"Crash’s Award-Winning Perpetuation of Asian Stereotypes"

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Honors Humanities Core Course H1C

06 June 2011
“We’re always behind metal and glass,” Detective Graham Waters murmurs. “Think we miss that touch so much, we crash into each other just to feel something” (Haggis, Moresco 1). The opening scene of Crash, directed by Paul Haggis, is characterized by this dazed thought as it voices the physical and mental interactions that embody the film’s title. As the story unfolds, numerous characters and their varied lifestyles, personas and ethnicities are introduced, beginning with black Detective Graham Waters and his partner, Hispanic-American Ria. Their lives are later connected to Anthony and Peter, two young, black delinquent boys, who hijack a car belonging to District Attorney Rick Cabot and his wife. As a result, Hispanic locksmith Daniel Ruiz is hired, who later services Persian store-owner Farhad. In another part of lively Los Angeles, white LAPD Officers John Ryan and Tom Hansen exercise force with Cameron Thayer, a black Hollywood director, and his feisty wife, Christine. With such a dynamic cast, Crash’s equally dynamic plot “is about the rage and foolishness produced by intolerance, the mutual abrasions of white, black, Latino, Middle Eastern, and Asian citizens in an urban pot in which nothing melts,” declares acclaimed The New Yorker film critic David Denby. However, in contrast to the momentous stories of the white, black, Latino and Middle Eastern characters, the Asian characters remain hidden in the shadows. The audience receives glimpses of Asian and Asian-American characters in sporadic bursts with minimal dialogue and screen time. Despite the success of the film Crash and its Academy Award for Best Picture of 2005, it fails in providing a fully delineated picture of Asians and Asian-Americans. Some critics acclaim the film for being “one of the best Hollywood movies about race” (Hsu 132); however, rather than equally depicting each ethnicity to paint a realistic picture that accurately reflects the
diversity of America, *Crash* actually “conceals” the Asian character by grossly stunting character growth and, ultimately, aids in perpetuating Asian stereotypes.

The initial encounter the audience makes with an Asian-American character occurs in the first scene, when a Volvo rear-ends Detective Graham and Ria. Detective Ria emerges from the dented squad car and approaches the vehicle of a volatile, shouting Korean woman named Kim Lee. Immediately, racial slurs begin spewing as both women hiss insults at each other, Lee’s Korean accent piercing the icy night air:

KIM LEE: Stop in middle of street! Mexicans! No know how to drive! She blake too fast!

DETECTIVE RIA: "Blake" too fast?? Oh, sorry, you no see my "blake lights?"

(Haggis, Moresco 2)

This is the first view of racism the audience receives as both women instantly begin racial profiling, channeling their anger into verbal stabs. The two women argue a while more until the camera’s focus settles on Detective Graham while Lee’s frantic voice fades into the background—a symbol of her neglected role in the film as a whole. Although Lee appears at the onset of the film as an engaging character, the storyline moves rapidly along and focuses on a different story, essentially limiting Lee’s role to a brief cameo of a hysterical, “bad Asian driver” with poor English. Moreover, while Detective Graham and Ria are shown approximately six minutes later when they investigate a second crime scene, Lee does not appear until the last thirty minutes of the film when she finds her dying husband in the hospital. This obvious imbalance of screen time is the first sign of the lack of an Asian presence in *Crash*. Moreover, the brief portrayal of Lee propagates the Asian stereotype of the “perpetual foreigner” (694). Chris Haddy presents this view in
his article “Automatic Activation of Yellow Peril Asian American Stereotypes: Effects on Social Impression Formation” as he explains the negative typecast of Asians as outsiders who “can never be completely assimilated into U.S. society” (694). While Lee and Ria both represent minorities in a broad sense, Ria, of Latina descent, speaks perfect English and holds a prestigious position in society as a detective. Contrastingly, Lee’s character is ultimately the person at fault for rear-ending the squad car and is depicted as irrational and hot-tempered for bickering with composed Ria. In this opening scene, the first taste the audience receives of the Asian character is bitter, with a stereotypical twist.

As the film progresses, a second notable scene that features an Asian character emerges when Anthony and Peter, driving a stolen Navigator, hit and run over Choi, an elderly Korean man. After stopping to investigate, excerpts from the film’s script reveal Peter’s reaction:

PETER: Holy shit, we run over a Chinaman! (Haggis, Moresco 25)

Peter impulsively gives the Asian man a typical Asian title that blatantly exposes the young criminal’s ignorance. While the brief racial slur does not particularly stand out amid the countless bigoted jeers infesting Crash’s dialogue, Peter’s exclamation presents the first usage of Asian labels. In her article “Asians: The present Absence in Crash,” associate professor of English at the University of Illinois Catherine Prendergast quotes Paul Haggis in his DVD commentary: “We cast two Korean people and then decided to call them Chinamen, because that’s what we do in America […]. We sort of lump all groups together” (347-8). Director Haggis explains his intentions of deliberately using Korean actors in order to give legitimacy to Anthony’s bigoted remark. In this sense, Haggis can be credited for attempting to give Choi authenticity by scrutinizing the Asian
character and devoting the same amount of time in crafting the Asian character as the black, white, Hispanic and Middle Eastern characters. However, Haggis only depicts the outer, superficial layer of Choi and neglects to delve deeper into the Asian side of the racial relationship between the two reckless black men and the injured Asian man. While Crash’s director succeeds in his goal of “[demonstrating] American stereotypes about Asians” (Prendergast 347), he fails to build on the foundation of the Asian character, choosing rather to remain focused on Peter and Anthony as Choi’s story ultimately takes the backseat to the agenda of the young men who run him over. The audience receives the opportunity to learn about the two black men as the film progresses while Choi’s story remains not only untold but unwritten. Essentially, the Asian character acts as a compliment to other characters’ stories rather than as a protagonist in his own right, which is a trend that becomes prevalent—as a later momentous scene highlights.

After Anthony brings Choi’s abandoned van to a chop shop, he discovers a cluster of illegal Asian slaves stuffed in the back, chained to the walls. Treating the immigrants like materialistic goods, the Russian shop owner offers five hundred dollars for each person; however, instead of selling the trafficked slaves, Anthony drives to Chinatown and decides to liberate them onto the street. The Asian foreigners meekly begin to explore the new and foreign land with confused and apprehensive expressions. Dressed in tattered clothes and covered in filth, they exude a sense of barbarianism and destitution, far inferior to even the licentious gangster who releases them. If solely fixing one’s attention on the development of Anthony’s character throughout the film, one might agree with Wallace Katz who, in his New Labor Forum article “Crash: Film Noir in Post-Modern LA,” deems this scene “one of the high points of the film,” as Anthony’s
seemingly virtuous deed contrasts with the “greedy bastard” (123) of a shop owner’s inhumanity and selfishness. However, with a closer look at the Asian immigrants, it becomes clear that the cluster of illegal aliens is devoid of any substantial recognition in the most basic sense of identity as they lack individual names.

Moreover, numerous film reviews and plot summaries of Crash contradict one another in their descriptions of the smuggled foreigners, haphazardly tacking on a seemingly suitable ethnicity to the title of the immigrants. While the Internet Movie Database identifies them as “Cambodian” in contrast to other film synopses that classify the aliens as Thai, the most notable entitlement, or lack thereof, appears in the film’s script where the group of Asian foreigners is labeled “the Illegals” (Haggis, Moresco 112). This blatant lack of definitive ethnic classification barely scrapes the surface of the Asian characters’ underdevelopment, as the individual immigrants become a faceless crowd of pitiful “aliens.” The helpless aliens play such a miniscule role in the overall film that their characterization falls victim to ambiguity, and their ethnicity becomes a trivial fact drowning in a sea of more prominent character descriptions.

As the scene continues to unfold, Anthony slaps a wad of two twenty-dollar bills into the hand of a dazed, male immigrant. When met by a stunned look, Anthony murmurs, “Dopey fucking Chinaman” (Haggis, Moresco 113) before hopping back into the driver’s seat of the van. The last glimpse of the Asian character the audience receives is of a dim-witted Asian alien, unable to comprehend the American’s actions and orders, leaving an overall negative image of the Asian character emblazoned in the minds of the film’s viewers while preserving the “Yellow Peril” stereotype. In The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority, Timothy P. Fong discusses a
1870 poem titled “The Heathen Chinee” by Bret Harte that epitomizes the “powerful anti-Chinese” (189) sentiment during the late 19th century. In his poem, the Chinese character, Ah Sin, is caught cheating during a card game and is then “attacked and beaten by his white competitor, who yells, ‘We are ruined by Chinese cheap labour’” (189-90). Harte’s poem represents the overall negative attitudes toward the unfamiliar, “slant-eyed” Asians who were perceived as intruders on American land. Similarly, Choi fits the description of the unwelcomed “Chinaman,” eager to profit off of the inhumane human trafficking business by selling the aliens for work, thus also fulfilling the stereotype of both the scheming Asian businessman and the Asian worker taking jobs away from Americans. As the scene ends, the camera maintains its focus on Anthony as he grins to himself, content with his righteous decision, before driving off into the night. Ultimately, Anthony’s honorable deed functions to compensate for his previous offenses, giving him the opportunity of something the Asian character will never receive: redemption.

As Prendergast points out in “Asians: The Present Absence in Crash,” redemption is a theme that contrasts with the bigotry and intolerance of Crash’s characters, offering a humane look at otherwise wanton individuals. Arguing on the phone with HMO Administrator Shaniqua Johnson, white LAPD Officer John Ryan makes a racist comment, implying Johnson’s ineptness, before storming off to his squad car. Consequently, Ryan channels his anger and discrimination into pulling over black Hollywood director Cameron Thayer and Christine, his wife for public indecency. Christine, intoxicated and indignant, spits racial insults at Ryan, to which he responds by aggressively pinning her to the side of the car and sexually molesting her during the pat-down. This scene wildly juxtaposes to a later event in which Ryan arrives at the scene of
a hazardous car accident to find that Christine is the injured victim, trapped in the driver’s seat. Her horrified reaction reveals the emotional scarring she has endured from their last encounter, but the dangerous circumstances leave her no choice but to trust the corrupt officer who promises not to hurt her. Ultimately, Ryan rescues the distraught woman and proceeds to whisper reassurances as he protectively cradles her head. Although a dark shadow of prejudice and violation falls on the officer earlier in the film, the redeeming light of heroism illuminates Ryan’s compassionate side, leaving the audience confident in his humanity. The extensive screen time needed to successfully craft such intricate details of the white character richly develops the role he plays that Dr. Ray Sangeeta, director of the American Cultures Program at the University of Maryland, describes as the “[knight] in shining armor” (353). Furthermore, it highlights the inability of the Asian character to even attempt to reach such an admirable pedestal. In comparison, the Asian characters collectively receive “fewer than three minutes of screen time” (Prendergast 348) in the entire film, rendering it virtually impossible for the audience to grasp anything more than the exterior, clichéd view of an Asian person living in America.

A second comparison can be made on the topic of redemption when scrutinizing Anthony’s character at the conclusion of the film. In comparison to the thuggish, spiteful qualities of Anthony the viewers are exposed to earlier in the film, the newly kindhearted black man atones for his previous wrongdoings in his “act of kindness to the anonymous Asians” (Prendergast 348). However, the attention remains on Anthony’s virtuous transformation, as the Asian characters are “present just long enough to be the vehicle for the redemption of others, but not for themselves” (Prendergast 348). Playing a subservient role, the trafficked immigrants are placed as add-ons to Anthony’s story of
personal growth and maturation, and thus robbed of the opportunity to share their own journey of adversity. One argument can be made in the film’s defense by claiming that the anonymous nature of the illegal aliens is merely a directorial decision to exclusively portray America’s view of the very real institution of human trafficking in Asia. However, numerous questions regarding the captured Asian aliens arise as Crash fails to adequately delve into their side of the story: Where are these slaves from? How were they captured? What are they being smuggled for? The inability of the audience to confidently answer these questions without inference exposes the submissive quality of this unidentified group of Asians. Thus, this argument falls short as human trafficking is not clearly presented and fails to educate the audience about the cruel business.

Furthermore, the illegal Asian immigrants collectively embody one third of all Asian characters in the entire film; therefore, one third of all Asian representation in Crash is characterized by the vulnerability, ineptness and anonymity of “beings” jammed into the back of a grimy white van. Although many critics, including Sandra J. Taulbee in her review of the film, praise Crash for its ability to “mirror society” and “[imitate] real life” (251), a look at Los Angeles County’s demographic profile reveals a glaring discrepancy between reality and the film’s depiction of race in the urban metropolis. The 2007 edition of Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation’s report titled L.A. Stats finds “47.3% of the population is Hispanic, 28.8% white non-Hispanic, 14.4% Asian-Pacific Islander, and 9.6% black.” Such quantifiable, unbiased facts present the actual diversity of Los Angeles around the time of the film’s release, countering the film’s reputation of painting a realistic picture of race in America today. As statistics show, the Asian population exceeds the black population of Los Angeles; yet, Crash
emphasizes the role of the black character and neglects to accurately portray the established presence of Asians in the bustling Californian city. Overall, the Asian character remains unjustly neglected and one dimensional, offering viewers a distorted perspective of Asians in America today.

As the champion of the 78th Annual Academy Awards with six Oscar nods, Crash made an explosive impact on American culture in 2005. Its racially diverse cast and riveting storyline attracted a wide variety of viewers, some of whom offered rave reviews of the film. However, the topic of race rises from the seemingly realistic depiction of Los Angele’s demographics as the underdevelopment of the Asian character becomes apparent. While the film endeavors to illuminate the deeply prejudiced mindsets of men and woman alike, stereotypes such as the “perpetual foreigner” and “Yellow Peril” are perpetuated by the neglected roles of the Asian characters. Ultimately, the fervent acclamation of Paul Haggis’s Crash, despite its unrealistic and ultimately harmful portrayal of Asians, reveals the detrimental view of Asians that Americans harbor today. As they overlook, or perhaps readily accept, the minimal, negative depictions of Asians in the film, the reality of the lack of social acceptance and assimilation of Asians and Asian-Americans becomes lucidly apparent.
Works Cited


