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Crash

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Crash

Abstract

This is a review of *Crash* (2004).

In director Paul Haggis' film *Crash*, the miraculous lies just below the surface of the lives of individuals, providing them with a tremendous sense of choice. The characters can choose to do the right thing or choose to do the wrong thing. The figure of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, plays a prominent role in the film, reminding us that the divine is always present even when wrong choices are made.

Graham (Don Cheadle), opens the film by saying that we feel so cut off from each other, so estranged from life, that in our desperate need to feel the warmth of human touch (affection, sympathy, connection), we literally crash into each other to have that need met. This image of "crashing" is akin in some ways to the sentiments of Paul who, in his letter to the Romans, uses the image of 'groaning' creation and 'groaning' humankind to illustrate the suffering and sense of estrangement humans feel and to point toward a hope-filled future (Rom 8:18-25).

The theologian Richard McBrien makes some similar observations in his seminal work *Catholicism* (1994), where he states that "[w]ith the question of Providence . . . we come as close to the heart of the problem of God as we possibly can. And the closer we come, the more deafening the silence".

Crash is constantly asking us to ponder how our actions and lives are interconnected and how our actions often produce chain reactions that have

unforeseen consequences. The film asks us to question whether or not these consequences are mere chance, or if there is some divine movement at the core of it all. The film's "deafening silence" is that it never really answers this question definitively.

All of the characters in the film are living in a cloud of fear. Their 'groaning' is the realization that fear has overtaken their lives: fear of those who are deemed threatening, or those who belong to different social and racial groups. The film shows us that fear can cause some unusual responses: a 'villainous' character will choose to do the right thing, a so-called 'virtuous' hero will choose to compromise his integrity, and a steady thinker will choose to do a rash and foolish thing. And yet, as a result of each choice, good or bad, some meaningful event occurs, suggesting that something larger is at work.

One of the most striking and morally complex characters is Officer Ryan (Matt Dillon). Ryan is an ardent racist who pulls over an SUV owned by a wealthy African-American couple (Terrence Howard and Thandie Newton), even though he knows their vehicle is not the recently stolen SUV he seeks. Ryan sexually gropes Christie (Newton) as he 'frisks' her while her husband Cameron (Howard), out of fear, stands watching while saying nothing. Later, in one of the film's many scenes of 'coincidence,' or 'divine providence at work,' Ryan comes across Christie again. This time he is responding to a car accident. A car has flipped over and is in danger

of exploding. Ryan rushes to the aid of the victim, only to realize it is Christie trapped inside the vehicle. Christie, upon seeing that her rescuer is the one individual who has caused so much pain and grief in her life and in her marriage, refuses to be assisted by him. In the difficult exchange that follows, the viewer realizes the enormous role that fear has played in the lives of these characters. Throughout the film to this point, both Ryan and Christie have been preoccupied with the complexities of their own lives. When thrust together in a life and death situation, they must each confront their own fears about each other. After the ordeal, as Christie is being led away, she and Ryan continue looking at each other. Both they and the audience know something profoundly spiritual has just taken place.

Crash presents many scenarios in which fear causes one character to choose an act that leads to another, inviting the audience to wonder if something larger is really taking place, something miraculous. What makes the film work on so many different levels is that the characters are not stereotyped clichés. Like us, they are a mix of good and bad, virtue and vice. Like us, they 'groan' for some connection that is not hindered or limited by fear. And like real life, *Crash* seems to be saying that something larger than ourselves may also be 'groaning' in an attempt to assist us on the way.