How to Read a Film: Looking at Crash
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Often, when we watch a film, we expect to be entertained. After all, that’s mostly what we’re paying for when we buy a ticket or rent a DVD. Once the film begins, we tend to watch it passively from padded stadium seats or a cushy sofa, munching snacks, checking cell phones, and even carrying on conversations. We sit back and let the film come to us, allowing the images to wash over our partial attention. When thinking about a film, most people frequently concern themselves with what the film is about—its subject and plot—in the most direct terms, without considering the ways in which the film is put together. This is reasonable, since movies are largely understood and experienced as simple entertainment. But this approach is dramatically incomplete. Film has a form that can be analyzed, critiqued and discussed, and that form is inextricably connected to its content. This is true for any film, from the smash comedy Wedding Crashers (2005) to Crash (2005), the Best Picture Oscar winner.

Yet to access the specifics of a film’s form—the unique properties of a particular film as a film—requires the application of specific concepts or questions. Absent those, we can still enjoy a film, but we will also almost certainly miss much of the film’s complexity and meaning. We learn and actually enjoy more of a film when we resist our own passivity and move ourselves, intellectually, toward the film with a set of useful questions. In examining the interplay of a film’s form and content—which is to say, in “reading” it critically—we can and should adopt an active, searching, and analytical posture—the opposite of the typical relationship with film. Learning to read a film carefully is a conscious choice: it’s the difference between being a half-aware consumer of flashy products and a bright student doing thoughtful work in the context of an intellectual community. In our increasingly visual, media-saturated culture, such critical awareness of how visual and aural texts function gives one a dramatic advantage over those who remain passive and unaware.

Before going any further, consider the following stark comment on the status of the college learning environment, written by Mark Edmundson in his recent book Why Read?: “Immersed in preprofessionalism, swimming in entertainment, my students have been sealed off from the chance to call everything they’ve valued into question, to look at new ways of life, and to risk everything” (16). A professor at the University of Virginia, Edmundson is alarmed that consumer culture and certain cultural attitudes (of students, faculty, staff, and parents alike) have grown to such prominence on college campuses that thoughtful exploration of new ideas is all but defeated before the student first sets foot on campus. Edmundson assumes that the most valuable undertaking of college students is not to get a job or be constantly entertained, but to use their college experience to call into question their own assumptions, to risk their own comfort and
certainty by encountering and engaging new ideas and diverse perspectives. If Edmundson’s observation is even broadly true, there may be a much more extensive and systematic challenge awaiting new college students than getting into the classes they want, fitting in socially, and finding majors to declare.

If what Edmundson describes can be viewed as a context in which students examine and study a film, a plausible danger is that the film will be viewed, presented or discussed simply as one of many forms of pleasurable entertainment available to students or any other consumer. Certainly study of a particular film won’t directly lead to a job four years later, and given the fact that the exercise is not part of a formal class where assignments or testing demand a certain degree of engagement, there may be easy reasons to take the task of reading the film less than seriously. But this would be a mistake. The challenge (for students, faculty, staff, and parents) may be to use the film as an opportunity to question, to risk, to challenge what we already know or think we know. Such an activity, to follow Edmundson’s observation, is one of the most unique and valuable aspects of being educated at a liberal arts college. True, this goes against the stream of popular culture that says movies are just entertainment and not the stuff of serious academic discourse. Then again, college is a space to think about and explore issues the outside world often speeds by for lack of time or interest. Lafayette College has made the unconventional choice of making a film the shared orientation text for the class of 2010. Examination and discussion of the film offers students the chance to learn, to risk, to debate, and to begin their college careers by joining an intellectual community in a shared discussion on a significant and relevant topic to all.

The film, Crash, takes as its central topic, race and how it is lived in America today, a topic that hardly needs mention as one of the most central, complicated, and ongoing issues in American history and contemporary culture. This essay is intended as a brief companion piece to encountering Crash as a film, with hopes that it will be a useful introductory aid for those who are interested in exploring the film and discussing its complexities. Hardly the end of coming to an understanding of the film or the issues it raises, this is simply one possible way to get the discussion started.

There are two main kinds of elements in any given film: narrative and stylistic. Narrative elements include subject matter, characterization, and plot. Stylistic elements include camera movements, editing choices, mise-en-scene (the existence of specific props, lighting and other visual elements in a given scene), music, sound effects, and patterns of color. The two sets of elements are always intertwined. In fact, a film’s style or form is a big part of the film’s content/narrative elements. One way to start thinking about film form is to raise our awareness of important stylistic elements. A film is not a novel or a play or a story or a poem or an essay, even if it is based on or adapted from any of those forms. Film is a very different formal animal; the medium of film can do a myriad of things other forms cannot. When watching a film, we can ask several basic, but useful questions:

- **What is the camera doing?** How far away from the subject is the camera? Is the image a distance (long) shot or a close-up or somewhere in between? Is the shot stationary or moving? If moving, how is it moving? Is the camera looking up or down on its subject? Is the frame level or canted? Assume every frame involves dozens of premeditated
decisions designed to convey meaning. What do the properties of the camera — cinematography — suggest in terms of the film’s content?

• What are the elements in the frame—mise-en-scene (pronounced “meez-ahn-sen”)? This consists of all the elements placed in front of the camera and visible on screen. The four main areas of mise-en-scene are 1) setting and props, 2) costumes and make-up, 3) lighting, 4) figure behavior and movement. Crucial information is communicated via each of these formal aspects. What is in the frame and what does its inclusion suggest?

• What is the editing pattern? Does the film employ quick cuts or long takes? Are there many separate shots or fewer shots with a longer elapsed time between cuts? What transitional elements are in use between scenes or shots—cuts, dissolves, fades? Is more than one story told via crosscutting? Does the frequency of cuts remain constant, speed up or slow down? Is film speed manipulated?

• What is occurring with the sound? Cinematic sound consists of three aspects—1) score, 2) noise or sound effects, 3) dialog. Does sound accompany or control a scene? Does it ever enhance or compete with a shot? How? In what ways does each element of cinematic sound advance or offer meaning?

Approaching film with these four broad categories of inquiry will reveal a great deal of layered meaning in how these elements structure the film, while often drawing our awareness in one direction or enlisting our sympathies in another. These and other filmmaking choices add up to film form, described by film historians David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson as “the overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film” (Film Art, 49). Isolating the broad categories of inquiry (in this case cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, and sound) is a useful way to generate specifics, so it often helps to approach a film multiple times with different questions each time. Assembling readings with varying formal emphases into a complex reading will more closely reflect the complex system of relationships that is film form.

As we increase our sensitivity to these various elements, we can begin to chart their occurrence not only in particular scenes, but over the course of an entire film. One way films create coherence is to use their varied elements in patterns: through similarity and repetition, or in crucial variations, they help us make sense of the unfolding work of art before us. Thus, in watching a film, we can look for repetition, check for the use of motifs, and ask how the film creates a sense of progression from the beginning of the film to its ending. In Crash, for example, recurring close-ups of a prop—a small statue of Saint Christopher (patron saint of travelers)—appear enough in the film to warrant status as a motif, with potentially important meaning for the film as a whole. Identifying a film’s specific formal choices can help us uncover the layers of meaning inherent in a film, and give rise to critical interpretation.

Every element in a film has a function that can be analyzed and discussed. When doing so, it’s important not to get bogged down in notions about the filmmaker’s intention—the idea that the filmmaker “did it on purpose,” or that he or she knew exactly what effect a given element would have. This question of intention is beside the point. Rather, we can ask: what function does this
element serve? How does it relate to other elements within the film? The more questions we ask, the more we can construct interesting arguments about the film’s content. In the end, the meaning we take from a film has a lot to do with the questions we ask of that film. Failing to understand and employ filmic concerns often results in merely personal reactions or reviews—often useful, but rarely detailed analysis and hardly an exhaustive reading. Film study aims for considerably more.

**Reading *Crash***

To begin reading film, then, we can look closely at several early scenes in *Crash*. Five minutes into the film, we see a close-up of a gun on a store counter. As Chekhov reminds us, a gun appearing in the first act is bound to go off in the third act, and this close-up makes sure we pay attention. Dorri (Bahar Soomekh) and her father Farhad (Shaun Toub) argue with the gun store owner (Jack McGee) over the gun’s purchase, or, more specifically, over the question of what kind of bullets to use in the gun. The scene presents a triangulated conflict, with Dorri trying to convince Farhad that he should not buy a gun at all. The father and daughter speak Farsi (Persian) to each other, the store owner speaks English to his customers, and Dorri translates for the owner and her father, who speaks English, although not fluently. The shop owner asks what kind of free ammunition Farhad would like with his gun, and father and daughter have an exchange, translated into English for the viewer as subtitles, that reveals three things: 1) Farhad knows nothing about guns, 2) Farhad is determined to buy a gun, and 3) Dorri has been trying for some time to convince her father to not buy a gun. This conversation in Farsi irritates the gun owner, who grows impatient. He interrupts the debate between Dorri and Farhad with, “Yo, Osama! Plan the jihad on your own time.” Farhad takes offense at the comment, interpreting it as a racial slur. Asserting his rights as an American citizen, Farhad calls the owner “an ignorant man,” and the owner responds with a profane, graphic, racialized reference to 9/11 and the Iraqi war, then orders Farhad dragged from the shop by an armed security guard. The scene reveals that the argument is not so much about guns or ammunition as it is about respect and, above all, about the volatility of perceptions (and misperceptions) about racial “others”.

The bulk of the conversation is shot tightly cropped with the camera position close, magnifying the claustrophobia and tension of the scene. Interestingly, whenever the store owner is shot, he is centered in the middle of the frame, with the shadows of Dorri and Farhad appearing on either side of him. His eyes bounce back and forth from the father to the daughter as he waits outside their shared language. When the camera moves to Dorri and Farhad speaking, however, it is almost always in motion and the two are off-center in the frame. What effect do these compositions within the frame have? Do they uncomfortably force the viewer into confrontation with the store owner? Do they foreshadow the way in which the gun threatens to come between Dorri and Farhad, perhaps destroying their family? As occurs throughout the film, Christmas decorations appear in the scene, here strung on the walls and displayed on the counter. More prominent still are two recurring splashes of red in the frame, one over the right shoulder of the shop owner (boxes of bullets) and one over Farhad’s left shoulder (an octagon, perhaps a stop sign facing out, hung in the shop’s window). After Farhad’s eviction, Dorri, wearing a red coat, is left to complete the purchase. She and the owner discuss ammunition (the store owner adding sexual innuendo to his previous offenses) and she selects “the ones in the red box.” As she
leaves though the shop door, the camera follows not her face but her mid-section, as she clutches the gun and the red box to her side.

In considering this scene in conjunction with later developments in the film, we can point out that the bullets “in the red box” figure prominently in the shooting involving the locksmith Daniel (Michael Peña), and his daughter Lara (Ashlyn Sanchez), who attempts to save him because she believes she has a magic cloak. In retrospect, as we look back on the gun store scene, we can see that Dorri’s red coat may also be a kind of magic cloak, its color linking her to not only the bullets, but to the stop sign hovering in the depth of the frame (Stop signs, red traffic lights, and other red-lettered signs are all over the mise-en-scene of many important scenes in the film). More than this, red-coated heroines figure in notable films as recent as Steven Spielberg’s Munich (2005) and Schindler’s List (1993), and as far back as one of the earliest American films, Edwin S. Porter’s The Great Train Robbery (1903). Dorri’s red coat may also have some resonance within the context of the Christmas season in which the film is set.

This gun store altercation transitions to the next scene, with new characters, but with a slight variation of the same racialized tensions. As Dorri exits the shop’s door, the film cuts to the opening of a restaurant door, from which two young men emerge. This transitional bridge creates a sense of connection between the two scenes, and the two sets of characters. The two young men, Anthony (Ludacris) and Peter (Larenz Tate) walk down the street, side-by-side, discussing their poor treatment at the hands of a waitress who, Anthony believes, discriminated against them because they are African American men, who are always (according to Anthony’s suspicion) perceived as bad tippers. Shots of Anthony and Peter are soon intercut with scenes of a young, well-heeled white couple (Sandra Bullock and Brendan Fraser), also walking down the street, side by side, apparently coming from the other direction. The camera movement and the editing pattern of eyeline matches (cut progressions to show what characters are looking at) imply that these two pairs are on some kind of collision course. Anthony is livid at what he considers to be racial discrimination on the part of their waitress, and then equally livid at Jean’s (Bullock) pulling closer to her husband (Fraser) as the two pairs draw closer. He points out that in this wealthy, predominantly white neighborhood, he and his friend are the ones who have something to fear. He asks, “Then why aren’t we scared?” To which Peter replies: “Because we have guns?”

With this, the black pair draw guns and force the white couple out of their car, a black Lincoln Navigator (a model whose significance is worth pondering), and drive off. How are we to read this scene? It begins with a character expressing anger at racial profiling, then acting in such a way as to confirm those stereotypes. Are we meant to be surprised at this twist of events—the ways in which characters discuss and dismantle stereotypical expectations, only to fulfill those expectations? How does the camera movement that leads up to the confrontation—the scenes intercut between the two pairs—create our own expectations for what’s about to happen? How can we relate this scene to the one in the gun shop that comes immediately beforehand, in which racial stereotypes are also at play? How might characters’ self-consciousness about race fit into the film’s overall development of that topic?

These two early scenes alone suggest that racial stereotypes, fear, and violence are the central subject matter of Crash. A lot happens quickly in the two thematically and formally linked scenes, but even though we are only a few minutes into the story, the scenes also help extend and
deepen issues raised during the film’s opening credits sequence. As the credits begin, the first image we see is hard to identify: A black field with obscure white specs of indeterminate pattern emerging from the blackness. There is no true reference point from which to work, so scale and clarity are a matter of perception. The dots may or may not be in focus; they may be the lights of a city seen from an airplane, or some distant star field. The lights shimmer and seem to wink, nearer bluish particles begin to fall or drift from the top of the screen to the bottom, like snow. The music, which began during the production company logos before the first image, is ponderous, wavy, electronic, and slightly eerie. Bluish-white words, all in small case, gradually emerge in the midst of the scene, then after a moment of clarity fall into watery fades to black before the next words (production information, actors’ names, and so on) rise to visibility, then fade in turn. We begin to be conscious of the camera pulling back. The frame begins to brighten slightly and at about 30 seconds into the film (behind the words “a film by paul haggis”) we can now see clearly what we have been looking at: a bluish tinted close-up shot of a road at night, complete with a pair of blackened tire marks entering and leaving the frame, and an abstract pattern of dark splotches and glistening highlights. The subject is much nearer to us and starker than we had supposed.

As the credits progress, this image dissolves into a series of distant shots of bright circles moving slowly through blackness. Even though the circles seem to be out of focus, these images are identifiable as car headlights because of their proximity and pattern of movement. Eventually, we see some of these lights through glass, rain beads clinging within the balls of light. Dialog enters unexpectedly: “It’s the sense of touch,” someone, a male voice, says quietly. A female voice responds, incredulous, “What?” The male voice explains that in “real” cities, people brush past and bump into you, but, “in LA, nobody touches you.” The camera moves left over the out-of-focus circles (some now flashing) and rain streaks on glass, then settles on the face of the speaker (Don Cheadle), in close-up, at the extreme left of the frame. The right three quarters of the frame are washes of color, bluish and red. As the speaker comes into focus (“rack focus” occurs when the camera focus is turned quickly from one depth to another), we see him looking directly into the camera and completing his thought: “We’re always behind this metal and glass.” He goes on to say that he thinks people in Los Angeles crash into each other simply to get back the sense of touch or feeling that they miss. Again through the technique of rack focus the open space to the right of the frame is now filled. We quickly learn that the female speaker is seated next to him and, when a police officer sticks his head into the frame on the far right and asks if they are hurt, we begin to understand that they have been in a car accident. The female speaker (Jennifer Esposito) seems shaken and angry. She explains they have been rear-ended, and suggests her companion has lost his “frame of reference.” She leaves the car and gets into an altercation, full of slinging racial slurs and threats (“Mexican” vs. pan-Asian), with the driver Kim Lee (Alexis Rhee) of the car who hit them. The male speaker leaves the car and walks forward to greet several police officers at a crime scene, the murder of a young man. As the man, now revealed as a police detective, kneels down at the crime scene, the shot dissolves into a daytime shot of a different section of Los Angeles, and the word: “Yesterday.” The gun shop scene begins with the next shot.

One of the interesting facets of this opening is its use of formal filmic devices to help carry ideas or themes. The mention in character dialog of a lack or loss of a “frame of reference” is supported visually with the way the opening credit sequence is shot and by the specific, strategic
use of selective or rack focus for both the opening image and the shot of Graham Waters (Cheadle), once he speaks the line about always being behind metal and glass. Metal and glass may, in fact, mar perception, and from the start the film seems to want to alter characters’ (and by extension, viewers’) frames of reference. Rack focus is a choice, which is to say, that the same material can be shot without the technique and in a multiplicity of other ways. Yet the filmmakers’ pattern of use, even in the films’ opening minutes, is intentional, manipulative, and effective. It is a filmmaking choice that visually reveals the world is different and larger than we thought, that individual perception is an inherently limited prospect. The same technique is employed in the first shot at the gun store, when the gun is placed on the countertop. The shot is all metal (guns) and glass (the case), with the focus racking from a 9mm Ruger pistol below/inside the display, to the worn, 38-caliber handgun, the gun Farhad has purchased, laid atop the scratched glass counter. Is metal and glass (whether cars or guns) the answer or the problem? Is it both? Later, when Cameron (Terrence Howard) and Christine (Thandie Newton) are pulled over by police, Cameron warns his wife to “Just stay in the car!” She does not, and bad things happen. Are we to understand metal and glass as a refuge, or as a cage? And what does such a refuge/cage do to our perceptions of others? Addressing such questions may be a reasonable beginning towards understanding what the film wants to suggest can or should be done about encountering racial “others.”

These brief examples are just a start. We can choose to focus on other scenes and shots, on other film techniques, other characters and conflicts. The point is, we should choose to focus, choose to slow down long enough to investigate all (or at least more) of what the film is trying to communicate. Watch the film more than once, use the pause button on the remote, take notes. Film is one of the most complex and challenging of art forms. It has a long and diverse history. Close scrutiny and discussion of Crash, or any film, will reward the viewer in innumerable ways, including the potential transformation of something we thought we already knew well—our own relationship to film.

Discussion Questions

1. The narrative structure of this film is dense with coincidence. What function does the degree of connection among the characters serve?

2. Much of the film’s dialogue is overtly confrontation, in which racist accusations are overtly articulated—perhaps more overtly than is commonly seen in real life. Can this lack of nuance be said to have a function? If so, what?

3. Critic Stephanie Zacharek of the on-line magazine Salon wrote in her review of the film: “Crash only confirms what we already know about racism: It’s inside every one of us. That should be a starting point, not a startling revelation.” Do you agree with this assessment? Where might the film have taken the issues it raises?

4. How are certain characters marked by clothing or speech or props? For example, why are stairs important to understanding Jean Cabot (Sandra Bullock)?
5. In what ways does the film explore the systematic or institutionalized nature of racism? Does the film examine the complicated relationship between race and class, or race and gender? How and where?

6. How is music used in the film? Do either the lyrics or the music of the songs “In the Deep” (by Bird York) or “Maybe Tomorrow” (by The Stereophonics) advance or underscore or compete with other modes of information in the film?

7. Look for moments in the film where distortions occur. What happens, for example, during the crash scene encountered by officer Ryan (Matt Dillon)? What happens to the sound and film speed? Why?

8. Are all characters created equal? Are they well-rounded or limited in their portrayals (screen time, dialogue, admirable or reprehensible qualities)? Is this more one person’s story than any other’s?

9. How would specialists in different academic disciplines engage the subject of race in America? Would economists investigate the issue the same way artists would? One character in the film, Flanagan (William Fichtner) says, “I know all the sociological reasons” why blacks commit crimes. How might the discipline of sociology be a useful way to interrogate the film?

10. How does the story order, the progression and juxtaposition of certain scenes, develop or heighten the story’s tension? Do certain sub-stories comment on or illuminate other sub-stories? How?

11. In what sense is the place—Los Angeles—an important or integral character in the film?

12. What is left out of the film or, in your opinion, what does the film get wrong? What, from your perspective, did the film get right?

13. What historic or newsworthy events might the film be in conversation with or concerned about? Can you contextualize the film by examining significant LA events having to do with race such as the beating of Rodney King, the Watts Riots, OJ Simpson?

14. What other films seek to address the issue of race relations? How does Crash deal with race compared to other films you know? How useful is film in exploring race? Begin with your own politics—are you interested in and encouraged to see a film attempting to deal with racial strife?

15. Crash might be placed in a sub-genre of recent films set in LA and dealing with the intersection of multiple lives. What does Crash add to a collection of films like Short Cuts, Grand Canyon, and Magnolia?
Works Cited