journeys of the characters.

In *Crash*, the intersections begin at the end of the first scene—although the audience doesn't know why Graham, the black detective, reacts to the sneaker he finds on the ground—and almost every scene thereafter has some intersection with another story thread, whether clear or subtle. In the second scene, the story of shopkeeper Farhad and then the story of Daniel, the locksmith, begin the chain of relationships. In the third scene, the black carjackers, Anthony and Peter, intersect with Rick, the DA, and his wife, Jean, with a further intersection with the story of Graham, who is up for a promotion in order to ensure that Rick gets the black vote in the next election. As the story proceeds, characters continually crash into and affect each other's lives, making connections with each crash.

With each crash of culture, the film moves deeper into the difficult, sometimes tragic, circumstances of people's lives. And we can see that some of these tragedies could be resolved if it weren't for the racism which operates to restrict and diminish the characters.

The Stories as Individual Journeys

Crash tells twelve different stories. This is very unusual, since most films have an "A" storyline—the main storyline—and perhaps two or three subplots. This makes *Crash* a difficult juggling act with some specific challenges. The writers had to make sure that the audience understands each story separately, and also understands the intersections between them. They had to choose storylines rigorously, making sure each is there for a specific reason related to the theme. And they had to make the coincidences that create the intersections credible and possible. Considerable economy of writing was required to find the core beats of each story, and at times to devise scenes which contain beats from two or three different stories at the same time.

The twelve storylines of *Crash* operate more like subplots than plots, since there is no one main character in the film. Each crash of characters occurs at a plot point in one or more of those stories: either at the Catalyst of an individual story, at a Turning Point, or at the Climax.

In the first scene—a car crash that happens "Tomorrow"—we enter into twelve different stories, none of them specific at this point in the story, but all of them implied, with connections which will become clearer as the film proceeds. The film then flashes back to "Today" to explore the events leading up to this moment. After the Midpoint, it returns to the car crash, then moves forward in time to explore the consequences of all the events that led up to the crash.

The Collisions and Connections Between the Stories

Whenever a writer uses parallel storytelling structures, the writer needs to find ways to connect scenes that may seem disparate, because they are on different storylines. In most films, where there is a strong "A" storyline, scenes flow, one from another, in

an action–reaction sequence. Occasionally this chain is interrupted by subplot scenes, but the subplot scenes, if used well, generally push at and complicate the main plotline.

In a parallel structure, there are no evident connections between the stories. As the story unfolds, we begin to see connections, but usually in Act One, and even sometimes into Act Two, the connections are neither obvious nor organic.

To achieve this, writers use four techniques to keep the audience engaged:

1. The writer can imply connections within the scenes. The implication of some connection helps us anticipate and trust that the writer will eventually show us the connection, even though we don't see it immediately.
2. The writer can create a sense of connection through scene transitions.
3. The writer can use props to connect scenes that seem to have no relationship with each other.
4. The writer can thread a character through several scenes, connecting one story with another.

Implying Connections

When Graham starts looking, curiously, at the crime scene, we assume that he is connected, in some way, with it. He crosses beneath the crime scene tape, which tells us that he's official. He looks as if he's on the verge of a discovery, which implies that he's been searching for something related to this scene. His partnership with a woman could, possibly, imply another kind of relationship, although at this point we don't know. The fact that he's a detective implies relationships with other people in law enforcement, so when he has a scene with the DA, this is not entirely unexpected.

Using Scene Transitions

A good technique for connecting scenes that are not intrinsically connected is to use doors. A door closes at the end of one scene, and a door opens in the next scene. *Crash* uses this technique in a number of places. Hansen closes the car door at the end of a scene; Shereen slams the back door at the start of the next scene (p. 22).

Brian "bangs through the double glass doors" at the end of a scene; a deliveryman enters a Lock & Key Company (p. 58–59) at the start of the next scene. Shaniqua exits a room in one scene; Maria enters a room in the next scene (p. 47).

Sometimes the cut joins an action at the end of one scene with a reaction at the beginning of the next scene. Even though the character is not reacting to what has happened in the previous scene, the reaction seems to be related. When Graham leaves Ria, WE CUT on the slam of the door to the next scene in which Ryan "wakes with a start, thinking he heard something" (p. 46). At the end of one scene, Choi screams; in the beginning of the next scene, Christine drops her purse as if in response, even though it is not (p. 27).

Some of these transitions are subtle, but each one makes the audience feel as if one action is leading to another, creating further threads of connection between the various plotlines.

Using Props to Create Connections

A prop that appears in one scene can create a connection to the next scene. Sometimes that prop is the same thing, such as the same car; sometimes the prop is a similar thing, such as another car or another lock or another door.

The same locksmith repairs the locks of Rick and Jean, and the lock of Farhad. The locks become metaphoric as well. It is ironic that Jean locks people out when she's so isolated that she truly needs them, and that Farhad concentrates on the lock and not the door—which is the true source of danger since it lets bad people in.

The stolen SUV weaves throughout several scenes. Anthony steals it from Rick and Jean, runs over Choi with it, and then takes it to Lucien, hoping to get money for it. The St. Christopher statuette connects Peter with both Anthony's scenes and Hansen's scenes.

At the end of the film, Cameron thinks it's snowing—but what's falling is in fact ash from the fire of Hansen's car. Soon after, it starts to snow.

Using Characters to Connect Scenes and Storylines

One character intersecting another, even in what seems to be an arbitrary or trivial way, pulls unrelated stories together and implies a connection. Shaniqua's story connects with the story of Ryan and his father. But she also connects with other stories through the very simple intersections that occur when people go about their daily lives. We've seen Shaniqua with Ryan. Later, she goes into Farhad's shop to buy some cigarettes. At the end of the film, after Anthony has freed the illegal immigrants, we see her car driving away.

Daniel connects through his profession, since he fixes the locks of both Farhad and Jean. Toward the end of the film, Dorri connects with Graham, since she's the pathologist who asks Graham to identify the body of his brother, Peter.

The Second Turning Point as the Breaking Point

Although the film focuses on the individual stories, each of which each has its own structure, the entire film has an overall structure as well.

The Set-Up can be seen as the "introduction of characters." The First Turning Point can be seen as a combination of several turning points in different scenes clustered together, in which characters try to overcome, mitigate, or counteract racism. Rick wants to bridge the gap between races by giving a black man a medal (p. 33). Daniel gives his daughter, Lara, a magic invisible cloak that will protect her from bullets (p. 38). Anthony and Peter take Choi to a hospital after the accident (p. 39). But these attempts to diminish the effects of racism don't work, and Act Two develops the problems further as they build and spin out of control. The Second Turning Point is made up of moments when a number of characters are at near breaking point. The Climax of the film as a whole is the snow, which suggests some resolution and cleansing.

The Second Turning Point is worth closer examination. A number of characters come close to breaking, and this drives them toward a transformation. Jean's breaking point occurs when she confesses to her friend Carol that she's constantly angry.

Carol doesn't care. Shortly afterward, Jean falls down the stairs and discovers just how unkind her friends truly are.

For Cameron, it's the moment when he starts losing it with the police. Enraged that he's been stopped once again, rather than being docile this time, he strikes back. For Anthony, it's the moment when he feels so lost that he has to accept the final humiliation: riding the bus.

For Farhad, it's the moment when he's so angry that he aims his gun at Daniel to kill him. At that moment Daniel's daughter comes running to protect him, "leaping into his arms" just as Farhad's finger pulls the trigger. Bang!—the bullet hits Lara in the back. "Daniel knows she is dead without even looking. The horror registers on his face and on Farhad's." It seems impossible that Lara is all right, but it turns out that she was wearing her impenetrable cloak—and Farhad's daughter Dorri had put blanks in his gun. With this miracle, we begin to see the unraveling of racist attitudes and a movement toward resolution for some of the characters.

Using Images to Reinforce the Theme

Although the director of *Crash*, Paul Haggis, uses muted colors and the film feels almost as if it was shot in black and white, there are a number of visual and sound images that reinforce the theme and characters.

Most of the visuals in *Crash* are realistic rather than metaphoric. But there are several images that connect scenes and that show the possibility of overcoming racism.

There are three crashes in *Crash*. The first is at the beginning of the film; it's a multi-car crash, and we see Graham weary as if this is just more of the same. The second crash, in which Ryan rescues Christine, also has several cars involved. With the rescue and the explosion comes the beginning of something redemptive, transforming, that changes perceptions. The third crash is not really a car crash, but a car burning at the end of the film. Hansen burns his car as if he could, somehow, remove all evidence of hatred, violence, and the troubling nature of racism. The car burning turns into a bonfire celebration as kids gather around.

These three car scenes are connected with other car scenes throughout that represent Los Angeles. There are many different kinds of vehicles represented: SUVs, vans, squad cars, passenger cars, Christine's Jeep, and a bus. These vehicles wind their way through the many districts of Los Angeles, connecting stories that would ordinarily not be connected, and moving people to touch, connect, and sometimes crash into each other.

Fire is used in the scene with Christine, as the flames creep closer to her overturned Jeep. This is reinforced by the technique of the ticking clock—the fire seems to be seconds away as it follows the path of the dripping gas, finally leading to an explosion. Fire is used again at the end of the film, when Hansen burns his car to remove the evidence of the murder of Peter. Fire is an image of heat, boiling toward an explosion, causing something to erupt. It is also used as an image of burning away—whether evidence, or burning away a taint, corruption, and old attitudes.

Using Sound Cinematically

Most screenwriters use very few sound cues in their writing. Many scripts contain a recognition of realistic sounds that make up a scene (honking cars, sirens, ocean waves, a knock at the door, a kettle boiling, children's laughter), but it's rare to find a writer using sound as a metaphor and writing it into the script.

Although most of *Crash* uses realistic sound, in one of its most memorable scenes sound is removed for impact. When Ryan rescues Christine from the burning car, a Welsh song plays on the soundtrack and the sounds we might expect to hear, such as policemen yelling for help or screaming onlookers, are taken away. We hear occasional lines of dialogue between Ryan and Christine, but the song is in the forefront. While the action keeps us tense and anxious about the outcome of the scene and provides the needed conflict, the song distances us enough to perceive other layers of the scene. As a result, we are pushed back in our seats, our minds processing its thematic layers, as opposed to being fully emotionally involved with the danger and anticipation. This is an interesting decision by writer/director Paul Haggis, because the more

dramatic the scene, generally, the more you want the audience to lean forward and be emotionally engaged.

There is much in *Crash* that provokes us to sit back and ponder, because there will be much to think about after the credits roll. The car-on-fire scene is shot like a love scene: very intimate, very close. Ryan gently reaches over to pull down Christine's skirt so as not to embarrass her. Their faces are close as he tries to undo her seat belt.

RYAN
I need you to move a little, can you do that? . . .
Are you hurt, anything broken?

CHRISTINE
I don't think so.

RYAN
That's good.

And as the gasoline is about to explode, Ryan reaches back for Christine one more time and drags her out (p. 71–72).

In the scene where Farhad raises his gun to shoot Daniel, time slows down, as if to give the audience a chance to catch up with everything that's happening at once: the gun raised, Daniel waiting for the inevitable shot, the mother in the kitchen finishing a chore, the little girl watching and then rushing to her dad. Ordinarily, time would speed up here, to pull us emotionally into the action. Instead, the slowing of time pushes us back—enabling us to listen to the dialogue and to follow the developing intersections very carefully. Everything is coming to a head, and the director doesn't want us to miss a beat.

Moving Toward Resolution Using the Sense of Touch

Great writers bring in the senses to make their writing more immediate and engaging. Obviously, a strong visual sense is necessary to write for film, and most screenwriters will create colorful, cinematic scenes that the reader can visualize while reading

the script. Although sound is often brought in by the director, the sound designer, and the composer, many writers include the sounds of the scene. Very occasionally, writers imply the sense of smell, as in films with scenes of food; in *The Remains of the Day*, *Babette's Feast*, and *Like Water for Chocolate* the scenes are so sensual we can almost smell the food.

Occasionally, screenwriters also add the sense of touch. If you've watched James Bond films, you may remember scenes where Bond strokes a woman's back with a mink mitten, and scenes with satin sheets and massage lotion and the steam of a sauna.

In *Crash*, Haggis and Moresco use the sense of touch to make a thematic statement: that people don't touch, and that's partly why racism endures. It then brings people into literal touch with each other, to show resolution. Ryan pulls up Christine's skirt in the harassment scene (p. 20–21), but he pulls down her skirt in the car-on-fire scene, not wanting to embarrass her (p. 70–72).

Daniel pulls the blanket up to cover his daughter, ready to go to sleep, He kisses her on the forehead and gives her a magic invisible cloak, gently placing it around her (37–38).

Graham pulls a blanket over his mother and kisses her on the forehead (p. 61).

Ria and Graham have sex, interlocked, until the phone rings and they angrily separate (p. 43).

There are other scenes where people clearly don't touch at a moment when we would expect them to. This is a very difficult thing to do—to show a negative on screen. Sometimes this is shown by contrast: for example, we see warmth and touching in one scene, such as between Daniel and his daughter Lara (including the moment when she jumps into his arms), and in another scene we see people across the room from each other or nearby and not touching. The father/daughter relationship between Daniel and Lara, which is very warm, is contrasted with the relationship between Farhad and his daughter, Dorri, where tension takes the place of kindness and loving touch.

Jean, too, is separated and isolated—alone in her bed and sometimes with only her furry slippers for comfort.

How does one overcome racism? Through touch. Connections. Meetings. Intersections. Being close enough to see the humanity beneath the race. It is the same path to overcoming any of the "isms": sexism, ageism, classism, and religious intolerance.

Creating a Transformation

In a story with a short timeline, characters usually don't have the time to change and grow and transform. Yet, sometimes realizations and epiphanies and transformations do take place in a short period of time because of the intensity of the experience.

In *Crash*, which takes place over the course of two days, many of the characters come to a new understanding or a transformation in attitudes or actions. Ryan, the white cop, becomes aware of his racism and sexism after saving Christine, a black woman, from the car crash. Farhad becomes aware that he's taking out his anger on a father and his precious daughter, and repents his actions. Christine and Cameron soften toward each other as they realize that racism, rather than any intrinsic problem, caused their anger.

Anthony is surprised by both Cameron's actions and Cameron's words, "You embarrass me. You embarrass yourself" (p. 91). These words seem to hit their mark, as Anthony proceeds to do a good deed for the illegal immigrants. Jean softens toward her maid, Maria, and says to her, "You want to hear something funny? . . . You're the best friend I have" (p. 108). Jean realizes that friends can better be defined by kindness than by money.

Hansen recognizes that he's not quite the man of integrity that he thought he was, and is left with a sense of vulnerability and confusion, which has the potential to deepen his character. Before his death, Peter found a moment of connection with Hansen, which surprised both of them.

There are, however, some characters that don't change. From all indications, Shaniqua will continue to be inflexible with her social work cases. Ria will probably

continue to be a good cop, but won't continue her relationship with Graham and probably won't overcome her racist attitudes toward Asians. Ryan's father will continue to suffer, with little change in his circumstances. The DA will continue to work the angles and to spin information to ensure his reelection.

With other characters, it's unclear whether their transformation will hold or not. Will Anthony make any real changes? Will Cameron continue to be under the thumb of a racist producer? Will Jean make new friends or revert back to her white upper-class life? Regardless of whether the transformation holds, or to what degree, we see these moments of grace, of change, of something shifting, even if only for a moment.

Resolution and Redemption

The film gives hints of change in some characters, and therefore hints at the possibility of some sort of redemption for them.

Redemption, the result of true change in attitude and action, is a word with religious and spiritual connotations. By using a word with these connotations, a writer has the potential to further deepen the resonances of a story. Although the word itself is not used in the film, the spiritual dimension is implied by the miracle of the magic cloak and the angel (Lara) who saves her father from death.

What does it mean to be redeemed? Redemption is more than just a transformation. It gets to the heart of the vulnerability and possibilities of the human condition. That which was lost is found. That which was dark is made light. That which was oppressed is liberated. That which was bound is freed.

In *Crash*, there is much that is wearing down the characters. Racism is a heavy burden, and can only be carried on by making sure that people don't come into contact with one another, don't confront or collide with one another. It depends on stereotypes that are tightly held, and it depends on objectifying the other person and making the other person less than human. Stereotypes are tightly fit into a one-dimensional mold which can only be broken by these moments of epiphany where the Other is seen as being as fully human as one's own self.

The writers use an image that breaks into our usual way of seeing things, forcing a moment of epiphany. They use a religious image: Farhad has just shot Lara, and she should be dead. Yet, because of the magic cloak that her father gave her to protect her from bullets, and because of her spontaneous willingness to put herself into danger to save her father, she saved all of them. Farhad says:

FARHAD (in Farsi)
She was my firishta.

DORRI
What are you talking about?

FARHAD
My firishta. You don't know your faith. She was my angel. She saved me. She saved us all. (p. 109)

The city of Los Angeles, also, is given an implied possibility for transformation, when at the Climax of the movie it starts to snow. Snow can be a metaphor for things being made clean, pure, and fresh. Like the miraculous moments that overcome racism, snow—which seems to be an impossibility in Los Angeles—is another miracle. It covers up the dirty. It creates a blank page on which to start again.

Study Questions

1. Did you identify with any of the racist attitudes in the story?
2. How did these individual stories touch you? Did you have a favorite? Were you more compassionate toward some of the characters than others?
3. Can you think of other ways in which these characters could have intersected each other's lives? Write a scene that brings together characters that don't come together in the film. (For instance, could any of the other characters wander into Farhad's store? Could Shaniqua, as a social worker, intersect with anyone else?)
4. Examine some of the contrasting characteristics that you find within these characters. What qualities were unexpected? What qualities did not surprise you?

5. What do you imagine happened to Hansen after the story ends? Write a scene of how he would reconcile himself to the murder he committed. How do you think that would affect the rest of his life?

6. How did the racism that all of these characters experience create the wounds that are part of their daily lives? Do you see any hope for them? If so, how has that hope happened, and how might it continue to happen?

7. Look at all the characters and discuss whether they transformed and how they transformed. What would be necessary in their lives to make those transformations permanent?

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