

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Crash]

Crime and Prejudice

By Steve Sailer

ON LOS ANGELES'S Wilshire Boulevard in 1991, during the murderous crack era, two young black men shoved snub-nosed .38s in the faces of screenwriter Paul Haggis and his wife and carjacked their new Porsche. Out of that horrifying incident grew Haggis's strong directorial debut, the ensemble drama "Crash."

More than making up for the phoni-ness of his portrayal of women's boxing in "Million Dollar Baby," Haggis's "Crash" is perhaps the most honest movie yet about how America's racial patterns in crime generate corrosive, but sadly accurate, ethnic prejudices.

The press, though, doesn't consider crime victims to be real victims because they are just random human beings, not organized pressure groups. Most critics have misinterpreted "Crash," praising it, bizarrely, for supposedly discrediting the racial stereotypes it actually explains.

As two African-American men emerge from an expensive restaurant, one (played well by rapper Ludacris) entertainingly rants about how their waitress gave them poor service just because they are black. While his sidekick points out that she was black, too, they pass L.A.'s district attorney (Brendan Fraser) and his Brentwood socialite wife (Sandra Bullock). Although heavily Botoxed, she

visibly flinches at the sight of black guys just walking past her. This blatant racism enrages Ludacris, so he chooses the DA's Lincoln Navigator as tonight's vehicle to carjack.

Afterwards, the DA groans, "Why'd they have to be black?" Calculating that the news is going to cost him either the black vote or the "law-and-order vote," he immediately instructs his aides to find some black to promote publicly.

Meanwhile, a black LAPD detective (Don Cheadle of "Hotel Rwanda") is investigating a road-rage incident in which a white undercover policeman shot an out-of-control off-duty black cop. The DA's oily Irish-American fixer (character actor William Fichtner) lets Cheadle know the boss wants to prosecute the white cop to appease black voters, so he's not happy when Cheadle reveals the dead black officer had \$300,000 in his trunk. (This is based on a 1997 LAPD scandal.)

The politico blurts out his frustration at how the tidy deals he engineers are constantly undermined by black malfeasance. "Why do blacks get themselves thrown in prison eight times more often per capita than whites?" he demands of Cheadle, who has no answer. Cheadle finally agrees to frame the innocent white cop in exchange for a promotion and the dropping of felony charges against his younger brother, who turns out to be one of the carjackers.

Despite its admirable candor, "Crash" is not a realistic film. The immensity of L.A. means that Angelenos seldom run into other people they know by accident. Some Los Angeles screenwriters respond by crafting intricate coincidence-driven plots about a fantasy L.A. where everyone knows everyone else, as in Paul Thomas Anderson's "Magnolia" or Alex Cox's brilliant "Repo Man." Simi-

larly, "Crash" slams together the lives of about 16 Angelenos of every ethnic group (except, oddly enough, Jewish) in a chain reaction of racial conflicts.

Haggis imposes two more implausible but intensifying rules. Each character has clichéd qualities, both good and bad. The Irish cop, superbly portrayed by Matt Dillon resents blacks' affirmative-action privileges but risks his life to save a black woman he once abused. The immigrant Iranian shopkeeper is industrious yet also a touchy hothead. The Mexican locksmith is a good family man, while sporting alarming gang tattoos on his neck.

Finally, every character in "Crash" must bark out his innermost negative views about the race of every other character with whom he collides. In the opening scene, for example, an impolite Korean woman rear-ends the car driven by a Latino lady, who explains to her exactly what she (and everyone else in L.A.) thinks of Asian women drivers.

The mostly minority L.A. audience at my showing found this unlikely in-your-face frankness a hoot, an enjoyable holiday from the public politeness prevailing among Angelenos, whose social template was laid down long ago by upbeat Midwesterners.

Moreover, since 1992, when the LAPD, rather than be further condemned for brutality after Rodney King's beating, let a drunken mob run amok at Florence and Normandie, resulting in much of the city being burned down, law-abiding citizens have bought lots of guns for self-defense. And as Robert A. Heinlein pointed out, "An armed society is a polite society."

"Crash" is too contrived to be a great movie, but it's a contrivance of an unusually high order. ■

Rated R for language, sexual content, and some violence.

BOOKS

[*Wilson's War: How Woodrow Wilson's Great Blunder Led to Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, and World War II*, Jim Powell, Crown Forum, 341 pages]

Making the World Safe—Again

By Thomas E. Woods Jr.

THE STORY SOUNDS oddly familiar: a president surrounded by yes-men and convinced of his divine mission to remake the world involves his country in a war that has nothing to do with its genuine security interests. When the grandiose promises he once advanced on the war's behalf do not come to pass, he simply retreats into his own reality in which everything has worked out splendidly.

Yet instead of Iraq and WMD, this story involves Woodrow Wilson, Europe, and World War I. After years of enforcing a double standard consisting of denunciations of German submarine warfare but only the occasional criticism of Britain's illegal hunger blockade, Wilson took his country into war against Germany for what he insisted were the noblest of purposes rather than narrow considerations of national interest. Although the eventual peace treaty violated just about every one of Wilson's stated principles, the president crisscrossed America calling it "an enterprise of divine mercy" and the "incomparable consummation of the hopes of mankind." Wilson, wrote Sigmund Freud, "was rapidly nearing that psychic land from which few travelers return, the land in which facts are the products of wishes."

We often hear of the unintended consequences of government intervention into the economy. For example, attempts to lower the price of milk by means of price

controls will lead to shortages of milk. In *Wilson's War*, Jim Powell is at pains to demonstrate that foreign intervention, too, has its unintended consequences—hence his book's provocative subtitle.

Those consequences have much to do with the Treaty of Versailles that Germany was forced to sign in March 1919. Wilson had spoken of a "peace without victory," a settlement that would be just toward victor and vanquished alike. Here he was certain that the United States had a salutary role to play, since left to its own devices Europe would end its war with an unjust settlement that would merely sow the seeds for a future conflict. Ironically, of course, such a treaty was made possible by the very American intervention that Wilson believed could avert it. (Wilson neglected the example of the Congress of Vienna a century earlier, which without any American help brought forth a settlement that managed to avoid a continent-wide war until the Great War of 1914-18.)

Wilson's Fourteen Points, which outlined the principles he hoped would govern the settlement and the postwar world, pointed to just such a peace. But it was not to be: Wilson was bullied at the peace conference by vindictive European leaders who threatened to remain aloof from the president's pro-

posed League of Nations—the institution Wilson fervently believed would prevent future wars and which could justify the American sacrifice—if he did not consent to their violation of his principles. Why, Powell wonders, did Wilson think the treaty negotiations would go any other way?

The Fourteen Points' call for general disarmament, for example, gave way to the demand that only Germany was to disarm. The call for an impartial settlement of colonial claims translated in practice into stripping Germany of her colonies and distributing them among

the victors. And so the treaty went, all the way down to the so-called war-guilt clause, which assigned exclusive blame for the outbreak of the war to Germany and her allies. This would be the rationale behind the enormous reparations bill laid at Germany's feet two years later.

In recent months, Republican cheerleaders for war have begun selling t-shirts, directed at the "war never solved anything" Left, listing all the evils that war has supposedly eradicated. One of them is "fascism." It is true that in the 1940s war did smash fascism, though at the cost of empowering Soviet Communism and ushering in half a century of nuclear terror. More fundamentally, though, the t-shirt philosophers miss the point that fascism, far from being a spontaneous phenomenon that emerged out of nowhere, was itself a product of a previous war, namely World War I.

There are at least two senses in which this was the case. For one thing, the fascists were deeply impressed, even shaped, by the experience of the war and the massive material and ideological mobilizations it effected. The nationalism that was encouraged by the war, the collective efforts toward a common goal, the suppression of individual liberty, the subordination of private interests to public needs—fascists sought to

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apply all of these features of wartime experience to the postwar organization of society. The fascists emerged from the war persuaded that the classical liberalism of the 19th century was dead and that the society of the future would be centrally directed: its social policy, its culture, its economy.

The more frequently discussed way in which fascism derived from World War I involves the Treaty of Versailles. That treaty was so egregiously at odds with the Fourteen Points, on the basis of which the Germans had surrendered in the first place, that it was practically