
KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN SPEZIAL

Textanalyse und Interpretation zu

Paul Haggis

CRASH

Patrick Charles

Alle erforderlichen Infos für Abitur, Matura, Klausur und Referat

Über den Autor dieser Erläuterung:

Patrick Charles wurde 1973 in Bournemouth, Südengland, geboren und studierte englische Literatur an der Universität von Newcastle. 1993 zog er nach Berlin, wo er eine Ausbildung zum Buchhändler machte und zehn Jahre lang als Buchhändler arbeitete. Seit 2004 ist er als freiberuflicher Autor von Schulbüchern und Lernhilfen und als Übersetzer im Kulturbereich tätig. Er lebt mit seiner Familie in Berlin.

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Titelbild: Filmszene aus Crash (USA/D 2004): Daniel (Michael Peña) und Tochter Lara (Ashlyn Sanchez) © ullstein bild - United Archives / 90061

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FOREWORD 6

1 BACKGROUND 9

The Setting – Los Angeles	9
The USA	12
The Filmmakers	17
Inspiration	19

2 SUMMARIES 21

3 THEMATIC ELEMENTS 40

Urban isolation	40
Racial & social prejudice	48
Class & class prejudice	55
Cars, guns, doors and magical objects	57
Power/impotence – dignity/humiliation	72

4 CHARACTERS 76

Cast	76
Race	87
Constellations	88

5 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES 89

Circles, symmetries & multiple storylines	89
Irony & absurdity	96

6 VISUAL DESIGN 100

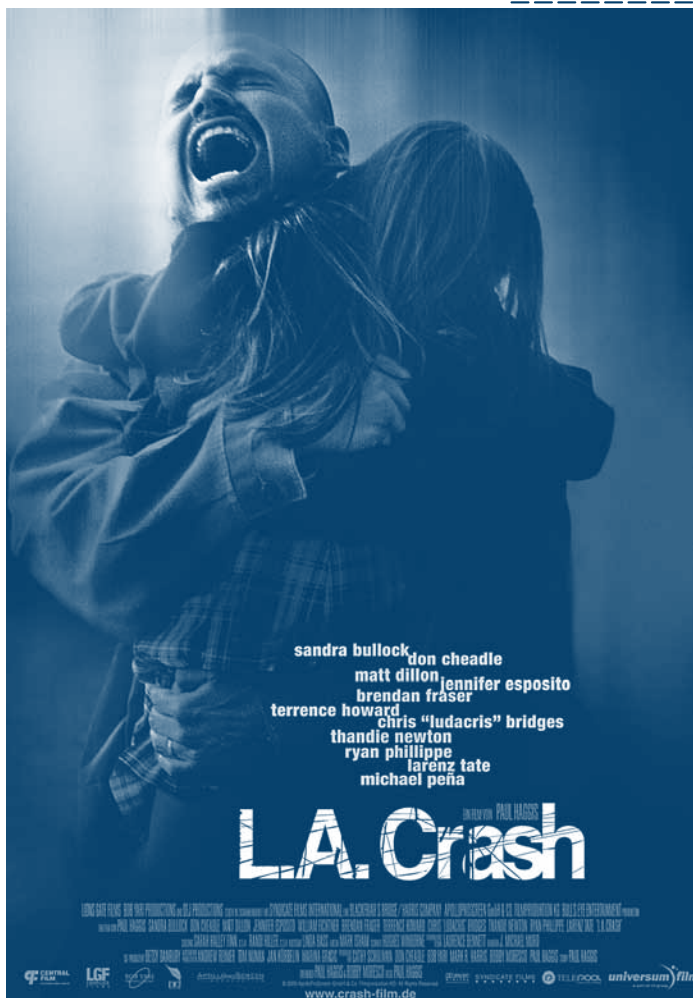
Light and dark	101
Camera movement	106
Objects & set design	109
Transitions	113

7 MUSIC 115

8 CRITICAL RECEPTION 122

ONLINE SOURCES	127
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The German DVD
cover for *Crash*
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FOREWORD

British and American cinema produced a number of ensemble films during the 1990s and early 2000s, including *Love Actually* (2003), *Magnolia* (1999), *Grand Canyon* (1991) and *Crash* (2004). Whatever their individual genres, these were films which used apparently unconnected characters and storylines to explore shared themes. In the case of Paul Haggis' *Crash*, these themes were urban isolation and race in modern day Los Angeles.

The advantage of an ensemble approach to storytelling is that the filmmaker can approach his or her subject from several different perspectives. In the case of *Crash*, with its interest in the chaos and turmoil of modern urban life, this format also allowed Haggis to follow his characters and storylines through the film like fish in a fast-moving river: they are forced along by the rush of events and their situation, crash into one another and are thrust apart again, constantly moving. The themes of the film are reflected in the structure, with its organisation of coincidence, chaos and conflict in a multi-narrative, multi-character format.

The film was released three years after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and cannot help but reflect the increased paranoia and awareness of danger and violence in American society. The still-unresolved black-white racial tension at the heart of the history and identity of the USA, and the continued discrimination and criminalisation of the rapidly growing Latino population, were joined by an explosion in anti-Arab sentiment. But, as Paul Haggis points out in the commentary to the DVD of *Crash*, Americans tend not to differentiate: olive skin and dark hair makes you an Arab, and all Asians are Chinese. Farhad is Iranian (Persian); Choi is Korean; Ria is Puerto Rican-El Salvadoran, but to other characters they are Arab, Chinese, Mexican – the laziest and most obvious term is ap-

plied in each case. While every character would see themselves as being primarily 'American', the lack of communication and contact within society, specifically urban society, which the director addresses in *Crash*, leads people to seek identification in a closer, more personal context. This will often be ethnicity. The comfort and reassurance of traditional codes and customs for first-generation immigrants is understandable for individuals. This can however lead to problems for the wider community, as it can lead to the formation of closed mini-societies with little contact with the larger host society. It is not improbable that a man like Farhad, subjected to constant racist hostility, would be more likely to retreat even further into frustrated hostility. His counterpart in the film is Daniel Ruiz, similar on many levels (poor working class immigrant father), but whose response to the hostility and racism of the world around him is peaceful and patient. No matter what conflicts are forced on him, he never resorts to violence or anger.

Haggis has said that one of his intentions in making the film was to "bait" liberals: to provoke complacent tolerant viewpoints with a more complex look at race and racism. It's a matter for debate whether or not he was successful in achieving this goal. What he does manage is to show a wide spectrum of characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds and, equally importantly, social sections of society. The issue of class is not often acknowledged in US popular culture, where class is often directly and over-simplistically equated with one's financial worth, but it plays an important role in the many storylines in *Crash*.

The film provided the breakthrough for a few of its actors, particularly Michael Peña and Terrence Howard, as well as allowing veterans like Matt Dillon and Sandra Bullock and a newcomer like Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges (a successful rapper) to show people an entirely new side of their performing abilities. Two other actors

in the film who had also previously been considered lightweights, Brendan Fraser and Ryan Phillippe, have also been applauded for their standout performances.

Crash is an interesting and rewarding film to analyse and interpret, because it provides a well-organised variety of approaches to its main themes and an effective narrative format which further strengthens the thematic unity. It is possible to access the film from a storytelling, symbolic or visual perspective. And while the major ‘action’ sequences – the two scenes between Officer Ryan and Christine Thayer; Cameron Thayer’s confrontation with first Anthony and then Officer Hansen; Farhad’s attempted shooting of Daniel – dominate the film both emotionally and as far as excitement is concerned, there is not a single scene within the film which is not relevant to one or more of the central themes.

This study guide includes analyses and interpretations of key themes, narrative strategies and aspects of the film’s visual design and soundtrack. You will also find a comprehensive scene-by-scene summary and a reference list of all the film’s characters.

THE SETTING – LOS ANGELES

1. BACKGROUND

The Setting – Los Angeles

“We really wanted to shoot in LA because it was a character in the film.”

[Paul Haggis, DVD commentary]

The film *Crash* is set in Los Angeles (LA), the largest city in California and the second largest in the USA. LA is a huge metropolis covering over more than 1,300 km² and divided into more than 80 districts. It has no real centre in the way that Paris or Moscow, for example, have identifiable centres. The sprawling, disconnected nature of the city provides more than a setting and a background for *Crash*: LA is itself a character in the film, influencing the action and creating conflict.

LA – character in the film

It is ethnically diverse and its population covers a broad social spectrum from the ultra-wealthy to the extremely poor. Noted areas include the troubled South Central, Compton and Watts, epicentre of the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and the violence of both gang culture and rioting; Beverly Hills, the surreal home of the fabulously rich, and of course Hollywood, home of Disneyland in Anaheim, famous around the world as the centre of the US film industry. LA is, along with New York, generally understood to be the cultural centre of the American entertainment industry, inextricably linked to show business and the world of glamour and illusion.

But LA also has a long and troubled history of racial tension, and has seen several periods of civil unrest and outbreaks of rioting. Police officers of the LAPD (the Los Angeles Police Department) have often, and very publicly, been accused of racism, corruption and brutality. Landmark incidents include the race riots in

History of racial tension

THE USA

The USA

Crash is primarily concerned with issues of race and society. Some basic understanding of the context for these issues in the USA will be helpful, in particular regarding three specific topics: **affirmative action**, **ethnic diversity** and the **post-9/11** world.

"I can't look at you without thinking about the five or six more qualified white men who didn't get your job."

[Officer Ryan to Shaniqua Johnson, 00:45:04]

Affirmative action is also sometimes called *positive discrimination*, which is a convenient summary of the general idea: very basically, if two people apply for the same job, one of them white, the other black, and they both have the same qualifications, the black person should be hired. The term comes from a law signed by President John F. Kennedy in 1961. It is usually in effect in the fields of education and employment, and is an attempt to correct discrimination against minorities and women. It is a very controversial issue and is explicitly relevant to *Crash* in the characters of Officer John Ryan and Lieutenant Dixon. Criticism of the concept comes from various angles, from blatantly racist rejection to the more complex idea that the obvious diversity of American society has made affirmative action unnecessary. It is also criticised for disadvantaging Asians, and for not taking social issues into consideration, specifically the issue of whether it favours the middle classes over the lower classes.

Arguments in favour of affirmative action are that it enables equal opportunities to become available for all people: that its proven success when applied to women in the workplace can and must be duplicated among ethnic minorities, which would not only improve conditions for the individual but at the same time add to

Tolerance, fairness and understanding

THE USA

CODES

Codes are sets of conventions which are used to communicate meaning, in both spoken and non-verbal forms. The most common code is language. The term as it is used here comes from *semiotics*, which is the study of how meaning is made and how it is communicated. Codes can be found and studied in every area of human behaviour. In *Crash* codes are important as the customs and details of everyday life and interaction, and are particularly relevant because so much of the conflict in the film comes from misunderstood signals: the inability to correctly read and understand the codes being used by other people.

“Yo, Osama – plan the jihad on your own time.”

[Gun store owner to Farhad, 00:05:58]

The terrorist attacks of **9/11** changed the world in countless ways. Some of these resonate in *Crash*, released less than three years later in 2004, most explicitly in the gun shop scene with the owner’s hostility and racist taunting, in DA Rick Cabot’s reaction to the idea of decorating a firefighter because he’s “an Iraqi named Saddam” [00:14:20], and in the racially-motivated burglaries and destruction of Farhad’s shop.

Attack of 9/11

But what is more important is that the 9/11 attacks prompted a general increase of anxiety, fear and paranoia within American society, as well as an intense focus on militarism and the use of violence as a solution: both on a large scale in the form of war and invasion, and on a more intimate scale in the form of torture. Related to this heightened paranoia and awareness of violence,

THE FILMMAKERS

SCIENTOLOGY

The Church of Scientology is notorious for its close ties to Hollywood and its use of celebrities (most famously Tom Cruise and John Travolta) to promote a glamorous and positive image. Scientologists in Hollywood often use their network to help one another: it is not uncommon to find several Scientologists working together on a film being made by one of their own. Haggis' history in Scientology was a theme in Lawrence Wright's award-winning book *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood and the Prison of Belief* (New York, 2013), and in the documentary film of the same name he is interviewed about his involvement with Scientology and his reasons for leaving in 2009. The final straw was the anti-gay position the Church took, co-financing homophobic legislation.

Rejected by the
big studios

The idea for *Crash* was rejected by the big Hollywood studios when Haggis first brought his treatment to them, mostly because the subject of racism was considered to be more or less “finished”. So he went ahead with an independent production, without the large amounts of money which might have been provided by the major studios.

On the DVD commentary, Haggis talks about how lucky he was to have been able to get **Don Cheadle** at the start of the project: by 2004, Cheadle was a famous and highly respected actor, winner of Golden Globes, Oscars, SAG Awards and Emmy Awards for his work on television (*ER – Emergency Room*, *Picket Fences*) and film (*Hotel Rwanda*, *Traffic*, *Boogie Nights*). His involvement in the project was impressive enough to be able to draw in more and more talent, including other high-profile actors like **Matt Dillon**, who has been

2 SUMMARIES

Film details:

Original title: *Crash*

German title: *L.A. Crash*

Country: USA

International Première: September 10 2004, Toronto

International Film Festival (TIFF)

Première USA: April 21 2005

Première Germany: August 4 2005

Length: 112 minutes

Original language: English

Budget: ca. \$7.5 million

Rating in the USA: R (Restricted – children under 17 must be accompanied by a parent or adult guardian)

Rating in Germany: FSK 12

Filmmakers:

Director: Paul Haggis

Producers: Cathy Schulman, Don Cheadle, Bob Yari, Mark R. Harris, Bobby Moresco, Paul Haggis

Screenplay: Paul Haggis & Bobby Moresco

Cinematography: J. Michael Muro

Editor: Hughes Winborne

Production Design: Laurence Bennett

Costume Designer: Linda Bass

Music: Mark Isham

Cast:

Detective Graham Waters: Don Cheadle

Mrs. Waters: Beverly Todd

SUMMARIES:

CREDITS AND OPENING SCENE

A winter's night in Los Angeles, a crime scene by the road

02:15–04:45

Detective Graham Waters and his partner **Ria** have just been involved in a minor car accident while on their way to a roadside crime scene. The other person involved in the accident is **Kim Lee**. While Ria argues with Kim Lee and the traffic police, Det. Waters goes to examine the crime scene, where the body of a boy has been found. When he sees and recognises the body he freezes, stunned. The screen goes white and then we see the city, early evening, and we are told it is YESTERDAY.

04:50–06:30

Farhad and his daughter **Dorri** are in a gun shop. Dorri is translating for Farhad, whose English is limited, and the gun shop owner is becoming increasingly impatient and aggressive. He calls Farhad “Osama” and refuses to sell him a gun, and has him thrown out of the shop. Dorri stays behind to get the gun and when she asks for ammunition, the shop owner tries to confuse her with the wide variety of bullets available and makes sexual innuendoes. Dorri points to a red box and says she’ll take them: the shop owner asks her if she knows what they are, but she takes them and leaves.

06:30–09:30

Anthony and **Peter** are leaving a restaurant in a good part of town. Anthony is complaining about the way they were treated in the restaurant, because they are both young black men. Anthony is



Daniel believes that his daughter Lara has just been shot
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1:20:25–1:21:05

Waters has bought groceries for his **mother** and goes to her home to fill her fridge with fresh food. He also cleans and tidies her home while she is asleep.

1:21:05–1:22:45

Jean Cabot is complaining on the phone to another woman about her housekeeper **Maria**. She slips and falls down the stairs, dropping the phone. She lies unconscious at the foot of the stairs.

URBAN ISOLATION

3 THEMATIC ELEMENTS

Chaos of modern
urban life

The themes in *Crash* are clear from the opening scenes: this is a film about isolation, communication, prejudice, violence, guilt and life in the city of Los Angeles. The theme of people being pushed along by the force of events, with little or no control over where they are going and who they will crash into next, can also be seen in the structure of the film itself, with its multiple characters and storylines coming together and shooting off in different directions, presenting, in a compact, story-based format, the chaos and coincidence of modern urban life.

The main themes in *Crash* we will look at in this chapter are:

- **urban isolation,**
- **racial and social prejudice,**
- the significance of certain objects, primarily **cars, doors** and **guns**, as well as **a few magical objects**
- the oppositional forces of **power/impotence** and **dignity/humiliation.**

These thematic areas all touch on one another and, in the film, cover a lot of related territory. These themes are relevant to many of the characters in different ways.

URBAN ISOLATION

The theme of urban isolation covers a lot of ground and touches on many of the other themes in the film. We see people interacting with one another in various ways – families, chance encounters, colleagues – but there is often a sense of isolation, and an inability to communicate.

URBAN ISOLATION

Crashing and touching

“It’s the sense of touch [...] In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In LA nobody touches. We’re always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much we crash into each other, just so we can feel something.”

[Detective Graham Waters: 00:03:05]

Detective Waters’ comment at the beginning of the film, after having just crashed into Kim Lee, sums up a lot of what *Crash* is about. The physical nature of Los Angeles – this huge, decentralised city with its more than 80 districts connected by highways, where everyone drives to get anywhere – defines how people interact with one another. Director Paul Haggis’ comment on the DVD commentary that the film is about “*how strangers affect other strangers*” [DVD commentary 00:07:30] confirms this.

The urban isolation that plays such a huge role in the film, and in the real life of a large modern city, is presented in the film in the form of crashes. These can be literal – as in the car accidents in the opening and closing scenes, or when Anthony and Peter run over Choi Jin Gui, or in the major scene in the middle of the film involving Christine Thayer in the car wreck – and figurative, in the way that strangers unexpectedly come together in shocking and damaging ways. Here are some examples of the figurative crashes between and among various characters in the film:

Large modern
cities

URBAN ISOLATION

SCENE	CHARACTERS	CRASH
Farhad's door	Daniel Ruiz and Farhad	When Daniel tries to explain to Farhad that the locks are changed but that he needs a new door, Farhad's inability to understand the language and his angry suspicion causes a nasty argument which will lead to him attempting to murder Daniel. The collision of two strangers here and their inability to communicate or reach one another is highlighted by Farhad's problems in understanding English.
In the studio I	Cameron Thayer and his producer	After the humiliating and traumatic experience with Officer Ryan, Cameron is again humiliated in an encounter with his producer, who forces him to make a black actor on their TV show speak less well. Cameron is again forced to submit to racist domination.
In the studio II	Christine and Cameron Thayer	The day after their terrible argument, Christine visits Cameron in the studio and wants to talk things through, but after the experience with his producer Cameron is more angry and upset than ever, and they end up going their separate ways, even more hurt and sad than they were before.

CARS, GUNS, DOORS & MAGICAL OBJECTS

being simply always there, and they have been since the earliest gangster and Western films. Guns belong to American pop culture every bit as much as highways and rebellious teenagers: they can serve as symbols for many things in different films or books, from a celebration of the pioneer spirit to the hyper-masculine cult of the action hero, but in *Crash*, they represent a danger and a threat. They are not as important to the themes of the film as are cars or doors, but they are an unavoidable fact of life in America, and guns are crucial in two of the major events, concerning Farhad / Daniel Ruiz and Officer Hansen / Peter.

Farhad has
problems buying
a gun
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CAST

4 CHARACTERS

Cast

Detective Graham Waters

Graham Waters is a black detective in the LAPD. He speaks the first line in the film, and his discovery of his brother's body frames the structure of the film. When his partner and lover, Detective Ria, complains that he keeps people at arm's length, she is confirming what he himself says at the beginning of the film about the lack of touch and contact between people in Los Angeles. What we see is that Graham is indeed self-contained, and likes to keep people at a distance: he uses humour to deflect from the real issue when talking to Ria.

Brother of Peter

He does all he can to help his mother, a relapsed drug addict, despite the fact that she obviously loves his younger brother more. Whenever Graham sees her she repeatedly asks after Peter: later, when the two of them have to identify Peter's body at the hospital, she blames Graham, saying that he is responsible for his brother's death.

Graham allows himself to be corrupted by Flanagan: he agrees to lie about the shooting of a black detective, whom he strongly suspects to have been corrupt, in return for a promised promotion and a second chance for his criminal brother. This second chance for Peter is, in a tragic and ironic twist, made irrelevant when he is murdered by Officer Tom Hansen.

By the end of the film Waters has lost much of what he had at the beginning. His brother is dead and his mother blames him for it, and he has compromised himself, morally (he lies about the shooting of Detective Lewis) and professionally (he doesn't investigate what he knows to be a suspicious case).

CAST

Peter Waters

“20 years old and already three felonies”

[Flanagan, 1:06:25]

Peter Waters is the younger brother of Detective Graham Waters. He is a car thief. We see Peter laughing a lot, both with and at his friend and partner-in-crime Anthony, and it's his laughter which leads to his death in the car with Officer Hansen, when Hansen overreacts to Peter's discovery of his St Christopher dashboard statue and shoots him.

Criminal

His humour and light-hearted manner are contrasted starkly with his brutal lifestyle. Peter has a more easy-going manner than the angry and intensely racially-conscious Anthony. He playfully mocks Anthony's angry theories about how badly black people are treated in restaurants (00:06:45), the origins of rap music (00:28:50), and why buses have large windows (00:42:00).

As a convicted felon, Peter's chances of ever having a “good” life are almost gone. Flanagan uses this slim hope to pressure Graham. The issue of whether or not this would ever have helped Peter is made irrelevant by his murder.

Officer Hansen picks Peter up while he is hitchhiking from the San Fernando Valley back into the city, and after a series of misunderstandings and Hansen's police-trained instincts reacting badly to Peter's obvious lies, he over-reacts to a sudden movement and shoots Peter, leaving his body by the side of the road.

Murdered by
Officer Hansen

Mrs. Waters

Mrs. Waters is a relapsed drug addict and the mother of Graham and Peter. She repeatedly asks Graham to try and find Peter: at the end, when she has to identify Peter's body in the morgue, she

CIRCLES, SYMMETRIES & MULTIPLE STORYLINES

5 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

CIRCLES, SYMMETRIES & MULTIPLE STORYLINES

The narrative structure of *Crash* – the way the story is told – makes strong use of three strategies:

- a **circular** narrative (at the end it returns to its beginning),
- a **multi-narrative ensemble** (no single central character and storyline: instead there are multiple characters and stories, all equally important),
- and the **symmetry** (reflection) and **juxtaposition** (contrast) of characters, situations and themes – of elements within the narrative (characters, situations) as well as external elements (the audience's expectations and preconceptions).

Each of these strategies, which are used to comment on the subject matter by mirroring and contrasting individual elements, contribute to the idea of intersecting lives and situations within an anonymous urban world.

Crash is structured in a **circular** form: it ends at its own beginning, at night, with Detective Waters discovering what we as viewers later learn is his younger brother's body, and with two minor car crashes (involving Ria and Kim Lee at the beginning, and Shaniqua Johnson at the end).

The circular structure of the film could be interpreted pessimistically: nothing ever changes. We end up right back where we started, with a young black man shot dead by the side of the road and people crashing their cars into one another and immediately throwing racial insults. The film starts and ends at night, with unfocussed lights swimming in the blackness. Everyone in the film

Det. Waters finds his brother dead

IRONY & ABSURDITY

IRONY & ABSURDITY

Irony is the amusing or unexpected aspect of any situation which is very different from what one expected. Something which is **absurd** is ridiculous: it has no sense and no logic.

Complex picture
of the world

Both irony and absurdity are used in *Crash* to confuse and challenge our preconceived ideas about the film's characters and themes. We repeatedly come across ironic surprises in the narrative, right up until the end, when Anthony's "good deed" of freeing the illegal immigrants from the white van is immediately followed by Shaniqua Johnson's angrily racist attack on the other driver involved in the crash.

The use of irony is not only an entertaining and surprising device used in telling stories, it also serves to remind us that nothing in life is simple or one-dimensional. As with the other narrative strategies discussed above and the structure of the film itself, the use of irony and absurdity contributes to a more complex and diverse picture of the people and events covered in the film, highlighting the film's themes.

Christmas:

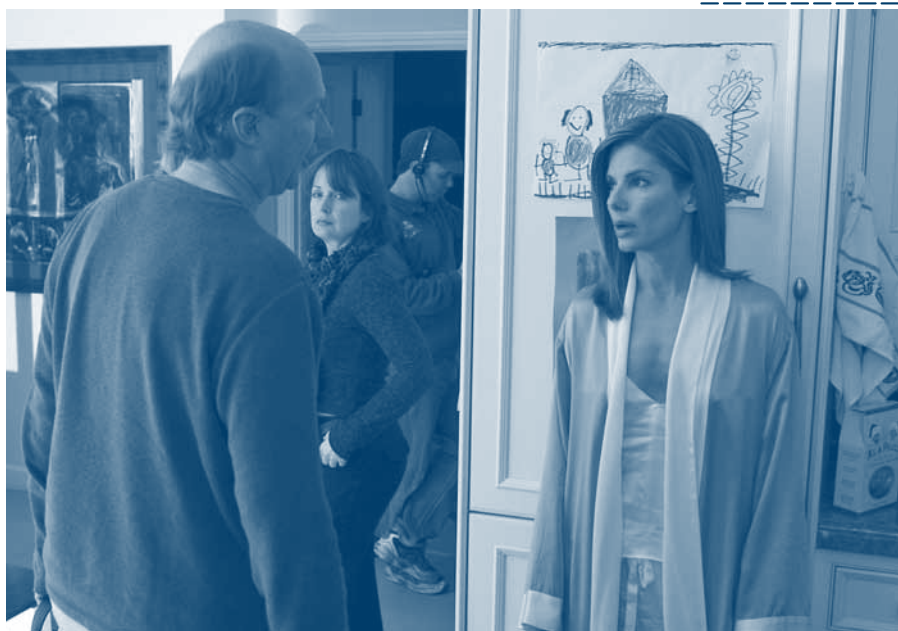
- It's Christmas time in Los Angeles, a city which never sees snow. Several scenes in the film draw attention to colourful, prominent Christmas decorations, which provide an absurd and ironic backdrop to dramatic and/or painful events. As well as being an ironic comment on the absence of traditionally Christian sentiments of "good will to all mankind" in the film, the Christmas decorations provide an absurd, almost surreal background to scenes such as the showdown between Cameron Thayer and the police [01:11:30–01:15:00].

IRONY & ABSURDITY

Coincidence and chance:

→ The chance crossing of the characters' paths often creates absurd situations, such as when Anthony runs down Choi Jin Gui or finds Cameron behind the wheel of the car he wants to steal. Each of those two situations, despite their serious nature, are examples of absurdity and irony, each in their way making a more or less "normal" situation suddenly very different.

Director Paul Haggis and Sandra Bullock as Jean Cabot on the set
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7 MUSIC

There is a lot of music in *Crash*, and great variety in the music. Most of it is electronic (created with synthesizers), reflecting the modern, urban tone and content of the film. Vocal elements are introduced to reflect surging emotions in the film, and also the ethnic variety that is the very heart of the film, from urgent hip hop to sacred Welsh hymns.

Electronic music

The soundtrack was **composed by Mark Isham**, who has by now created the soundtracks for more than 100 films. Isham's music is most often created using synthesizers. The soundtrack is largely a kind of floating, dreamy electronic soundscape, with melodies used to express melancholy, sentiment or a sense of mystery. When these synthesizer soundscapes are interrupted, it is usually by vocal music – the hip hop in the car with Anthony and Peter, the country music Officer Hansen is listening to in his car, or the strange Welsh Gaelic singing which provides an almost religious, spiritual atmosphere. We hear piano music accompanying the scene in which Graham Waters visits his mother at home [00:47:45]: the camera moves slowly in over a piano and Graham plays a few notes, the piano on the soundtrack picking up the visual cue, superimposed on the now familiar synthesizer sounds.

“Everything is about to change”

With an abrupt and powerful shift in the film's soundtrack [00:28.26], we move from the dreamy, sentimental synthesizer music surrounding Daniel and Lara Ruiz in her room with the magic cloak to loud hip hop music as Anthony and Pete head off to Lucien's to sell the stolen car they're driving.

Crashing into one another

The music in the film up until now has consisted of Mark Isham's soft and abstract synthesizer soundscapes, with melodies

ONLINE SOURCES

Some background

<http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html> → The official portal for the 2000 US census

<http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

→ Detailed demographic results for the 2000 LA census can be found here

<http://qz.com/515871/there-has-been-at-least-one-mass-shooting-in-the-us-for-every-day-in-2015/> → Gun-related deaths – more than one mass shooting per day by 2015

<https://twitter.com/dpjhodges/status/611943312401002496>

→ British journalist Dan Hodges on gun violence in the US

Filmmaker and film

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/19/paul-haggis-crash_n_5511665.html → 2014 interview with Paul Haggis about baiting liberals

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/crash-2005> → Pulitzer prize-winning US film critic Roger Ebert's review

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0375679/> → Crash: comprehensive information and details

http://goldderby.latimes.com/awards_goldderby/2009/04/maybe-crashs-upset-at-the-oscars-shouldnt-have-been-such-a-surprise.html → On the Oscar award controversy

<http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/even-the-director-of-crash-wouldnt-have-voted-for-it-for-best-picture> → A 2015 interview in which Haggis talks about whether or not Crash should have won the Oscar