

## Crash

### NARRATIVE

Crash tells the story of a group of very different people and the way in which their lives intersect over a period of twenty-four hours. As the film begins, each episode in the narrative seems separate and unrelated but as the story progresses, the lives of these different characters are woven together in an intricate tale of how human beings react to, and interact with, each other. What we experience is a complex web of parallel narratives as we follow each character or set of characters through their day. The filmmaker, Paul Haggis said he wanted to make a film about how, as strangers, we can affect each other even though we may never meet. Many of the characters in Crash do not realise the impact they have had upon the lives of the others but we, as the audience, do.

- Create a narrative map to show how the characters interact with each other. Begin by listing the major episodes in the narrative across the page and add the names of the characters involved in each underneath. (You may find it easier space-wise to use a key e.g. LS = Locksmith.) Draw arrows between the characters and events to show how they interlink.
- What we actually see on screen is called the plot of the film. However, we also add in extra details as we watch, such as, what has been happening before the scene and what is happening to other characters at the same time. In this way we create a larger 'story world' than just what we see on screen. This is known as the diegetic world. Think back to two or three of the major incidents in the film. What extra details did you add in your mind as to what had happened previously?

The action in the film takes place in a little over 24 hours but the film only lasts 122 minutes. Which events do we see happening in each of the following time frames, and why?

- a) in the same time it would take in real life?
- b) shorter than it would take in real life?
- c) longer than it would take in real life i.e. slow motion?

As an audience we see the 'bigger picture' – we know what is happening in parallel stories and how they fit together although, as in real life, the characters in the film do not. We say that our view of the action is 'unrestricted'. However, there are certain times when the knowledge we are given as the audience is restricted. Can you think of some examples where this is the case and say why the filmmaker made this choice?

- In most Hollywood films the ending brings closure. Is this the case in Crash? Which stories are resolved and which are not? How does this make you feel?

## EXPECTATIONS

### Genre

Crash is a film that challenges our expectations on many levels. In the first instance the film is not easily defined in terms of genre and therefore we cannot employ the usual set of conventions to predict what the film will be about and what part each character will play in the action. We often use the title of a film for clues as to what will happen but in this case 'crash' has a very different meaning. Although the detective played by Don Cheadle actually offers an explanation of the title\* within the first scene of the film, we are still focused in on the idea of a road smash at this point and it is only after viewing the whole film that the significance of his comments become clear.

- What does the title of the film suggest about the genre? Does the promotional material convey similar meaning? If not, how does it alter and shape our expectations?

In the promotional commentary, the producer cites the film as containing 'levity, beauty, heartbreak, chemistry and tragedy'. Place these words in the order in which you think they best describe the film and add two more words to the list. Be prepared to explain your choices. Discuss your ranking with the rest of the group.

*\*It's the sense of touch. In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something.' (Detective Graham Waters, played by Don Cheadle)*

- Consider Det. Waters' comment.
- How strongly does this story need an urban setting?
- How could you adapt it to convey the same ideas in a different time or place?
- Do you consider it ironic that the story is set in Los Angeles?

### Plot

In terms of plot, the filmmaker plays with our expectations. As with most films, we begin *in media res*, that is to say in the middle of the action, as two detectives drive to the scene of a crime. Little detail is provided at this point as to what has occurred but as a sophisticated cinema audience we assume that we are privy to this incident because it will have great significance in the plot. We are then invited to go back in time and experience the events leading up to the crash. Our enjoyment is heightened as we watch the plot unfold and try to guess how each episode fits into the overall scheme and relates to the crash we have seen.

- What elements of the plot surprised you? Why – what were your expectations and where did they come from?
- Our expectations of all the characters coming together in the climactic ‘crash’ of the film are never realised. Does this enhance our enjoyment of the film or detract from it?
- The two minor crashes which ‘bookend’ the film are insignificant in the plot. Why do you think the filmmaker chose to include them? What does the film gain or lose by their inclusion?

### **Character**

One of the most surprising aspects of *Crash* is the way in which it challenges our expectations of character. Traditional Hollywood convention is to introduce the audience in the early stages of the film to one, two or three characters who will be the most important and who will lead the action. These are what are usually termed ‘the heroes’ and we are encouraged to identify with them, viewing events and other characters from their perspective. Even when the heroes make mistakes or behave badly, our sympathies are still with them and we rejoice to see them overcome adversity by the end of the film, or at least be left a little wiser by their experiences. Conversely, the villains that we meet may have likeable traits but if their motivation is evil we know that they will not be allowed to prosper at the expense of the hero and that they will meet their just deserts.

*Crash* cleverly conforms to our expectations by leading us along a familiar path with certain characters, encouraging us to see them in a traditional role, then shattering our expectations of who they are. The two most shocking examples of this are when we see ‘good cop’ Ryan Phillippe shoot his passenger and ‘bad cop’ Matt Dillon save the woman from the burning car.

- Which of the two above mentioned examples (good cop/bad cop) did you find the most shocking, and why? How did our previous knowledge of the characters lead our expectations?

Put yourself in the character of Ryan Phillippe. After a sleepless night you decide to tell the truth. Write the report that you submit to the station officer next day, explaining what happened and your motivation. Do not forget to include previous events that may be relevant.

Make a list of the characters in the film. Give each of them a rating on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 stands for very likeable character and 5 for very unpleasant character. Now use the same set of characters and give them a second set of ratings A to E where A stands for very good person and E stands for evil person. What can you say about your results and the way in which the filmmaker plays with your expectations? Discuss your results with the rest of the group.

- At certain points in the film our sympathies with a character are altered almost instantly. Where does this happen and how is it achieved?
- Almost all the characters in the film are presented with a moral dilemma. What are these and how would you have behaved in each instance?
- Would you call any of the characters in the film a 'hero'? Explain your answer.
- How far were your expectations of character led by recognisable stars?
- In your opinion, which of the characters got their 'just deserts'?

## **RACE AND PREJUDICE**

Crash is a brave film. It deals with race and our prejudices in a brutally honest way, forcing us to confront thoughts and feelings that we may not be comfortable with. Don Cheadle says that the film aims to uncover 'what we don't say, what is below the surface'.

The film is at times shocking because we see and hear things that we don't usually encounter on screen, whether in mainstream Hollywood film or even in independent productions. The production team frequently stopped the action to ask themselves 'can we do this?' If they felt that it was what happened in real life then the answer was 'yes' and they continued filming. They felt that the best way to overcome prejudice was to bring it out into the open and get people talking.

Crash involves the prejudices of a range of different groups in society, looking at how they view each other and the consequences of this. It is not afraid to deal with the prejudices of minority groups as well as the more dominant sectors of society.

- What shocked you most in the film and why? Be honest.
- What did you laugh at in the film? Why?

Not all the discrimination in the film is based on race – what other types of harassment do you see and how are you made to feel about it?

The film presents us with a number of racial stereotypes. Consider how each of these are portrayed in terms of physical appearance and behaviour. Are our expectations always challenged by the film?

What social stereotypes do we see? How are we made to feel about them? What does this add to the film?

- Language (and the lack of it) is seen as an important factor in racial tension in the film. What incidents make use of this?
- Think about the comments of the two youths discussing hip hop and country and western as they drive along in the stolen car. What part do you think music plays in defining race and also in reinforcing stereotypes?
- Crash has been called a 'fable' or a 'morality play'. In what ways might this be considered to be true?

In the promotional commentary the producer invites us to consider three questions whilst watching the film:

- Was this about me?
- Was this about the person next to me?
- Was this about the person I don't even want to know?

What do you think? Be honest with yourself, even if you feel unable to discuss your thoughts.

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