Written by Mike Schulz
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CRASH

Crash, the magnificent drama by *Million Dollar Baby* screenwriter Paul Haggis, fits alongside such sprawling, ensemble-driven works as
Grand Canyon
,
Short Cuts
, and
Magnolia
, movies in which plotlines dovetail within one another and themes enmesh, and where bitter, dissatisfied characters might not wind up more content than before – some might not even wind up alive – but they will definitely have shared, for better or worse, An Experience. (These characters might not receive traditional happy endings, yet they almost invariably find degrees of solace and a measure of hope.) Moviegoers who crave a clearly delineated moral to their stories can be driven batty by films of this ilk; more than once I've heard someone ask, apropos of one of these works, "But what was its
point
?"
Crash
, like its predecessors, explores characters so hungry for contact and meaning and understanding in a chaotic universe that they're ready to explode, and oftentimes do. That hunger
becomes
the point.

Set in southern California at year's end, *Crash* features nearly two dozen major characters who encompass most every ethnicity and level of social and financial status imaginable, from street thugs to the working class to the Los Angeles district attorney himself. They couldn't be more diverse, yet they all share a mutual, barely concealed loathing of everyone else; as the D.A.'s wife reveals, "I'm angry all the time, and I don't know
why
." Many whom we meet in
Crash
are vociferous in their contempt for other races, and one of the more remarkable aspects of the film is that we
understand
that contempt, at least from their individual perspectives. (The bravura script, by Haggis and

Bobby Moresco, employs a great deal of shocking dialogue, including some shockingly *funny* dialogue.) As the characters' stories merge and their defenses are dropped, *Crash* becomes larger in scope than its series of set pieces. The movie aims to be about more than tempers rising in southern California; it attempts to take the pulse of the whole *world*, where everyone is irrationally mistrustful and frightened, yet determined, no matter what the cost, to survive. (It makes sense that the movie opens with a highway nightmare and closes with a fender-bender.)

Grand ambition alone, of course, does not a grand movie make, and I'm thrilled to report that *Crash* has been crafted with breathtaking skill. The actors – including Don Cheadle, Matt Dillon, Terrence Howard, Brendan Fraser, Jennifer Esposito, Thandie Newton, Michael Pena, Shaun Toub, and Larenz Tate – don't strike a single false note; even performers who you worry might not be able to keep up – such as Sandra Bullock, Ryan Phillippe, and rap star Chris "Ludacris" Bridges – are stunningly good. Haggis directs with incredible energy and imagination, and at least three sequences – Dillon's cop attempting to remove a passenger from an upturned car, Pena's locksmith hoping to keep store owner Toub from firing his gun, and Phillippe praying that Howard doesn't make the biggest mistake of his life – would be in a battle for the year's absolute finest. In fact, just looking at that list, with the verbs "attempting," "hoping," and "praying," gives a fair indication of the film's emotional power. The drama in *Crash* doesn't come from what the characters do but from what they're *trying* to do. Haggis and company make you empathize with everyone onscreen so completely that, in addition to being on the edge of your seat for most of the film, you can also find yourself close to tears throughout, and yet the movie is exquisitely entertaining. You're willing to take this journey with these characters because, despite *Crash*'s roller coaster of conflicting emotions and allegiances, it grants you emotional release at its close; by the end, you might find it hard to wipe the "*Damn* that was a good movie" smile from your face. As of May 6, 2005, *Crash* is the film of the year. And come December, it could very well still be.

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