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A "Crash" Course in American Racial Ethics: Paul Haggis' Didactic Film in a Humanities Context[1]

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Always try to do the right thing.
Da Mayor to Mookie in *Do the Right Thing*—dir. Spike Lee, 1989

You think you know who you are. You have no idea.
Office Ryan to Officer Hanson in *Crash*—dir. Paul Haggis, 2004

Crash is a film for anyone who has ever introduced a thought or statement with the phrase, "I'm not a racist, but . . ." The "but" is usually followed by the thinker or speaker's latest observations of other people behaving badly in some thoroughly stereotypical way. This film, using intertwining narratives, follows for thirtysix hours, much of it in flashback, a pair of thirty-something L.A. detectives (a black man and Latina woman) and a pair of thirty-something married couples: one the yuppie District Attorney of L.A. and his bitchy wife (both white) and the other a buppie T.V. director and his bitchy wife (both light-skinned black). We also follow a pair of young black carjackers (one an Angry Young Black Man, the other more easy-going); a Hispanic locksmith and his five-year old daughter; plus an Iranian man, his wife and their grown daughter. Peripheral characters—whites, blacks, Asians and Asian Americans—abound, and there are suffering older people, too: the white father of the racist white policeman and the black mother of the black detective. The elderly father has painful prostate problems while the elderly mother is a heroin addict who cannot locate her younger ne'er-do-well son. The rainbow cast interacts with one another as their individual plotlines intersect—sometimes violently.

Screenwriter of *Million-Dollar Baby,* the Academy-Award-winning Best Picture for 2004, and here directing his first major film, Haggis is a highly

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Socratic chider and provocateur forcing us to question both outright bigotry and smug liberalism. Like Socrates, he offers few actual answers, but predicates his assumptions on a good person's innate sense of right and wrong (or in terms of Plato's *Gorgias*, a good man's sense of "justice"). The truth, for both Socrates and Haggis, lies not in easy aphorisms but in the thorny truth-seeking process. *Crash* exists in dialogic relationship with its audience, engaging us in a debate on race and ethics that feels both timeless and painfully contemporary.

The forebears of Haggis certainly include classical ethicists such as Plato and Aristotle, imbibed by Haggis and his collaborators, wittingly or not, with the mother's milk of Western culture. But Haggis' forebears also interestingly include renowned cinematic "race men" such as Spike Lee and John Singleton. Other relatives on the Anglo-American side of the family tree include Paul Anderson Thomas, Robert Altman, and John Sayles—all purveyors of the "braided" plot and all fascinated by LA as a mythical landscape.[2]

Haggis' LA, represented in the film by numerous shots of moving headlights and urban roadway vistas, constitutes an embattled new Ellis Island of the American Psyche. Often dubbed a world City of the Future and partly familiar to all consumers of American popular culture everywhere, LA is currently governed by its recently (since this movie) elected Latino mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, and an Austrian strongman/actor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who improbably reigns from Sacramento. As T. S. Eliot once said in "The Wasteland" (1922) so trenchantly of London, LA is an "Unreal city," even by postmodern standards.

Haggis, who may well trace his multicultural sensitivities to his Canadian birth and upbringing, entered America in his twenties to become a successful and prolific TV writer. Although Haggis' script for *Million Dollar* Baby certainly contained a thorny, ethical end-of-life decision—the injured boxer played by Hillary Swank requesting euthanasia from her manager, played by Clint Eastwood—it was based on the short writings of F.X. Toole and therefore not fully Haggis' own. *Crash*, on the other hand, was co-written from scratch with Bobby Moresco, and was Haggis' own baby from the first.

Haggis couches his ethics lesson as a film *à thèse*. His conceit or thesis idea, heard first in a disembodied voice-over—then we see it is actually Graham (Don Cheadle) speaking to his Hispanic partner and lover Ria (Jennifer Esposito)—is that LA's car culture physically and emotionally isolates its people into ethnic

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2 A. G. Harmon uses the term "braided plot" in his article "Ordered Chaos: Three Films by Paul Thomas Anderson." The probable impact on Haggis of European filmmakers (e.g. Lars von Trier and Dogme 95) is not explored in this particular paper.

enclaves or class-based neighborhoods behind glass and metal. The only time people move is in their cars, likewise made of metal and glass. They tend to "crash" into one another just to *feel* something, something human.

These crashes produce feelings, all right. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people, the "ride" becoming as unpredictable as a carjacking where you, the owner, are thrown into the backseat as a hostage. Actually carjacked himself back in 1991, Haggis said in an interview with Bruce Newman, "We deal with preconceptions during the first twenty minutes of the film. Then I start twisting you around in your seat until, hopefully, you're dizzy" (*San Jose Mercury News,* May 4, 2005, Infotrac OneFile). While he never uses the term "dialectics," Haggis does say in the same interview, "I didn't want to give them any pat answers." Roger Ebert, a big fan of the film, puts it in similar terms: "Haggis is telling parables, in which the characters learn the lessons they have earned by their behavior" (rogerebert.suntimes.com, May 5, 2005).

Critics who dislike the film have found it both preachy and muddled. A. O. Scott, of the *New York Times,* adamantly unimpressed, speaks of its "clumsy reversals" and characters who are mere "ciphers in an allegorical scheme dreamed up by Paul Haggis" (May 6, 2005). Andrew Sun of the *Hollywood Reporter* calls it "another middle-class conscience exercise in multicultural promotion" (September 15, 2004). David Edelstein writing in *Slate* was equally irritated at its didacticism: "The theme is racism. I could say it 500 more times because that's how many times the movie says it, in *every single scene* [sic]." He also finds it illogical: "In the end *Crash* says when you push a vicious racist, you get a caring human, but when you push a caring human you get a vicious racist" ("Crash and Fizzle" slate.men.com/id/2118119). These negative appraisals have some validity. One does indeed feel emotionally manipulated more than once during Haggis' film.

But what irritates some about the film exhilarates others. Says Ebert, " *Crash* is a movie with free will, and anything can happen." He speaks of the "filters of political correctness" being lifted from our eyes. Positive and negative reviewers have at least concurred on the fact that the film is difficult, indirect and has something to do with ethics.

Even with its flaws, *Crash* is a deeply humanistic exploration of vital concepts such as justice within a civil society. Its proper context is therefore among other important works of literature and film that also ask "What is justice?" and "What makes a man (or, nowadays, a woman) good?" Before turning to a close reading of *Crash* itself, let us first consider its classical context and more recent cinematic provenance.

Classical Ethics: Plato on Rodeo Drive

. . .One must beware of doing injustice more than of suffering injustice, and more than everything, a man must take care not to seem to be good but to be so, both in private and in public; and if someone becomes bad in some respect, he must be punished, and this is the second good after being just—becoming so and paying the just penalty of being punished . . .

Socrates speaking in Plato's *Gorgias*, 128.

The epigraph above, a concluding chord in the *Gorgias*, might well have been written in reference to the "good white liberal" Officer Hanson (Ryan Phillippe) in *Crash*. Hanson ends up making a tragic mistake in *Crash* when, acting in what he *thinks* is self-defense, he shoots and kills an unarmed black hitchhiker whom he has been kind enough to pick up while off duty. The victim happens to be our easy-going black carjacker Peter (Larenz Tate) whom we later realize to be the missing brother of Graham (a morally barometric LA detective played by Don Cheadle). The epigraph can also relate to Officer Hanson's previous partner, the racist Officer Ryan (Matt Dillon), as well as the black carjacker Anthony (Chris Ludacris Bridges). It likewise relates to Graham himself in ways to be discussed.

What is most reminiscent of Plato in this film created two thousand four hundred years after Socrates' death, is no single passage, but instead the whole parabolic spirit of ethical inquiry—the Socratic, dialectically-based questioning that forces an interlocutor (here the film audience instead of Gorgias or Callicles) into wondering "What is the right thing to do in a case such as this?"

The film can be studied as a chain of ethical choices rife, as in life, with complicating, mitigating factors. Aristotle's exploration in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the Golden Mean and, more importantly, the nature of justice, also offers helpful insights.[3] Aristotle begins Book Five, a chapter wholly devoted to the subject of justice, with an admission that the "good" exists and that we

[3] This is not to suggest that Aristotle would necessarily champion the contemporary struggle of women and minorities for equal rights. He was, from our modern perspective, a sexist and racist who held women and slaves (often foreigners in Greece) as inherently inferior beings in need of mastery (The Poetics 1469). All references are to the Richard McKeon edition of *The Basic Works of Aristotle*—New York: Modern Library, 2001. Unless indicated, subsequent references in this paper are to The Nicomachean Ethics in the McKeon edition.

sense it, but that it stands afar off, a target for mankind to aim at: "Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?" (935). The good, for Aristotle, is not a Platonic Idea. It is, instead, a target located between extremes of thought and behavior. Shifting his argument to discussing what is just, i.e. the good, specifically as it relates to other human beings (cf. 1021), Aristotle cogently distinguishes between what is merely legal and what is truly just:

> . . . [T]o know what is just and what is unjust requires, men think, no great wisdom, because it is not hard to understand the matters dealt with by the laws (though these are not the things that are just, except incidentally); but how actions must be done and distributions effected in order to be just, to know this is a greater achievement than knowing what is good for the health . . . (1019)

Aristotle notes that the law bids us to be brave, temperate and good-tempered (1003) and to avoid holding onto our anger too long. But it takes a skilled judge (or to follow his previous metaphor, physician) to know how long is too long. An angry man may or may not be justified in his anger:

> The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised. This will be the good-tempered man, then, since good temper is praised . . . for the good-tempered man is not revengeful, but rather tends to make allowances. (996)

Holding on to anger too long and not "making allowances" are a particular problem in *Crash* where several characters are wounded by previous conflicts and seek justice. Officer Ryan (the racist cop played by Dillon) seeks revenge against black people for his father's having lost his janitorial service to affirmative action measures and for the incompetence of a black employee named Shaniqua (Loretta Devine) in a position of power at his father's current HMO. Ryan displaces his anger onto another black woman, Christine (Thandie Newton), who mouths off at him during a traffic stop. Neither woman is guiltless. Shaniqua has unjustly taken out her anger against Officer Ryan on his father, and an inebriated Christine was in the process of performing a sex act on her husband Cameron (Terrence Howard) when Officers Ryan and Hanson pulled over their late-model black Lincoln Navigator (a model that figures prominently in three of the plotlines). Still, Officer Ryan's angry reaction to Christine's actions is extreme and patently

unjust. He sexually molests her under the guise of searching her for concealed weapons. She is, of course, humiliated, as is her husband Cameron, forced, like his slave ancestors, to stand by and helplessly watch as a black woman is abused.

Anger being held too long also figures in the near tragedy perpetrated by the Iranian shop-owner Farhad (Shaun Toub) against the Hispanic locksmith (Michael Pena) and his young daughter. The shop owner thinks the locksmith has cheated him and been indirectly responsible for the second burglary of his store. The audience knows that the locksmith is wholly innocent of having hurt the shop-owner, although perhaps unwise in the ways of safe parenting. He has told his daughter a comforting but dangerous fairytale about a cloak of impenetrability, a fiction that nearly gets her killed.

The notion that seeking revenge breeds injustice seems straightforward and fairly clear. But inappropriately held anger alone does not account for all instances of injustice. Justice is more than the absence of anger; it is “complete virtue in its fullest sense, because it is the actual exercise of complete virtue” (1003). Aristotle continues, “Justice in this sense, then, is not part of virtue but virtue entire, nor is the contrary injustice a part of vice but vice entire” (1004). Injustice is characterized, says Aristotle, by some ill-gotten gain. Logically speaking, such an inequity must be rectified—even if it happened in the past. “Corrective justice will be the intermediate between loss and gain,” notes Aristotle.

A good Aristotelian judge in a trial does not operate on the Pythagorean notion of reciprocity—better known to us as the Hebraic notion of “an eye for an eye.” Instead he corrects the injustice by a more just distribution, taking away from the “gain of the assailant” (1008) and giving it to the victim, thus restoring “equality” and “just proportion” (1009). The importance of “proportionate requital”—as opposed to straight reciprocity—cannot be overstated. Aristotle continues with the following:

> For it is by proportionate requital that the city holds together. Men seek to return either evil for evil—and if they cannot do so, think their position mere slavery—or good for good—and if they cannot do so there is no exchange, but it is by exchange that they hold together. This is why they give a prominent place to the temple of the Graces to promote the requital of services; for this is characteristic of grace—we should serve in return one who has shown grace to us, and should another time take the initiative in showing it. (1010)

Aristotle describes no less than the basis of a civil society, even introducing the key concept of Grace that, in a different form, becomes so important to later Christians.

What has gone awry in Haggis' LA, therefore, can be understood as a lack of Grace, civil Grace. Deluded by stereotypes and/or anger held too long at various people who fulfill negative stereotypes, the uncivil denizens of LA seem to have forgotten how to treat one another humanely. Anthony, played by rapper Ludacris, an Angry Young Black Man *par excellence*—has decided to "liberate" Lincoln Navigators for a living. He has taken it upon himself to practice rectificatory justice for the many real past insults to his people. He believes himself to be acting justly to restore racial equity, albeit at gunpoint. Anthony even has his own race-based code of ethics: he never steals from a fellow black man. He keeps to his code until he unintentionally hijacks Cameron's Navigator. At that moment, he is astonished to find another black man at the wheel who happens to be in a mood to fight back. Cameron is really displacing the anger he feels at the white racist cop(s) who molested his wife Christine during their recent aforementioned traffic stop. The seriocomic altercation between Anthony and Cameron is interrupted by yet another pullover by the LAPD. Cameron dangerously lashes out at the police, as well. Fortunately, one of them is Officer Hanson (Ryan Phillippe) who understands the reason for Cameron's righteous anger against the LAPD, having silently witnessed the sexual assault on Christine the previous evening without intervening. Hanson saves Cameron from the other white cops who are just about to shoot another crazy-acting black man and, from their point of view, quite justly.

Because Hanson has saved him, Cameron is then able to save Anthony, hiding unseen by the cops in Cameron's Navigator which, minutes before, he had been trying to steal. Cameron opens Anthony's eyes to the unreasonable, hypocritical nature of Anthony's personal quest for reciprocal justice. "You embarrass me," says the successful, hard-working Cameron to his misguided black "brother" Anthony. "You embarrass yourself," he concludes. This is the precise moment of Anthony's *anagnorisis* and the *peripateia* in his individual plotline. Although he goes on to steal again—the white van belonging to the "Chinaman" he has previously run down but, thanks to his partner Peter, taken to the Emergency Room—Anthony is redeemed and goes on to save the dozen "Chinamen" (all Asians being called Chinamen by angry blacks in the film) chained to the original "Chinaman's" van. Anthony's saving of the vulnerable, chained "Chinamen" —really illegal Thais or Cambodians as the comic but malevolent chop shop owner points out—is an important act of Grace that helps end the film on a positive note. They represent LA's newest Americans in search of the timeworn, but still somehow valid, American Dream.

Anthony's likeable carjacking partner Peter (Larenz Tate) is unfortunately not around to share Anthony's enlightenment. By this time, he has been killed in the ill-fated hitchhiking incident with the liberal Officer Hanson (Phillippe), the man who "seemed" so good (cf. the epigraph from Plato which began this section).

Officer Hanson is by no means guiltless due to 1) his failure to intervene in Christine's sexual assault by his partner and 2) his failure to stand up to Lt. Dixon (Keith David) a Black officer protecting his own status by cynically hushing up the racial incident involving Ryan. Hanson might be considered, however, a case of what Aristotle calls a "just man" who nonetheless commits "an act of injustice" (1016) when he kills the hitchhiker Peter. Peter, whom the audience knows to be a sometime carjacker but quite good-hearted, is unarmed the night he enters Hanson's car, trying to escape the uncharacteristic LA cold. Peter unintentionally irritates Hanson by not conforming to Hanson's stereotypical expectations of blacks. Specifically, he tells Hanson that he (Peter) has been watching and enjoying skating—a sport blacks stereotypically cannot stand. Hanson therefore thinks Peter is mocking him and dangerous. When Peter tries to pull out the metallic St. Christopher statue from his pocket to show Hanson that it is identical to the one on Hanson's own dashboard, Hanson thinks it is a gun and, in an almost reflex gesture based on his training as a cop, he shoots his innocent passenger. It's Death by Stereotype. Officer Hanson—the just man—has committed a tragic mistake in both a legal and ethical sense. Officer Ryan's dire comment—"You think you know who you are. You have no idea"—the epigraph that begins this paper—has proven tragically true. Hanson the liberal had "no idea" how powerfully conditioned he was by our pervasively racist American culture.

Ethics and the Phenomenology of Film: Trying On Another's Point of View

In engaging us in the dialogic nature of spectatorship and the reversibility of subjectivity and objectivity, the cinema instantiates a deeply felt human requirement for intersubjectivity, a need to be understood ourselves and to be able to see things from another's point of view.

Jane Stadler in "Intersubjective, Embodied, Evaluative Perception: A Phenomenological Approach to the Ethics of Film." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 19 (2002): 246.

Critic Jane Stadler's observations on how film physically and mentally affects its viewers rely on concepts by key French film theorists including Christian Metz (1977), Jean Louis Baudry (1986/1992) and the philosopher Maurice Merleau–Ponty (p. 241 and passim). She likewise relies on Vivian Sobchack, Charles Taylor and Adam Newton, the latter two for the idea of "embedding in webs of interlocution" and "intersubjective dynamic relations of narrative engagement," respectively (Stadler 238).

First and foremost, Stadler suggests, film affects the human senses and the human brain in a unique way, uniquely enabling a certain kind of interior/exterior ethical debate in its viewers. Using the film *Dead Man Walking* (1995) as her exemplary text, she speaks of the capacity of the film medium to work on the "visual, verbal and metaphorical levels simultaneously," thus making viewing a film very analogous to "situations encountered in ethical life" (237). Stadler also notes that ethical insight itself is more than straightforward ratiocination: "[E]thical insight is a felt experience rather than something that can be grasped on a purely conceptual level" (247). It is perhaps for this reason that the great teachers of history such as Socrates and Jesus have so often resorted to parables to reach their disciples.

Stadler says, "Film enables us simultaneously to see, to see how we see (as the film makes visible the process and practice of perception), and to see as though 'through the eyes' of other viewing subjects" (Ibid). The very technology of film, when attended to by an audience, gives us lessons in the phenomenology of perception. Stadler notes the importance of a favorite film convention used to establish a particular character's point of view: "Filmic techniques such as the shot-reverse-shot convention replicate or represent patterns of perceiving and engaging with others that are central to ethical forms of perceiving and engaging" (246). Film can thematize issues of perception both on higher allegorical levels and lower sensory levels (through music, lighting etc.).

Another way of putting this is to say that film engages its viewers in multiple dialogues—both with talking characters or written signs on the screen, plus with itself—including its myriad nonverbal elements. Because of the several forms of interaction involved, Stadler prefers the term "polylogue" to dialogue: ". . . It may be that spectatorial participation in a film is actually more like a polylogue or conversation since we also engage with the characters . . . as they look at each other, and sometimes as they look at us, in a direct address to the camera" (245). Stadler likewise speaks of the multifaceted "cyborg experience" of film viewing which can effect "a transformation and synthesis of perspectives . . . capable of inflecting and refashioning perceptions of self and other" (248).

Crash's Cinematic Ethical Context: "Do the Right Magnolia"

The basic problem that a pluralistic society faces is how to sustain civility, the solicitude that citizens qua citizens have a right to expect from one another.

Alan Mittleman in "Pluralism: Identity, Civility, and the Common Good,"

Modern Judaism 21.2 (2000): 132

The only excuse for calling Paul Haggis a 'white Spike Lee' is to provocatively recall a very recent era when black artists were similarly pigeonholed by inevitable comparisons to whites. Thankfully for both races, such comparisons have now become politically incorrect. Haggis is, of course, his own man, as is Spike Lee. But the highly dialectical nature of Lee's first great hit *Do the Right Thing* (1989) still provides a very useful and reasonable point of departure in analyzing *Crash*.

Set in Brooklyn, New York, also in a brief (two days) period, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (hereafter *DRT*) focuses on a pizza restaurant as a flashpoint of racial conflict, especially, but not exclusively, between blacks and whites, the latter mostly Italian-Americans. It is not exclusively a black/white conflict because, as in *Crash*, Hispanics and Asian Americans also enter the picture. A Korean shopkeeper—desperate to save his store during the climactic race riot—says plaintively to his attackers, "I no white. I Black . . . You. Me. Same" (Hanson 60). Although widely resented by blacks in the neighborhood, the Korean is spared.

DRT has been extensively written about, and specifically in terms of its "dialectical" approach to political issues. Douglas Kellner in "Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics in the Films of Spike Lee" likens Lee to the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, especially in Brecht's Marxist *Lehrstücken* (75). A major difference, Kellner continues, is Lee's very pronounced personal capitalistic bent. Amiri Baraka and bell hooks, have, in fact, accused Lee of being a perpetrator of "cultural identity politics" who is insufficiently radical and insufficiently "counterhegemonic" (Kellner 100). Such 'blacker-than-thou' or 'more-radical-than-thou' tiffs within the black community are targets of satire in several of Lee's films.

Also like *Crash*, *DRT* can be seen as dialectical both within the bounds of its fiction and in its dialogic relationship with its audience. The dialectic dramatized on film is that of L-O-V-E and H-A-T-E, those letters being actually

worn on each hand as brass knuckles by one of the black characters (Musser 38). It is the philosophy of Martin Luther King embodied by the phrase “Do the Right Thing” versus that of Malcolm X embodied by the catch phrase “By any means necessary” or the lyrics to the rap song “Fight the Power” blasted out by Radio Raheem before his death at the hands of police. As Dean McWilliams points out in his article “Bakhtin in Brooklyn: Language in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*,” the Love/Hate Martin/Malcolm dialectic is not a simple Manichean conflict. No one slogan will un-complicate and save the world. The solutions are complex and the voice of truth is truly polyphonic. It is by no means easy to “do the right thing,” and the audience, too, is tacitly brought in for consultation. Philip Hanson in “The Politics of Inner City Identity in *Do the Right Thing*” says, “Throughout *Do the Right Thing* one sees Lee speaking to absent but implied referents.” Lee is, of course, speaking to us. He furthermore, like Socrates and later Haggis, demands of us as his interlocutors our very best answers delivered in a language everyone can understand.

The thematization of language itself is a major point of comparison between *DRT* and *Crash*. Dean McWilliams in his Bakhtinian analysis of *DRT* mentioned above, speaks of the “cacaphony of different accents” on that film’s soundtrack (251). Precisely as in Haggis’ much later LA community depicted in *Crash*, the New York community in *DRT* is deeply split by ethnic communication problems, best dramatized in Lee’s “racial slur montage” (McWilliams 249). Blacks throughout America—NYC to LA—have long been ostracized by whites for speaking nonstandard Black English, a.k.a. Ebonics. Some blacks, in turn, displace their anger by bitterly ostracizing non native-born speakers of English. Mookie (Spike Lee) yells at his illegitimate child’s Puerto Rican grandmother to speak English to his son; Radio Raheem yells at the Korean grocer and his wife to “Speak English, M . . . . . f . . . . . !” (McWilliams 249). McWilliams speaks of this dangerous ethnic division as a kind of “tone-deaf polyglossia” (249).

Haggis’ native-born characters in *Crash* likewise yell repeatedly at the foreigners they cannot understand (Asian-Americans, Iranians, etc.) to “Speak American, M . . . . . f . . . . . !” The “foreigners” respond, Caliban-like, by quickly learning and repeating the words they most often hear: streams of angry invectives and profanities.

Spike Lee’s later films *Malcolm* X (1992) and *Bamboozled* (2000) also provide possible sources, or at least points of comparison, with Haggis’ *Crash*. In Lee’s controversial biopic on Malcolm X, a well-intentioned white liberal girl comes up to Malcolm X (Denzel Washington) to offer her help in his cause, only to be coldly rebuffed. She can be seen as an archetypal figure for all well-meaning white liberals caught up in naïve attempts to ‘do the right thing’ about racism.

Ryan Phillippe's character Officer Hanson is just such a character, especially in his dealings with Lt. Dixon who likewise rebuffs his half-hearted do-goodism.

Lee's *Bamboozled* introduces us to Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) a Harvard-educated African-American in deep denial about his blackness. In an attempt not unlike the efforts of Mel Brooks' eponymous "Producers" to come up with the world's worst musical, Pierre Delacroix (called Dela) comes up with an incredibly racist TV show called *Mantan: The New Millenium Minstrel Show*. He does it to irritate his producer Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport) who, though white, acts hipper and blacker than Dela. (This 'wigger' producer character may also be an indirect inspiration for Tony Danza's Fred in *Crash*.) Like *Springtime for Hitler,* the musical within *The Producers, Mantan*: *The New Millenium Minstrel Show* becomes a horrifying, run-away hit. Audiences even show up in blackface to watch it. *Mantan's* creator Dela, played with a comic edge by Wayans, may have served consciously or unconsciously (intentions are not at issue here) as a model for Paul Haggis' character Cameron (Terrence Howard). Although Cameron is played quite seriously and well by Terrence Howard, now the star of John Singleton's most recent film *Hustle and Flow* (2005), Cameron, like Dela, has some painful issues about his blackness. Like Dela, Cameron is a T.V. director who is accused at one point of not encouraging an actor to be 'black' enough. It is Fred (Tony Danza), his producer and boss, who does the accusing. Cameron is wounded by Fred's racism but feels unable to resist. He re-shoots the scene in question, getting the actor to 'blacken up' his speech as requested. This incident in *Crash* echoes both *Bamboozled* and Robert Townsend's groundbreaking stereotype-attacking film *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987).

Another black-directed film serving as a possible progenitor to *Crash* is John Singleton's classic *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), also seminal in its depiction of LA. Critic Paula Massood says that Singleton's film "First mapped the hood onto the terrain and into the vocabulary of the popular imagination" (90). Cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson has called South Central LA, the setting for *Boyz N the Hood,* a "catastrophic environment" (125). The film is best known, of course, for its depiction of young black men not unlike Haggis' carjackers Anthony and Peter. Dyson speaks of Singleton's characters' "deeply ingrained and culturally reinforced self-loathing and chronic lack of self-esteem that characterize black males across age group, income bracket, and social location" (122-123). Singleton's LA policemen—even black officers—seem bent on harassing blacks. Paul Haggis shows a similar problem some dozen years later.

Singleton's hood is full of people making ethical life-and-death choices. One focal character is Tre, played by a young Cuba Gooding. When his

friend Ricky is murdered by Crenshaw bad guys (fellow young black men), Tre, according to the hood code of reciprocal justice, should seek revenge on his killers. That is what Doughboy, Ricky’s brother does, losing his own life not long after. Doughboy, like many other black men, has descended into the Charybdis of gang revenge killings. Tre fortunately decides not to take part in the counter-attack on Ricky’s killers. Tre’s father, Furious Styles (Laurence Fishburne), has managed to guide him onto a less dangerous path. Dyson points out the importance of ethics in the film calling it a “plausible perspective on how people make the choices they do and on how choice itself is not a property of autonomous moral agents acting in an existential vacuum, but rather something that is created and exercised within the interaction of social, psychic, political and economic forces of everyday experience” (127). Dyson eschews the particular term “dialectics,” but he does mention a related idea: “Singleton is too smart to render life in terms of a Kierkegaardian either/or. His is an Afrocentric world of both/and” (126).

Although Haggis’ carjackers are older and better dressed than Singleton’s young black men, they are all recognizable products of black LA culture. Haggis does not choose to show us Anthony’s family background, but we assume (according to stereotype) that he may come from a broken home. We do meet the addicted single mother of Peter and Graham, the former a doomed Ricky-like character and the latter more akin to the eventually successful Tre, a sadder-but-wiser ghetto survivor.

The final film chosen for contextualizing *Crash* relates both formally—its intertwined or braided plot—and thematically, especially in its depiction of LA’s shallow yuppie whites. It is Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999). Kent Jones described *Magnolia* in a piece for *Film Comment* calling it the story of twelve “almost characters” in six “tenuously connected high-strung situations” (38). It, too, takes place in a few days in LA, but in the wealthy San Fernando Valley area. Anderson, in Jones’ opinion, observes the Aristotelian unities of time and place. A.G. Harmon, writing in *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, goes him one better, adding in unity of action:

> At a dizzying pace, the stories converge, diverge, and re-converge; they appear as random in their overlap as the heat and sunlight and violence of America’s icon city. But in the midst of a cataclysm that strikes each of the characters to his core, their stories come together thematically. And when they do, we gain the larger perspective that tells us they have never truly been apart. (115-116)

Harmon finds *Magnolia* to be Greek (i.e. classical) in another, even more germane way: "Disaster and catastrophe and a Greek sense of story are necessary to awaken us, to wise us up, to help save each other and ourselves" (116).

Jones and Harmon's observations are certainly equally valid for *Crash*, likewise a film based on what Harmon calls "the theme of shocking coincidence" (108). He continues with a statement on *Magnolia* that beautifully appertains, as well, to *Crash*:

> Whatever the answers, these stories are not part of the world of the Enlightenment man, nor of the Modernist wretch, nor even of the Postmodernist clown. They belong to something older, less stylish, more important—a humanist's interest in man's nature and place in the world. (109)

Crash by Crash: A Closer Look at Technique

Persons— all persons or rational beings—are deserving of respect not because of some realized excellence of achievement, but because of a universally shared participation in morality and the ability to live under the moral law.

Bioethicist Leon Kass (16) quoting Immanuel Kant

She blake [sic] *too fas* [sic]!

Ria mocking Asian woman's accent after a fender-bender in *Crash*

Crash begins and ends with loud traffic altercations, in accordance with both its title and with Haggis' stated thesis about LA car culture. People spring eagerly from the vehicles in question, shouting invectives rather than apologies. In the film's first vignette, we meet Graham—whom we have just heard philosophizing in voiceover—and his partner Ria. Stopped in a nighttime line of traffic, they have just been rear-ended by a driver who turns out to be a very loud and obnoxious Asian woman named Kim Lee, played by Alexis Rhee as the Dragon Lady stereotype incarnate. Though she has a classic problem

pronouncing "r," she has fully mastered LA's favorite Anglo Saxon obscenity, the one beginning with "F." Ria, the Hispanic female detective, takes her on in a shouting match while Graham ventures over to see what has caused the initial traffic back up. He comes upon a crime-scene stake out, and there is a brief close-up on a single sneaker, now marked with an evidence stake where it fell. Identifying himself as a fellow member of the LAPD, Graham asks workers at the scene what is going on. "Dead kid," he is told. He slowly starts walking in the direction of the corpse, pausing, so it seems (since we are getting his point of view) at a sneaker. Is there something familiar about the sneaker? On a first viewing, the audience simply absorbs it as a conventional signifier of some violent event. As Graham continues his walk towards the still obscured corpse, partially hidden by roadside desert vegetation, we get a cut to a wholly different vignette labeled onscreen as "Yesterday." The film will remain in flashback—relative to the 'dead kid' scene—for most, though not all, of its remainder.

In this new vignette, we enter *in medias res* another altercation, this one at the counter in a gun shop. The white gun store owner (Jack McGee), already irritated by something, yells "Yo, Osama! Plan the jihad on your own time!" The remark is addressed to a vaguely Semitic-looking man who answers irately in heavily-accented English, "You're making insult at me?!" The gun storeowner behind the counter now has a new example of the customer's poor English to use as verbal ammunition against him. He mocks him further, and the brown-skinned man grows angrier by the moment. His adult brown-skinned daughter stands between the arguing men. The storeowner takes his customer for an Arab, maybe an Iraqi somehow responsible for the deaths of American soldiers working to rescue his benighted countrymen. "I'm American citizen!" protests the brown-skinned man. His daughter gets him to move outside the store, and then she turns back to the nasty owner, still behind his counter. She demands the gun that her father was trying to buy or a return of his money. Her English is fluent and unaccented. So the gun owner, now on equal linguistic footing with his adversary, stoops to new tactics: highly insulting sexual innuendos. Harassed and exhausted, she takes the paid-for gun and asks for one of the boxes of ammo included in its advertised price. The storeowner launches into a litany of ammo brands that will fit the gun. To escape the lascivious owner, she hurriedly says she will take the bullets in a red box displayed behind him. "You know what these are?" he snarls condescendingly. She indicates that she doesn't care, takes her newly acquired gun and ammo, and stalks out of the bigot's store.

The scene has been shot in rapidly intercut medium-distance two-and three-shots, often showing the actors from the waist up. Close-ups are reserved for facial reactions or for what might prove important details: the red box of ammo, for instance. (We learn much later, in a key plot twist, that this box of ammo contains blanks.) The frenetic pace insinuates short tempers all around, while medium shots yield us glimpses of partial people. The oft-used medium shot seems especially apropos in a film about people treating people as Partial People, i.e. ethnic stereotypes. Haggis will stick with these conventions—and the psychological impact they tacitly have on the viewers—throughout his film.

The third vignette starts with a long-to-medium shot of two young black men exiting the glass door of a restaurant already deep in conversation. It continues in medium-distance tracking shots following the two. Occasional shifting angles convey their individual point of views:

> **Anthony:** Did you see any white people in there waiting an hour thirty-two minutes for a plate of spaghetti? And how many cups of coffee did we get? . . .
>
> **Peter** [after pointing out that neither had ordered coffee]: We didn't get any coffee that you didn't want and I didn't order and that's evidence of racial discrimination?! Did you notice that our waitress was black?
>
> **Anthony:** And black women don't think in stereotypes?? . . . [There follows a brief diatribe by Anthony on the subject of black women stereotyping all black men.] That waitress sized us up in two seconds. We're black and black people don't tip. So she wasn't gonna waste her time. Somebody like that? There's nothing you can do to change her mind!
>
> **Peter:** How much did you leave her?
>
> **Anthony:** You expect me to pay for that kind of service?

Peter laughs heartily, able to recognize a punch line that reveals his friend's foolish hypocrisy. Anthony, though clever and politically aware, is unable to see the circular, tautological nature of his own reasoning. Welcome to the world of self-fulfilling prophecies, the Shangri La of Stereotypes. The same vignette continues with only Peter and the more clear-thinking audience-members able to recognize this pair's uncanny resemblance to Abbott and Costello.

We get a brief cut over to a well-dressed white couple walking towards Peter and Anthony on the same sidewalk. They are *"in medias bicker"* mode, something to do with the husband's talking by cell phone with his assistant during dinner. Brendan Fraser is playing the husband Rick. The wife Jean is likewise played by a major star, Sandra Bullock, lending her talents, like Fraser, to this small ensemble role.

Spotting the oncoming pair of young black men, Jean instinctively huddles up more closely to her husband, taking his arm as if for protection. Anthony, ever alert for racism, notices her gesture and complains to Peter:

> **Anthony:** Did you see what that woman just did?
>
> **Peter:** What? She's cold.
>
> **Anthony:** She got colder as soon as she saw us!

Anthony has a new excuse to lecture Peter on the ills of white racism, pointing out that in such a predominantly white section of LA it is they, the blacks, who should be seized with fear rather than this silly woman approaching them. There Peter and Anthony are, only two of them, in a "sea of over-caffeinated white people" in a city well patrolled by the "trigger-happy LAPD." By now the audience is thoroughly enjoying screenwriters Moresco and Haggis' undeniable skill with comic-ironic dialogue. Anthony seems fully justified in his complaint against white racists who foolishly fear all black men as potential gang bangers. Even level-headed Peter nods in agreement. In this situation it is surely the outnumbered blacks who should logically be afraid. The next line is Anthony's:

> **Anthony:** Why *aren't* we [afraid]?
>
> **Peter** [disingenuously]: 'Cause we got guns?
>
> **Anthony:** You could be right . . .

The two friends take little time to enjoy the joke they have made between them.

The audience looks on in utter amazement as the two pull out large previously concealed guns and proceed to violently accost the white couple, Jean and Rick, whose fears they had just been mocking. They push Rick to the ground, thrust a gun in Jean's face, and grab the car keys in Rick's hands. Tires squealing, Anthony and Peter swerve off in their prize leaving the rightful owners standing aghast in the street.

Anthony mocks Peter for trying to put a "Voodoo-ass" St. Christopher's statue on the Lincoln Navigator's dashboard. Peter retorts by mocking his driving. They speed on to their destination: a busy LA chop shop. The St. Christopher's statue and Navigator will both reoccur as vital plot elements, as already indicated.

The audience's moral/ethical dilemmas are just beginning. These witty young black men, so politically hip and sensitive to blacks' being stereotyped, have just fulfilled the audience's most serious negative, stereotypical expectations. They have shown themselves to be the very 'thievin' Negroes' every white racist since slave times has assumed them to be.[4]

The next vignette involves Graham and Ria investigating the shooting of a black undercover narcotics cop by a white detective named Conklin who, of course, maintains that he did not know his victim was a cop. Our first assumption, along with Graham, is that Conklin is a racist and in the wrong, or in Graham's words: "Looks like Detective Conklin shot himself the wrong nigger." So begins the least satisfying of Moresco and Haggis' plotlines and the one that feels most forced. In later developments, it will emerge that the black undercover detective whom Conklin shot really *was* a dirty cop and probably high on coke when he was killed (negative black stereotype fulfilled again). Conklin, however, has already killed two blacks under suspicious circumstances. No one witnessed the two cops' confrontation, so it will finally be up to Graham to decide whether or not to sacrifice a probably innocent (this time) Conklin on the LA District Attorney's altar of Good Public Relations with the Black Community. Graham eventually turns down an implicit bribe from the DA's henchman Flanagan (William Fichtner). He cannot, however, turn down Flanagan's next offer—to quash a warrant out for the arrest of Graham's brother whom we shall later learn is Peter.

The next vignette after the Conklin plot is first introduced involves the second time we meet Jean and Rick. Following their traumatic, violent encounter with carjackers Anthony and Peter, Jean and Rick are now in their luxurious LA home. High angle shots reveal sumptuously tiled large rooms, tastefully decorated for Christmas. We see a Hispanic man kneeling to work on a door lock. As the camera moves us from room to comfortable room, it picks up a striking painting on the wall. It is a large full-length female nude that we come

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[4] Lovalerie King very usefully traces this stereotype in the works of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison and others in an article entitled "Counter-discourse on the racialization of theft and ethics in Douglass's Narrative and Jacob's Incidents." *Melus* 28: 14 (Winter 2003): 55, via Infotrac OneFile.

to associate with Jean, Rick's irritable trophy wife whom he tends to objectify just like an expensive painting. Rick, it turns out, is the District Attorney of LA and in this scene he is first and foremost teed off about having been carjacked by, of all people, *blacks*. It is a politically inexpedient time for him, courting, as he is, the black vote. He is also fearful of alienating "the law-and-order" folks on the right hand side of his supporter spectrum, should he underreact to the incident.

Jean, meanwhile, is unhappy at having been assaulted at gunpoint by the carjackers. She displaces her frustration onto the locksmith, still submissively on his knees changing her locks to prevent further molestation by the bad black carjackers. But because of his hairstyle and tattoos, Jean sees the locksmith as a likely gang member who will pass on a copy of her new keys to his "gang banger" amigos. She says all this loudly to her husband, in earshot of both her Hispanic maid, Rick's swarm of multicultural assistants in the living room/situation room, and the locksmith himself. Rick, whose only fear is being politically incorrect and therefore losing a vote, treats her like a child. She, in response, tries to emasculate him for not having saved her from the carjackers.

As already indicated, the locksmith turns out to be a thoroughly innocent man working hard to provide for his young five-year old daughter and his wife. We soon meet him in his own home, festooned, just like Rick and Jean's, with the proudly posted, colorful drawings of a very young resident artist. We never meet Rick and Jean's young son James (he is asleep off camera), but there is no reason to doubt that he is loved. The posted child's paintings tell us that. They make the same implicit statement in the home of Daniel, the locksmith. Hispanics love their children just as much as whites. To wit, Daniel and his wife have just moved their daughter from a neighborhood where she was nearly struck by a stray bullet and thoroughly traumatized by the experience.

The scene between Daniel and his daughter, the former lying down on the floor to speak with his daughter hiding under her bed in fear of another gunshot, is beautifully acted by both adult and child. Daniel (Michael Pena) offers his initially skeptical daughter an invisible cloak that he says will protect her from all harm. Eager to believe, she does, setting up the horrifying, climactic scene with the Iranian shopkeeper who tries to shoot her father and apparently hits her instead.

Haggis shoots that latter scene using both real and surreal touches. Daniel strains his mouth in a silent scream, sure that his daughter has been finally and fatally struck by a bullet. Her anguished mother looks on in horror; even the

Iranian assailant—himself, as we know, a father—stands stock still in dream-like horror at the thought of having shot the innocent child who has jumped into her father's arms (and thus into the path of the bullet intended for him) in order to 'protect' him with her magic cloak.

Haggis achieves his dream-like effect—making us feel inside a moment of unbearable violence—by using Mark Isham's "anxious electric score" (*Entertainment Weekly* critic Lisa Schwarzbaum's phrase) building to a crescendo, but also moments of silence (e.g. the scream). He uses little or no discernable slow motion, but one feels trapped in a moment lasting infinitely long in its sheer raw painfulness. There are two other similarly dream-like climactic scenes in the film.

One is the anguished moment, near the end of the film, when Graham and Peter's heroin addict mother looks in at the morgue window and sees her son Peter's corpse. She shrieks in anguish, sinking to her knees in her surviving son's arms. That effect of pain beyond pain is achieved by shooting the scene mostly over the shoulder (point of view) of the mother, very skillfully acted by Beverly Todd. We see the surviving son, perhaps inured to such scenes by his police training, mostly from the back or in profile. We never see the body. We see only the mother's horrified slow-quick sinking reaction. Graham, in a vain effort to comfort her, vows to find the killer. We then hear her cruel words of anger displaced onto her living son: "I know who killed him." There's a very brief pause of surprise on his part. She plunges in the emotional knife: "You did." Graham's mother has convinced herself that it was Graham's indifference to his brother, some Cain-like failure to keep tabs on him that really killed him. And so she lashes out at the only son who remains, the 'good' son, who is helpless to defend himself against her. He mercifully allows her to go on mistakenly thinking that it was Peter who filled her refrigerator with groceries before he died. The audience knows that this act of filial duty was actually performed by Graham.

The other dream-like climactic scene about two-thirds through the film, is the rescue of Christine (the Thandie Newton character) by Officer Ryan, the very policeman who molested her the night before. Again, Haggis shocks us by the very unlikely, but somehow believable coincidence in his plotlines.[5] We come upon yet another line of stalled traffic. The reason for the back up is unclear until we suddenly see, point of view of Officer Ryan, a recently overturned

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[5] It was Aristotle, writing in *The Poetics*, who said, "A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility" (1482).

vehicle. Other policemen are on the scene but only beginning their rescue work. We share the heightened reality of Ryan as he rushes (again both quickly and slowly) into mortal danger.

We are suddenly inside the overturned vehicle, still point of view of Ryan, but we begin to sense another point of view, as well. We realize the trapped driver, hung upside down in her own seatbelt, is familiar. It is Christine. When Christine realizes her ‘savior’ is last night’s tormentor, she is horrified and struggles against him; he, caught in forced, intimate proximity with his former victim, tries to calm her and succeeds by calling her attention to the ominously dripping gas and fire in a nearby vehicle. The gas flows inexorably towards the car containing Christine. Both Ryan and she realize that an explosion and engulfing inferno are imminent.

The fire reaches Christine’s car, and Ryan is pulled backwards (point of view of Christine) by his fellow police. It is truly too late. He cannot save her. But he, miraculously, shakes off his would-be rescuers and doggedly plunges back into the burning car. As if in a dream, he grabs and pulls her free. In the next shots, he carries her away in his arms from the danger as if she were a child or lover. There is a heroic, all-American look to the shot, strongly reminiscent of scenes of heroic firefighters and policemen risking and sometimes losing their lives to pull people from the burning World Trade Towers on 9/11.

Ryan’s heroism has miraculously trumped his racism. He stands redeemed. Christine, now able to walk on her own and being led away by others, looks at him in disbelief over her shoulder (We are back to his point of view).

The last montage in the film shows each individual plotline concluding and the various plotlines being actively braided together. Some of the climactic scenes have been accompanied by women’s chanting sounding sometimes Gregorian, sometimes vaguely Islamic. But the end of the film is accompanied by the first song on the soundtrack whose words we are encouraged to consciously listen to. It is called “In the Deep” and is sung by Bird York in a tone and mood reminiscent of Aimee Mann’s ballads in *Magnolia*.

The worst of the racists in the film have been chastened. Jean, the DA’s wife, has learned that she has no truer friend than her Hispanic maid Maria. It took only a slip on her laboriously polished wooden floor and a sprained ankle to teach her the lesson. She is lucky. The DA, less obviously redeemed, is seen peering through the window of his plush digs, possibly contemplating the next election. Anthony, probably still unaware of his friend Peter’s gruesome fate, now deigns to ride public transportation. In an earlier scene with Peter, he

had allowed as how the large windows on busses were designed explicitly to humiliate the people of color who habitually ride them.

Anthony, in his solo bus-riding scene, jumps impulsively off the bus, steals the van belonging to the "Chinaman," and takes it to sell at the chop shop. It is there that he and the slimy chop shop owner discover the dozen illegals chained within. Anthony, as previously mentioned, now has grown enough ethically to decline (off camera) a considerable amount of money and to let the poor refugees go (on camera), even giving them his own money for their presumed favorite stereotypical food: "Chop Suey."

The film's ending has also revealed that the "Chinaman" (actually a Korean) Anthony hit with the Navigator both survived the incident and was not so innocent as we first assumed. We see a hospital scene in which he is joyfully reunited with—of all people—the Dragon Lady who began the film. We then realize that the two of them are making a killing importing illegal refugees to sell into virtual slavery. The "Chinaman" has been "punished" by being hit by Anthony and Peter's car and nearly dragged to death under the chassis. His wife, however, remains unpunished and unscathed, fire-breathing Dragon Lady to the last moment.

Officer Ryan's father is seen continuing to suffer the torments of prostate problems. If we are to believe his son's tale to the HMO lady, the father is truly an innocent party who suffers unjustly. In a wonderful comic touch of retribution, his tormentor, the HMO official Shaniqua, at least gets some chastisement in the form of a minor car accident. She leaps from her car; those who have hit her leap from theirs. There is a cacaphony of invectives, some heavily accented or not even in English. "Don't talk to me unless you talk American!" hollers Shaniqua. The diurnal cycle of car crashes is apparently beginning again.

There is some evidence, however, that this time it may go better. The marriages of Jean and Rick and Christine and Cameron have been, at least temporarily, mended. Our last glimpse of Cameron has him stopping by the roadside to watch a bonfire. The air is filled with ashes. We have, after all, witnessed a minor holocaust. But then we realize it is also probably snow, improbably falling in the LA night. The film has looped around and past the moment when the flashback mode first kicked in. Graham has discovered that the "dead kid" by the road without his sneaker is Peter. Peter's killer, Officer Hanson, has discovered he is capable of murder. We realize that it is probably Hanson's car that burns out under the falling snow, his way of trying to remove the physical evidence of Peter's having been in it. The snow falls on the just and

the unjust. But could it also perhaps be a symbol of Grace descending on this thoroughly messed-up city?

Like Spike Lee in *DRT*, Haggis chooses an open, ambiguous ending for *Crash*. All’s not lost, but we are not really sure exactly what has been gained. As Charles Musser says (of *DRT*) “Both thesis and antithesis are necessary in the struggle for liberation and racial equality” (38). Racial stereotypes have been reinforced in a most worrisome, politically incorrect way. But they have likewise been exploded, their smithereens drifting slowing to earth like snowflakes. LA remains an Unreal City, but perhaps somewhat less disturbing than before, having served as the site of a rigorous, if inconclusive, lesson in American racial ethics.

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