

Framing Cultural Discourse through Conflict: Reactions to the Film *Crash*

Debbie A. Owens, PhD
Associate Professor
Journalism & Mass Communications
College of Business and Public Affairs

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Media and Cultural Studies

- ▶ Researchers have long-explored audiences' readings and interpretations of visual media messages, in particular, film and television.
- ▶ **One such area: consumers' cognitive responses to media messages—audience members attempt to make sense of media texts and such interpretations are the result of constructions based on their particular perspectives.**
- ▶ As a popular "cultural forum," film presents an environment in which some manner of "structured discourse" occurs.

Reception Study Approach

- ▶ I employ a *reception study* to explore audience analyses of the film *Crash*.
- ▶ **R-S** an examination of the audience or “reader” and media message or “text” to uncover the manner in which an audience makes sense of (meaning making) a media text (the act of decoding).
- ▶ **R-S** also supports the notion of a “polysemic” or open media text where messages, though encoded by the text producer in one way, may be decoded in another – *and different people can decode the same message in different ways*.
- ▶ **Cultural studies approaches**, through qualitative research methods, seek to examine self-identity and individual responses to media representations (Cooper, 1999; Bobo, 1995; Lind, 2003; Owens, 2002)

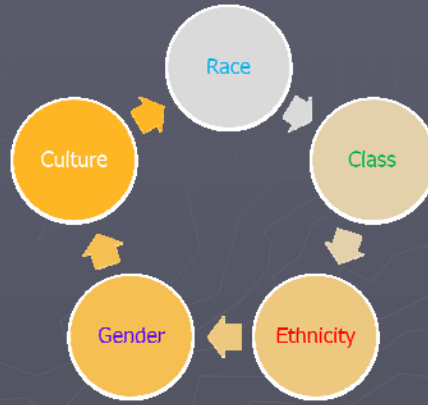
The Film *Crash*

- ▶ As with reading and interpreting a television narrative, individual audience members might interpret a *film narrative* in numerous distinct ways, with respect to the themes conveyed by central characters (Livingstone, 1990).





Themes



-Hit U.S. box offices on May 6, 2005

-3 *Oscars*, including *Best Picture*

-41 more awards & 64 nominations

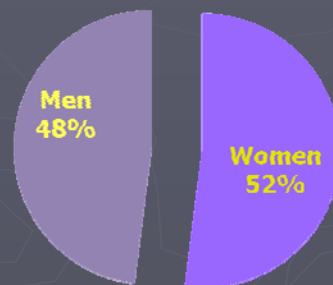


Methods and Subjects

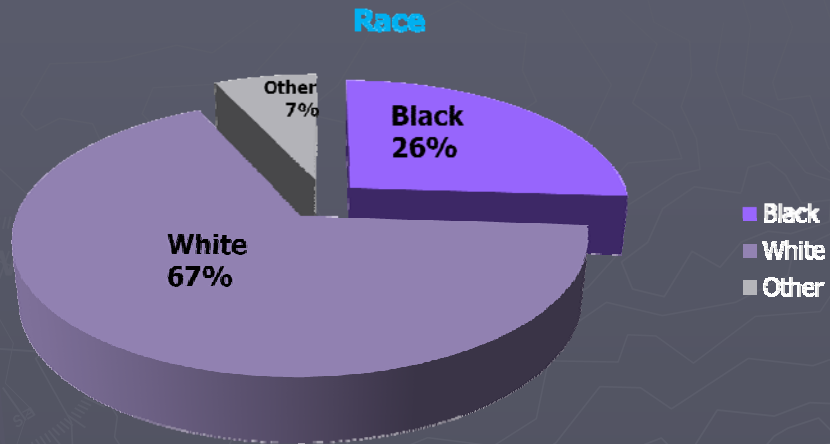
- ▶ Study conducted between February & March 2008
- ▶ In three classroom or lounge settings.
- ▶ Nearly all participants were students and employees at a small Southern university
- ▶ N=27 ▶ Aged 18 to 24
- ▶ Viewed film
- ▶ Opened-ended questions
- ▶ Audio-taped discussion session

Gender of Respondents

Gender

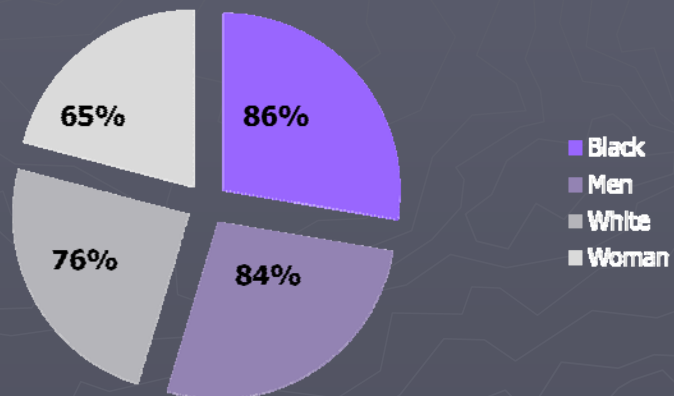


Race of Respondents



Positive Response to Film

Liked Very Much or Extremely



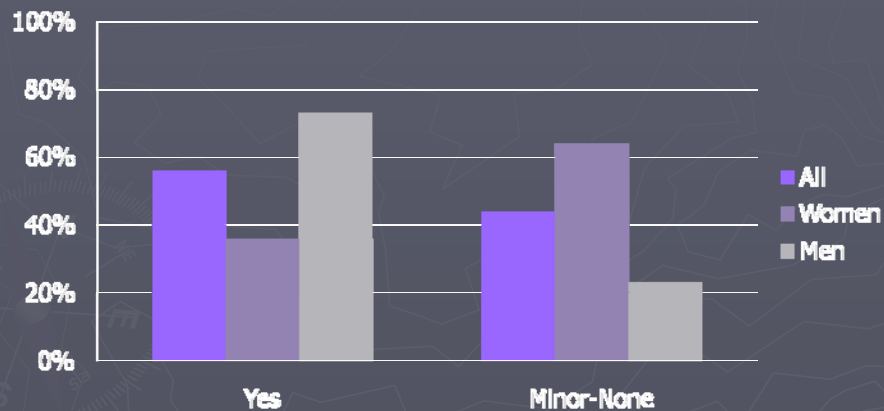
Reading the *Gendered* Motif

- ▶ With a few exceptions, respondents said *Crash* contributed to their *understanding of gender* or gendered issues. However, respondents **mostly referenced issues relating to women or femininity** (rather than men or masculinity).



Understanding Gender

Film's Influence on Understanding Gender



Men versus Women

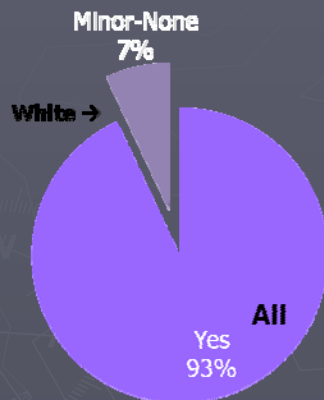
- ▶ Of those who *did recognize* gender issues, respondents mostly noted instances in which *women* were portrayed as *victims* and/or men's roles in these situations. They clearly read **patriarchal subtext**.
- ▶ Additionally, males addressed issues of masculinity, or men's roles, and noted women as **subordinate** to men.



Explanations for Gender Differences

- ▶ Respondents might have mainly focused more on film's prominent themes of racism and bigotry. Thus, they considered gender less relevant to the storyline.
- ▶ Subjects' limited experiences influenced attitudes about what constituted gender or gendered issues.
- ▶ That respondents *did not* recognize certain instances of gender bias was somewhat surprising since several character portrayals hinged on specifically gendered issues (both female & male).
- ▶ "***Selective perception***" function not ruled out.

Understanding Race



Film's Influence on Understanding Race

Blind-Sighted, or Not?

- ▶ Perhaps respondents *avoided or denied* influence. Or again, their *limited experiences* affected abilities to comprehend the hierarchy of racism or how construct of race operates within society.
- ▶ Fundamental assumption—certain respondents interpreted film through the lens of *"enlightened racism."*
- ▶ ***E-R*, popular media images work through their representations of race to reinforce whiteness as cultural norm, subordinate nonwhite "others."**
- ▶ Here, respondents view every *"other"* character as existing on an even plane secondary to white storyline. For them, whiteness represents *cultural norm*, implies that people belonging to all other groups deviate from that norm. (Campbell, 2005; Hall, 1980/1973; Hunt, 2005; Jhally & Lewis, 2005).

Interpreting Racial Issues

- ▶ As expected, respondents read the blatant stereotypes and “racialized” narrative that permeated *Crash*.
- ▶ Some sought to temper strong reactions to film’s storyline and dialogue with quite *individualist* interpretations relevant to their own self-identities.
- ▶ While keeping focus on the racial motif throughout film, respondents sought to make sense of overreaching, unsettling “racialized” text.



Conventional Themes

- ▶ Many respondents articulated conventional themes of *individualism versus altruism*.
- ▶ Respondents focused on individual film characters’ situations involving *interpersonal* struggle or self-reflection.
- ▶ Several of these respondents appeared to apply archetypal, if not tentative (safe), readings of the *Crash* film narrative.

Interpreting Film as Cultural Discourse

- ▶ To the extent that researchers consider film as a popular “cultural forum” in which some manner of “structured discourse” occurs, *Crash* has generated many instances prompting sustained audience discourse about culture and ethnicity, gender, and race and racism.
- ▶ Generally, just as filmmakers emphasized cultural and racial conflicts, respondents focused on themes about race and racial incidents and to some degree gender.

- ▶ Yet, on the one hand, responses indicated some viewers' *decisions not to recognize* either race or gender, while on the other hand responses indicated some viewers' abilities to perhaps reach a level of *enlightened racism* in cultural discourse in which they've “disentangled physical representations of race, from the character representations”.
- ▶ (Perhaps even enlightened sexism applies here.)
- ▶ Still others in their readings of the film narrative opted for a *personal interpretation*, addressing conventional themes rather than even broaching the topic of either race or gender.

Concluding Remarks

- ▶ Despite the above characterizations of specific respondents, whatever the filmmakers' primary objective for the movie —to either challenge audiences or merely garner box office profits— the film ultimately presents viewers an opportunity to explore several socially and politically salient American, if not, global issues.

- ▶ Ultimately, this study of audience reactions to *Crash* adds to the understanding of how people interpret what they view from the standpoint of their unique cognitions, cultural experiences, racial identities, and social groups.



crash

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