

**GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR,
YOUR HUDDLED MASSES
YEARNING TO BREATHE FREE.....**

I THINK.

Some thoughts on the film CRASH

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*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses
Yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*
(Emma Lazarus, New York City, 1883)

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CRASH

A.O.Scott in the *New York Times* (May 6, 2005) states:

“Many of the scenes in "Crash" unfold with great dramatic power, *even when they lack a credible narrative or psychological motive.*

.....The idea that bigotry is the public face of private unhappiness - the notion that we lash out at people we don't know as a form of displaced revenge against the more familiar sources of our misery - is an interesting one, but the failure of "Crash" is that it states its ideas, again and again, without realizing them in coherent dramatic form.

So what kind of a movie is *Crash*? A frustrating movie: full of heart and devoid of life; crudely manipulative when it tries hardest to be subtle; and profoundly complacent in spite of its intention to unsettle and disturb” (emphasis supplied.)

What of this criticism about “credible narrative or psychological motive”?

There was once a little boy of 5 who underwent a tonsillectomy. He had loved to listen to his mother read him “**UMFAAN— the story of a road**”—a somewhat misleading title perhaps because it is a corruption of *umFana* in Zulu which means “little boy.”

But it turned out that it was the story of a journey down a road, a life journey.

In his dream under the anesthesia, he was in a boat with a little black boy, his own age. Yes, *our* little boy was white. They heard the roar of the

oncoming falls. They saw the white spray crowning high above their shivering heads. The boys looked at each other. The boat rocked, then it raced, uncontrollable, for the steamy edge and—our boy woke up.

Years later when he saw those falls—this time in real life, *The Victoria Falls*—he understood how close he had come. The guidebooks will tell you:

The Victoria falls is 1708 meters (1850 yards —more than a mile) wide, making it the largest curtain of water in the world. It drops between 90m and 107m into the Zambezi Gorge and an average of 550,000 cubic metres/145,000,000 gallons of water plummet over the edge every minute. The local people call it "Mosi-oa-Tunya" -- the smoke that thunders.

This dream, like this movie is not for the summer-hearted. It is about the turbulence, the constant, deafening roar of pain and passion in our ears and the dangerous course we have to navigate to steer away from the edge of our most powerful impulses. And the fragile bonds that we all depend on but never think about consciously.

This film is also about how we see ourselves in others, and others in ourselves—even others who do not obviously resemble us. We hate what we see about ourselves in others. We make others into “the other” because it is too painful not to do so, to be who and what we are. This is how and why we commit crimes -- certainly in our thoughts, sometimes in our deeds.

In contrast to A.O.Scott, I think the film asks:

What is it that makes it possible for us to care about others? Do they have to be exactly like us? Do what we do? Look like us? Talk like us?...

Smell like us? And if we don't care about them, why not?

You will recall from *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*:

SHYLOCK: Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.

(Act III, Sc. 1).

Shakespeare understood that fear produces much of the ugliness in our relations with others, that fear can produce a desire to imitate the cruelty of the oppressor—perceived as well as real-- out of sheer terror and the wish to be safe—sometimes at any cost. This, I suggest, is motive indeed, motive enough.

No one in this film is safe—not black, not white, not Iranian, not Mexican, not rich and white, not rich and black, not poor and white, not poor and black, not rich immigrant, not poor immigrant. Because we are—none of us--ever completely safe.

This representation of the danger, the psychopathology of everyday life in America today in this film is the social canvass on which the filmmaker has painted the inner world of danger and absence of safety which all of us face all the time: loss of the object, loss of the love of the object, abject humiliation and fear of self-loathing—all the calamities of childhood that analysts hear about all the time. It also shows how the very human reaction of violence is often the only way people know how to respond when they are not safe.

Is this Emma Lazarus' America? Hardly. It is America the rich, the powerful, America which teaches that materialism and material success can protect you; an America, through its televised, electronic dialogue with us, that promises possessions as magical armor against any sadness, any disappointment, any pain. But even the illusion of realizing this solution is only for the very few. America is the depriving, disappointing mother in this film who may promise much but who disappoints and deprives and disillusiones all of its promisees. There is in the last analysis, no good enough mother for all of us here. In specifically psychoanalytic terms, we see here, as many developmental thinkers in our field have shown clinically, the fate of the superego under conditions of good enough vs. not good enough mothering, with contemporary America as the all-powerful mother. Without sufficient love and safety there is no compassion, no "other" as a person, only *us* – and our pain. We use social phenomena—racism, anti-Semitism, and

xenophobic bias as vessels into which to pour our failings, our humiliations and our pain. Then we dispense the contents gleefully like demented apothecaries to those who are in no position to refuse the potion. Racism and its kindred hatreds are magical solutions-- machinations-- based on omnipotence of thought which wards off feelings of loss, deprivation, humiliation, pain and worthlessness. It makes the other suffer what we suffer but want to unload. We are then avenged. But we are still empty. So often, as this film shows, we perpetuate the human tragedy of believing that we can be healed by the pain of another. Other people's weaknesses and our ability to exploit them is mere salve.

A few references to the film to illustrate this: you will undoubtedly be able to think of more:

The violation of the Thandie Newton character by the white police officer (Matt Dillon) shows the sexualization of aggression and the demonstration of power by subjugating this couple and forcing her husband's humiliation. Why?

Matt Dillon's father is in pain and he is not safe from his anguish, and helplessness and perhaps guilt, so—he externalizes his own failure to help his father onto the HMO supervisor and now he adds socially sanctioned, safe slurs to sharpen his rage. In Thandie Newton's character, he finds a vulnerable substitute whose status is also an object of envy. *These people* in this expensive car with those expensive clothes

don't have HMO problems -- he can turn passive into active, take revenge in displacement on the depriving black female HMO supervisor. He is also sexually aroused by the fact that the wife had been performing oral sex on her husband. So what he does discharges both sexual and aggressive urges.

Then there is the embittered young black carjacker who is full of rationalizations--some rather paranoid-- for his own hatred and has little or no understanding of his self-hatred or anger. These are echoed in Sandra Bullock's white character's paranoid fantasies.

There are similar themes involving most of the other characters too.

I will close with a consideration of two other issues in the film: first, why does Matt Dillon save Thandie Newton from the burning car?

Very likely his guilt over what he had done to her, more than anything else. And a wish to make reparation. He refused not to rescue her at great risk to his own life. But who was he really saving?

Then, why does the "good" young white cop -- Ryan Phillippe's character-- shoot the black hitchhiker? He shoots the young man in a surge of fear and suspicion. This is a clear depiction of how perception can push us to the limits of even our own compassion and cause us to cross a line because it is no longer perceived to be safe to trust. So there are times when whatever our intentions are to the contrary, we are highly vulnerable to primitive fears because we feel we cannot take the risk of assuming that the individual is an individual and not part of a larger

group about which we have certain pre-determined ideas. This regressive effect then results in enacting our primitive wishes.

This raises a serious dilemma: comparing this situation to that of Sandra Bullock's character, who suspects she is going to be attacked by the two young black men who look "like UCLA students," there are some situations in which fear is realistic. How do we know this and remain humanly connected to others at the same time. How do we not give in to fear or prejudice first?

This film I think shows us that we cannot escape trauma, the things that seem small to us later as adults, things that happened in the abandoned alleys of our minds. We never give them their due or pay them homage until our lives are so massively interfered with that we have no choice but to pay attention and address them. As Matt Dillon's racist police officer says; "You think you know who you are...you have no *idea!*" While society and human nature have historically rejoiced in biasing benefit and privilege in favor of the few, the group, the class, the race, and so on, these notions are not alien cultures transplanted from foreign soil. They are already rooted in fertile ground in the unconscious fantasies which are the aggregate of our struggles to feel safe, loved, gratified and not humiliated. When we are not able to do this, we search out some way to make someone else ugly. Human ingenuity is capable of

devising all kinds of grievances in the service of healing our wounds, and as this film suggests, there is no certainty that these remedies will be fair, honorable or just.

Back to where we started, with Emma Lazarus:

*“The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

Freud’s legacy can help us understand that the door cannot be golden because of the internal pain of human beings, some of which is universal and may never be healed entirely—that we all feel in some way or to some extent that we are “wretched refuse.”

But this film suggests we are nevertheless driven to ask: does society make that more or less likely? Is there any way that human nature can create a society that will protect us from this?

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