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### Checking in with the Other: Cultural Identity in *Crash*

I'd like to thank Syfr for inviting me to speak with you here today, and to recognize our Sundance location by discussing a little bit about film with you. Let me briefly tell you where I'm coming from. I'm British, and I teach film studies at the University of Utah just up the road in Salt Lake City. I came to the U.S. after an undergraduate education in England to do a doctoral degree at USC in LA--and I've occasionally wondered how I would have managed at an American High School. They come over as pretty intimidating institutions in the movies—and that's where I get a lot of my images of them—having just had a son, I suppose that will change in due course. Anyway, *my* experience reflects the fact that large parts of the world do get their sense of just what this country is like from watching films; like Americans in many walks of life, you are perceived by the rest of the world though your presentation by Hollywood. And the opposite is true too to large extent—if, for example, you took Hollywood's typical presentation of a Briton at face value, you would be forced to assume, I think, that the few who are not villainous are dining with the Queen on a regular basis.

I actually teach a lot of *Non-Western* film, especially Middle Eastern Cinema, and I will be showing you a little of one West African film today. I also occasionally teach a class on film and urban space that allows me to talk about issues of race, class and gender in American society. Having lived in Los Angeles for almost 10 years, that city often serves as a basis for such discussion and, it is the setting for the movie *Crash*, my main example this morning. I'll be raising issues here in a context quite different from that with which you are most familiar and for which purpose you are gathered here, but I hope that looking at what people have liked and found troubling in this film and how it can be used to stimulate discussion will itself be stimulating. I will say a little bit about how to talk about films and use films, and we'll finish, perhaps, by discussing ways you might

do this. Before, I get to the movie, however, I'd like to throw out a few succinct personal anecdotes—just a few of my own experiences that might, consciously or not, influence how I react to *Crash*'s view of life in a multi-ethnic U.S. city. (Presumably we could all recall many such instances of how stereotypes have been challenged or race brought unexpectedly to the fore in our lives.)

First—to challenge a stereotype perhaps—I picture myself in Los Angeles, spending a great deal of time sitting on a park bench which occupied the porch of the apartment in which I lived—I knew so many of my neighbors, because I was so often out in the sun working—I haven't had such an experience of community *anywhere* else I have lived.

Two—Another LA story: For a fair while I went down to a bar on Pico Boulevard called the Paradise club. At first with a (white) friend, partly to play pool/snooker. Although the area in which I lived was racially mixed—black and white--the Paradise was pretty much all black: only very occasionally did I see anyone else white. Well, as one does in a bar, I got to know people--and became more and more of a regular: I've always enjoyed getting away from my work, mixing with other people, those with different interests and concerns, when I am on my own time--and perhaps the racial difference was a part of what made me enjoy the Paradise, though I don't think it consciously entered my head either when I first started going or later as I became a regular. (And one pleasure of *being* a regular, I can tell you, was being able to answer the phone on the bar with the greeting "This is Paradise, Can I help you?") Anyhow, after a time a guy told me that for quite a bit at first, when I had been going there mostly with my friend, the bar had assumed we were the police. (Why else would two white boys be there?)

Three—And now we are in Utah--I once had a student in a class who was a real pain—she really thought she was something special, and I have to say I disliked her—she failed the class because she was disruptive, didn't do the work or didn't do it properly etc. Well she complained about me to the head of the Program where I was teaching. She said her bit to that person, I said mine—I wasn't overly concerned, being sure of my grounds. Then, quite out of the blue, the Program head asks her, something like: "Do you think that this problem was racially-motivated"—she was Persian—and, without pausing

she said: “No. That has nothing to do with it.” Well, at that moment my dislike for the student dissipated a good deal, but I took umbrage at the head: where did he get off introducing racism into the mix with no prompting whatever. Shouldn’t you at least *assume* that your employees are not—unless something indicates otherwise.

Finally, number four—there aren’t so many African Americans in Salt Lake City. However, we have a new Dean of Fine Arts who is. Talking with some colleagues soon after his arrival, one who did not know him asked which one he was when he passed by in the company of a couple of other people. To my surprise, the person next to me started to describe various of Raymond’s attributes but not his color—needless to say the people he was with were *not* African-American. Why not say; “He’s the black man, the African-American”—no danger of mistaking him then. Is that taboo, I wondered? That’s what I would have said—we’re just distinguishing him visually from other people here not talking about what makes him the person, or the Dean he is.

Well, I hope that some of these anecdotes may resonate as we talk about *Crash*, and maybe they will stir you to think about with which of your experiences discussion of the film most resonates. This is an independent film—it’s the oldest joke in the book that they should really be called *dependent* film--rather than a big studio production—and it’s been a big success, costing about \$7.5 million, and grossing something like \$55 million at the domestic box-office, and \$180 million world wide, while, of course, winning the Oscar along the way. *Crash* is a social melodrama, one that is framed as a series of vignettes, somewhat like a roundelay in literature; that is, it has multiple, simultaneous and overlapping plot lines, and is in the tradition of several of the films of Robert Altman, notably *Short Cuts*, as well as P.T. Anderson’s *Magnolia*, and Lawrence Kasdan’s *Grand Canyon*. All these examples are set in Los Angeles, and the last is specifically about race—though just black and white. Indeed, I think *Grand Canyon*, at least, is specifically referenced by *Crash*, because it is a film that starts off by having a character tell us that all the people leaving a Lakers game in Inglewood live their lives in fear and follows it up by having protagonist (Kevin Kline) break-down in a South-Central-cum-Inglewood block that has run-down African-American gang-territory written all over it. Sure enough he is soon threatened by a group of black thugs—and, just as unsurprisingly considering

the genre, rescued by a black tow-truck driver and all-round good-egg, played by Danny Glover. This is the archetypically opposite setting from the Westwood/UCLA-environs location in which we meet *Crash*'s fast-talking, car-jacking team at the beginning of that film, as they discuss the fact that they are perceived as a threat even in *that* location.

*Crash* then, more specifically, is what we might call an urban race film—a category in which we must mention both New York's *West Side Story* and *Do The Right Thing*. There are also some interesting if less obvious choices. Back in Los Angeles, I think of the undercurrent of racial threat that justifies the title of *Chinatown*, and even of the future-set *Blade Runner*. The language of the racial slur is a prominent marker in these films and in *Blade Runner*, the escaped replicants—androids, if you will—are referred to as skin-jobs by the police captain, prompting Harrison Ford's Deckard to note that “Bryant was the kind of man who called black men, ‘niggers’.” The power of *Blade Runner* derives partly from the sympathy we feel for the enslaved replicants who are literally less than human, but who show at least as much humanity as the human beings, who, in turn, are *dehumanized* by their role as an oppressing master-race. *Blade Runner* is a version of the dystopic LA-film—indeed it spawned the phrase ‘Blade Runner scenario,’ as an undesirable vision, with problematic racial overtones, of what the city would be like in the future. A contemporary-set LA dystopia is *Falling Down* in which Michael Douglas is driven crazy by the traffic and abandons his car in order to rampage back through town to Venice, appalled by all he sees. The car, its apparent necessity in life, and, to some extent its consequences for the city-scape, are a big part of the problem in *Falling Down*. The automobile is evidently crucial to *Crash* as well, though primarily as a metaphor and a location—the film is not so much a view of the effect of architecture or even roads on people's lives, but just being in automobiles. The idea is that riding in cars cuts people off from each other, but crashes--literal or symbolic--bring them together. And your first **handout** lists the films I have mentioned and a few others.

Paul Haggis, writer-director of *Crash* is a long-time LA-resident. Established as a television writer, he shot to screen-writing fame with the success of his Clint Eastwood-directed *Million Dollar Baby*, 2004's Oscar winner, and Eastwood is currently at work on Haggis's script for *Flags of Our Fathers* about Iwo Jima, while Haggis himself retools

the latest Bond movie, *Casino Royale* and works on *The Black Donnellys*--apparently a crime-show, but presumably with some ethnic overtones--to air in the Fall on NBC. He is the co-founder of Artists for Peace and Justice—and I really can't find out much about that organization, but he is evidently a Hollywood liberal, and perhaps not the most obvious collaborator for the Republican Eastwood. The original idea for *Crash*, he tells us, came from his being the victim of a car-jacking outside a video-store on his way home one night. He kept wondering who the car-jackers were.

I *wonder* how much that original stimulus has stayed with the film? David Howard, founder of the USC screenwriting program and best-selling author of how-to books on screenwriting claims that many films can be summed up in one word that identifies a theme for the film. What would you say it might be for *Crash*? Any ideas? . . .

Well *fear* is the first word that comes to mind perhaps. Fear of what? Of strangers? Of both contact/connection and of lack of that contact/connection. And fear which is often unjustified. Haggis locates it as being specific to our time: “after 9/11, we became just terrified of everybody, including our neighbor. . . “ (Vancheri) he has said. What else? Alienation?: Lonely people lashing out in order to connect, to feel something. Anger? Victimization? Characters are victimized by racial prejudice, by the health care system, by the cops—but the other causes are subsumed here to race. And, such is the structure of the script, victims commonly become the *victimizers*—this is most clearly, comically, but perhaps troublingly established near the beginning of the film when we see that pair of African-Americans strolling through the brightly-lit, buzzing streets of Westwood or some such vicinity. Having complained about stereotypical reactions based on race—and shared by both blacks and whites--and having discussed just how unwarranted they are; having clearly identified themselves as the victims of an internalized racism, the pair proceed to defy *our* expectations by taking the car, turning victimizers and one might say *fulfilling* the stereotype they have been kicking against. To take another example, the Korean victim of the hit and run, gentle and dignified in hospital, turns out to be nothing less than a slaver of Cambodian refugees. And of course, it is principled, compassionate, non-judgmental Officer Hanson, ridiculed by his superiors, who turns out to be Peter's killer. In the case of Matt Dillon's Officer Ryan, the situation is somewhat different. Although at first we do see him as the victim of an

uncaring Health Care system—he is on the phone trying to get help for his father—he very quickly resorts to verbal racism, and then his (shocking) victimization of Christine and Cam. But, of course, he will soon surprise us by his heroic rescue of the woman he has previously abused—earlier she had been only a representative of a race (though perhaps not the one he had thought when stopping her); later she is a person. The character who refuses to turn into a victimizer, and thus becomes the film’s moral center, is Daniel (the Latino locksmith). Meanwhile, the Thais or Cambodians are treated as a plot-device by the film and never given the chance to make such a transition. I would add that chance plays a big role in determining how each character’s own limited views manifest themselves, and that fear of the unknown, the foreign, is endemic. Personal insecurity is a primary cause of that fear and of racism—one might make a comparison to homophobia here—so that even seemingly benign faith in the unbreakability of stereotypes can be tragic: Hanson *cannot believe* that Peter has written a country song and likes ice-skating and hockey—but he has, he does. He is an individual before he is a representative African-American, but fear leads to classification leads to rigidity, and, in this case, to tragedy. Which is not to say that racial/national pride, that cultural identity is unimportant, far from it, and to have it willfully or ignorantly discounted—as happens to Ria, with her Savadorean/Puerto Rican heritage (but seen as Mexican) and Farhad who is a Persian not distinguished from an Arab—is very painful. (And indeed, as an aside, I do find the conflation/confusion over the overlapping terms of Arab, Middle Eastern and Moslem within American culture quite striking.)

Perhaps stating the theme of the movie requires a phrase: “The pressure-cooker of life,” say—in which we either disconnect or crash. Los Angeles’s auto-driven sprawl gives this a different inflection from the single block of Bed-Stuy location of Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing*. Driving in LA acts as metaphor for the human predicament. Indeed, Haggis, interviewed by *The Boston Globe* explains that “ . . . I knew I wanted to talk about LA, because LA troubles me. . . [it] lacks the kind of human contact that you have, for example, here in Boston. In LA, people travel 50 miles to visit fake city streets, like the . . . Universal City Walk, where they can walk among strangers, be jostled and touched, where they can feel humanity—and they don’t even know why they are going there. I think there is a very deep need in us to interact with strangers.” (Brokaw) Well

the faked streets at Universal certainly pack in the crowds, but Haggis presents a stereotyped, caricatured image of the city—one that ignores Latino Broadway, hip Melrose, multi-cultural and dimensional Venice, Santa Monica’s Third Street Mall etc. And perhaps this kind of simplification and exaggeration speaks to the problems with *Crash*.

Still, before we get to them, a word more about its structure. . . . *Crash* is designed like a series of positions or roles on a grid that people swap into and out of. To use Stephen Hunter’s phrase it is a “random pattern movie,” This has made some audiences uncomfortable with its unreal coincidences. (Though this is a criticism that those of us in academia are liable to discount, perhaps citing Matisse’s reply to the spectator who pointed out that the woman in his painting had one arm longer than the other: “You are mistaken, Madame, that is not a woman, it is a painting.” This is a film, not reality.) Still there is a danger of the characters in *Crash* seeming like pawns on a chessboard undergoing a series of ironic reversals (see Sickinski) --or pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, or, picking up on the crash metaphor, parts of a pinball machine. The tightness of the formal structure is emphasized by the film’s limited time period: imprecise but something between 24 and 36 hours---with stress, and perhaps hope, added by its being Christmas and ready to snow. (In contrast to the hottest day of the year setting of *Do The Right Thing*.) *Crash* adopts a device common to the narrative structure of Hollywood cinema—it begins at or near the end of the story and then shows how things reached such a pass. In addition the very end of the film features another car crash, instilling the sense of the whole merry-go-round repeating as we see Shaniqua launching into insults with an unnerving similarity to those Ria used at the start.

Let’s take a look at the opening of the film and those first words of Graham’s.

[clip: start of the film. 2:30]

[Discussion: I don’t know what you see in the lights? (Wire? Strings of DNA?) This scene reminds me of a character coming round in, say, a trauma recovery room—and Ria says that Graham’s knock on the head explains his speech: it’s a pretty nasty thing to say to somebody who has just been spun around in the road—it’s not as if he is swearing at her or something—Ria is the movie’s first example of intolerance.]

Well, *Crash* won the Oscar to the surprise of many, but it also earned its own share of insults, one might say, from audiences and critics. I've broken down the main complaints into three sections, but let me start by asking you? What bugged you. troubled you about the film? Do you have problems with it? Anything immediately spring to mind?: [Discussion]

1) Although *Crash* exudes a great deal of cynicism regarding social institutions—the police, social services, Hollywood itself, and “the schools [catering to the African American community] are a disgrace” ultimately the film, as we might expect from a relatively mainstream American movie, suggests that the problems identified are those of individuals. That “as individuals we can simply opt out of racism, as though it were a set of ideas and not a set of historically aggregated material structures and institutional practices.” (Sicinski) And thus we learn little, as Armond White points out, that would enable us to understand LaTasha Harlins, Reginald Denny, or, the prosecution/persecution of Michael Jackson. Thus for some critics, “the central things go unexplained” And the exclusive focus on race ignores issues of income inequality which overlap so significantly with racial divides—one in three Los Angeles children live in poverty, according to some estimates, and they are, of course, living close to displays of considerable wealth associated with the entertainment industry. (Laurier)

2) A second gripe: Doesn't the film tell us that we are all racists deep down?—or not so deep, even.? I am as loathe to accept this as I am a polly-anna-ish view of multiculturalism that *ignores* the possibility or presence of racism: “Crude as the language is, it *pales* next to the noxious message” writes *LA Times* film critic, Carina Chocano with typical crispness, even if the metaphor of color is perhaps unintentional and unfortunate. More amusingly, I refer you Erik Lundegaard's crash quiz, composed after the film's Oscar victory and designed to illustrate how the rancor is ready to burst out, become overt, at any time, even when it is going to do you no good at all. (He offers you reasonable, somewhat less reasonable, and then *Crash* versions of how to deal with tricky situations—I think maybe my favorite is the last, a reference to Don Cheadle's Graham in bed with Jennifer Esposito's Ria.) Thus, people say what they apparently think without qualm or hesitation through most of the movie. In Chocano's words, again:

“there’s no getting through a fender bender, casual conversation, business transaction, phone call to mom or naked love romp without someone’s ancestry taking a nasty beating.” This is perhaps not the most significant way in which racism manifests itself today.

3) A third complaint (and we have touched on this one briefly already): in its play with stereotypes, *Crash* sometimes only confirms them--most evidently in its confirmation of Jean (Sandra Bullock’s) fear of black men who proceed to car-jack her. (I think I’d have to add some issues with the roles of the women and, as we will get to in a moment, with the style, the film’s visual rhetoric.) But at least the film got people talking, exercised. Whether it is Mick LaSalle’s comment: “It’s cute stuff. You can almost hear the typewriter” or Peter Debruge’s more pointed: “*Crash* is basically just one white man’s righteous attempt to make other white people feel as if they’ve confronted the problem of racism head-on,” Haggis makes a valid enough point when he says: “The worst thing you can do to a filmmaker is to walk out of his [sic] film and go: ‘That was a nice movie. . . but if you can cause people to walk out and then argue about the film on the sidewalk. . . well, things are happening.’”

Although it is the language of the movie that has caused most comment—Graham’s crash-induced opening lines on LA’s metal and glass auto culture or his “Fuck you very much” when offered a deal he can hardly refuse—*Crash* is a *film* and not simply a piece of theater. So what aspects of the style support its message? And are there elements of the film’s style or visual rhetoric that are problematic?

First, the camera is God-like in this film—it can go anywhere and commonly, for example, floats above the action, overseeing events. Lighting in the film is often used to guide our emotional reactions. Thus the orange-lit crash/crime-scene at the beginning of the film is lit much more blue when it reappears near the end; similarly, as Peter’s ride with Officer Hanson continues the increasing tension is supported by the addition of more ‘unnatural’ blue and green light. Here’s another little example of light reflecting how characters’ feel:

[clip: Fred gets Cam to shoot the scene again: 1:40]

The long steady-cam forward-movement stops when Tony Danza's Fred approaches Cam, becoming a fixed camera, perhaps a filmic metaphor for the psychological 'crash' between them. Then, as Fred asks, "Is there a problem, Cam?," with a loud 'clink' the studio lights are turned off. This gives Fred's face a more sinister look, rather in the way Brando is lit in much of the *Godfather*. Literally he wants those lights back on and he has the power to make Cam defer to him—and to remind us that Cam was also unable to stand up to the cop the night before as his wife believes he should. Here, Cam is "the expert" but is that because he is the director or because he's black?—in any case the power lies with Fred because he's the producer . . . or . . . [Discussion]

Harsh, direct, bright light can, of course, also be used to put somebody on the spot and this is how we see Farhad in the brilliant shaft of morning sunlight after he looks at his ransacked shop, and learns that he will get no insurance: "This store is all we have." Similarly, the light is glaring behind Graham as he gives up the trigger-happy, but presumably justified, white cop, Conklin, for the sake of brother Peter.

Such moments are emphasized by the film's *sound*. The dominant music is provided by "Mark Isham's shimmery synthesized keyboards" [Edelstein], and at especially poignant moments it tends to dominate the soundtrack and to be accompanied by slow motion that emphasizes the importance of the action by extending it. This is particularly true in the shooting of locksmith Daniel's daughter by Farhad, and the rescue of Christine by Ryan. These are the most manipulative sequences in the film, and, especially in the case of the miracle-cloak saving the child, this may be annoying. We are faked into feeling this way, because we don't know the bullets are blanks—though, of course, Daniel and Farhad don't either. In both sequences the diegetic sound—that which you'd hear if you were actually at such a scene--is used highly selectively—in fact it is almost entirely erased from the soundtrack. We hear only odd word or phrases, such as "It's OK, Daddy. I'll protect you," and, in the sequence I am about to show you, "Pull." --and this is quite a long clip.

[clip: Rescue/Rape: 5:30]

In some ways this is the most impressive, in some ways the most annoying scene of the film. The rescue is presented as strikingly heroic—especially that highly iconic closing shot. The various marshaled filmic devices seem determined to drive home this point-of-

view as emphatically as possible. Yet the earlier imagery also strongly suggests rape and the sense that that is *exactly* how Christine experiences the prospect of her tormentor as rescuer is a powerful, gut-wrenching idea. The liturgical chant, the slow motion, the fact that everybody else stands around (and are silenced), the hand-held camera, all suggest an other-worldly experience. At the same time it is a real-world negotiation in which Ryan *must* make Christine see him otherwise. So is this an impressive portrayal of high feeling or an instance of overraught manipulation? Does anyone have any comments on what this scene presents or how it does so? [Discussion]

In a little while I want to try to suggest some ways in which you might use *Crash* with groups to stimulate thought and feeling, but I want first to compare it with another film—and I am going to take you now to a very different world, but one with some interesting resemblances to the one you have experienced in *Crash*. Burkina Faso is a land-locked sub-Saharan, West African state, one of the world's poorest. Still, it has benefited from having some relatively enlightened leaders over the years, and it has been established, for many years now as a--perhaps the--center of African cinema. The FESPACO film festival, held in the Burkinabe capital of Ougadougou every other February, is the world's largest, and the country is able to produce a few of its own films, sometimes in collaboration with neighboring states and often with the financial backing of the ex-colonial power, France. *Night of Truth* is a Burkinabe film directed by a woman, Fanta Regina Narco, and it is an account of the resolution of differences and reconciliation of two warring tribes, the Bonandes and the Nayaks. The most obvious reference is to civil wars in Rwanda and the Congo, perhaps, but Regina Narco insists that the film is not only relevant to African struggles: that it applies equally well, for example, to the various ethnic cleansings of the former Yugoslavia. A major theme of *Night of Truth* is the crucial need to overcome not only hate but also fear--being scared of the loss of cultural identity and of integration--in order to resolve conflict and achieve peace. Food and different eating habits are a major marker of difference in the film, and there are many symbols of reconciliation just as there are many instances of falling back into division and hatred. How much of the terror that has gone before can or should be

forgotten and how much must be remembered in order to produce peace? I'll show you a brief clip, which I hope will capture some of the mood and imagery of the film for you.

[clip: Painting war-scenes and the children with prosthetic limbs : 1:35]

The brutality of the war is inscribed on the children's bodies and depicted in the graphic art-work. In fact we become aware of still greater brutality later in the film. Indeed in some ways the metaphoric unmanings of *Crash*—Cameron, Farhad, Officer Hanson—are literalized in *Night of Truth*, as we learn that castration has marked one particular atrocity and has proved particularly hard to forgive. (*Night of Truth*, incidentally, is part of a series of challenging international films that have been packaged by the Global Film Initiative in New York, and sent to various cities around the country with special emphasis on having high school children see them in movie theaters on film. Notes and study-guides are available to accompany them, and I would direct you to the Global Film Initiative's fine web-site.)

One difference between *Night of Truth* and *Crash* lies in the casting. Regina Narco uses members of the army to play most of the roles—in a country where professional actors are few and far between. This means that they don't always have the range and skill of *Crash*'s cast. But there are big compensations in that we don't bring the baggage associated with previous performances or public personae to the story told in the film. For some this is a significant distraction in *Crash*, where every role, it seems, is filled by a star you recognize. (Haggis admits that financial considerations motivated the casting of big names instead of unknowns—and apparently none of them have seen a dime yet!) Still, the somewhat stylized nature of the dialogue perhaps necessitated trained, quality players: speeches like Graham's opening one are hard to pull off, I think—which brings me to the use of language in both films.

I don't think any of you who have seen *Crash* will have any difficulty coming up with quite a few examples of verbal insults: of language style and, for want of a better word, proficiency, being critiqued; of words being used to judge people, to categorize them and to comment on them. This is part of the texture of the film and one that has rubbed some critics the wrong way. (I can't resist quoting Carina Chocano again, who describes the film as “a grim, histrionic experiment in vehicular metaphor slaughter.”)

But I am interested in which uses/abuses of language you recall—has anything in particular that stuck with you? [Discussion]

Well, this thread of insults starts with Ria’s words to the Korean woman who has apparently rear-ended her and Graham as the movie begins. She produces the most stock imitation of certain Asian English dialects in replacing ‘l’s with ‘r’s and vice-versa—and we have noted that Shaniqua’s “Don’t talk to me unless you speak American” at the end of the film mirrors this opening confrontation. Shaniqua’s name itself is enough to confirm Officer Ryan’s suspicions. Meanwhile, the gun-store owner disdains Farhad’s grasp on the language, resents the extra time that the exchange with him will take, and—seeing a Middle Eastern man, throws in some derisory comments about planning the jihad on his own time. Later it is anti-Arab graffiti—rag-head *et cetera*--sprayed on the wall of their vandalized shop that seems to most upset Farhad’s wife, Shereen, and which she vigorously tries to remove. Christine, of course, thinks her husband has been too deferential in his language during her assault by the police and accuses him of knowing how to “shuck and jive,” while Jamal is condemned for not talking black enough.

More comically, perhaps, we also hear the constant, Tarantinoesque patter of Anthony’s commentary on events—at one point in the recently acquired SUV, his scorn is turned on rap music in which blacks insult themselves and are distracted from real-world problems—you don’t “hear white people calling each other honky all the time” he exclaims—yet his, at least potentially, valid argument is once again undercut, this time by the fact that these words are spoken by rapper-actor Chris ‘Ludacris’ Bridges. Of course, words can signal a change of approach: Ryan at least starts by apologizing to Shaniqua when he sees her in person and his use of the word “ma’am” and polite requests to the trapped Christine *attempt* to erase his earlier behavior towards *her.*, and thus to renegotiate their relationship at a critical moment. In addition, the songs that accompany several scenes at the end of the film reflect the mood of the characters in their lyrics. Your handout reproduces those of the two songs we hear at the end of the film. (The words accompanying the main background music, incidentally, are sung by Enya in Welsh, so are purely sounds to almost everybody watching the film.) Kathleen York’s “In the Deep” emphasizes confusion though it offers hope of a “Climb to Heaven,” while Stereophonics’ “Maybe Tomorrow” is more positive, suggesting a future that provides a

“way home” and that will contrast with the present day, marked as it is by “little black clouds.” Most pertinently, perhaps, it calls for a “breeze and an open mind”—the metaphor of a change of weather standing in for a change of attitude and of ways of experiencing the world.

In *Night of Truth*, the ultimate signifier of reconciliation lies in the words of a poem composed by the rebel leader whom we have seen killed at the reconciliation meeting but whose death has not been in vain: peace has finally been achieved by the end of the film and this is signified by a verbal connecting of the names of the previously warring factions: Bonande and Nayak are no longer distinguished by these terms; all are Bonandyaks. I’d like to show you the end of *Night of Truth* now, starting from the conclusion of a scene in which the rebel leader’s loyal retainer and erstwhile leading bigot talks at his master’s grave, and ending in the schoolroom.

[clip: End of *Night of Truth*: 5:40]

The scene and film finish with the teacher repeating her dictation of the poem more slowly for a student who is having trouble understanding her. I might add that the use of the French language is itself a complex sign of reconciliation. The two tribes in the film are made to speak Moore and Dioula respectively, the two major languages in Burkina Faso--with French serving, literally, as the *lingua Franca*. (I could talk a lot about language-learning, especially ESL classes as depicted in cinema, but that’s another topic.) I think the significance of language is self-evident here, with the title “The Crossing” suggesting a new psychic place from which the country can grow, renewed. Add to this the focus on education rather than fighting, and the symbolic freeing of the goats that precedes the school room scene, and I believe that this very confrontational film works through to a hopeful ending. People can change. Wars can end. In the less allegorical *Crash*, there is probably not room for quite so much optimism, despite the presence of miraculous cloaks.

Let’s look at how the American film ends now. I think you will find some comparable elements.

[clip: End of *Crash*: 4:25]

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Did you see or hear some things that seem to be in any way parallel with the end of *Night of Truth*? Which elements seemed hopeful and which not? [Discussion]

We have the song that pleads the cause of resolution somewhat like “The Crossing.” The snow and Cameron’s phone-call from Christine suggest reconciliation and beauty—even the burning car is presented as beautiful—helped by that old stand-by, slow-motion. On the other hand, Anthony’s gesture in freeing the Cambodians—which presumably has lost him a chunk of money—is, typically, undercut. Even if the racial slur is relatively mild (“dopey fucking Chinaman,”) we are bound to be dubious about just how ready for American society this bemused, speechless group of refugees may be. One man stands mesmerized by the bright lights and multiple choices of a video-store, while another slumps down upon the ground. And the pretty snow won’t make their first night on the street any easier. The parallel to the goats in *Night of Truth* is striking, but these are *people* and they are being freed into a society which has not been cleansed of its problems, and which perhaps could not be—this is driven home by the final collision and the verbal clash that it provokes. The bird’s eye views we are given of the crime-scene and the new crash suggests that the detached camera can offer no easy answers.

Actually, I like the end of the film in that it preserves complexity and is designed to leave us thoughtful—and the controversy surrounding its success suggests that this is something that the film does, at least in some measure. Ideally, as Roger Ebert, the best-known of all U.S. newspaper critics thinks, “anyone seeing [*Crash*] is likely to be moved to have a little more sympathy for people not like themselves.” This seems a worthwhile achievement, one predicated on understanding and thus on education. Michael Atkinson in *The Village Voice* calls *Crash*: a “hyperbolic civics lesson.” So how could the film be used in an educational context? Let me throw out a few ideas and then see what you want to discuss in our remaining time. [Discussion: Few of you, I know, are in institutions in which you would be able to show the film—if for no other reason than some of its language--but here’s a couple of questions that could be asked of the film as a whole, of a section from it, or, indeed, of students’ lives: What hurts people and why?: Leading, I presume, to a discussion of language, of cultural sensitivity and knowledge of what might bring people together. And why do people hurt?—what are they afraid of, what have they, in turn, been hurt by? Fear? Ignorance? Language? Some high schools,

I believe, still make use of Griffiths' *Birth of a Nation*—and its fear of miscegenation, specifically the black man and white woman is still there, hinted at in *Crash*, when Cam concludes that they have been stopped because Officer Ryan thought he had seen a “white woman blowing a black man.”]

Presumably, kids should leave high school with an awareness that such racism has existed and still does—and with notions about why, but not the idea that it is everywhere, all-enveloping. Perhaps a version of Lundegaard's *Crash*-quiz could be created, allowing students to consider what approaches to problems are likely to be more productive and why, but, as an alternative, let me suggest a series of activities that could use the film to provide an educational activity, perhaps a special event. (The following is a variation on ideas developed by David Dynak at the University of Utah.) Start by dividing your group into three. Each group has a large blank piece of paper in front of it and some markers, a different color for each group. One piece of paper has the word ‘racism’ written in the middle of it; another, ‘toleration;’ and the third ‘Color-conscious’—as opposed to color-blind. Each group has a few minutes to write down what this concept means to it, before they rotate to the next sheet, taking their markers with them—here they may react to the comments of the original group as much as to the prompt. Then they move to the last sheet, where their comments follow those of the other two groups, before finally returning to the place where they started to look at reactions to their original comments. At this point maybe the group picks a character or better a scene or pair of scenes: Daniel and Farhad/Daniel and Jean, Shaniqua and Ryan, Ryan and Christine, Rick and Jean for example. What motivates each character? Is there language on the sheet in front of you that explains their actions or might help them? Now try on one of the roles of the scriptwriter and/or actor: what's the back-story? Perhaps we know some of it—as in the case of Graham and Peter or Ryan or Daniel—or perhaps we know less of it—Hanson, Jean, Farhad. What about their experiences might influence how they act? Imagine a future for them?—or a part of the story we do not witness such as what Cam says to Jamal. What events in the participants' own lives influence them as they fill in these stories? Ask them to come up with a couple of experiences such as the ones I regaled you with at the beginning today. Organize a sound-collage in which each person has a comment picked out—perhaps a phrase from the film or a reaction to it. Choose one

person from each group to pass around tapping participants on the back as a signal to repeat their phrase aloud. Does the activity up to now alter the way they feel about Graham's opening speech? Finally, write briefly, as a critic on this prompt: is this film hopeful? How could it be seen that way?

In a longer-term project you could print off several movie reviews for the participants to react to. In addition to the full list of citations that follows this essay, I have provided a handout listing six particularly provocative and polarized reviews: three friendly—by Ebert, Denby and Schwarzbaum--three vehemently critical—White, Sicinski and Chocano. Of course there are other films with which you could do similar things—in my Introduction to Film class at the University, for example, I often pick a film towards the end of the semester that will serve to illustrate the concept of foreignness—that is I am not using the film to teach about any one culture but to broach the subject of the unfamiliar. *Bashu, The Little Stranger*, an Iranian film about a boy driven by war from one end of the country to the other into a place where the topography, customs and language are completely different, serves this purpose very well and is a film which could, I think, be effectively used in high schools for a similar purpose as an illustration of difference and how to get around it. Many films could serve a similar purpose, and I have tried to give you some indication how today. In any case, I do hope that this discussion has given some attention to ways of combining story, technique, and the experience of the viewer in looking at cinema.

Now let's turn to whatever questions, comments or discussion points you may want to raise. . . .

Thank you.

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