

Stealing Freedom: Auto Theft and Autonomous Individualism in American Film

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IN THE CLOSING SCENES OF CLINT EASTWOOD'S 2008 FILM *GRAN TORINO*, THE STORIES OF one man's personal redemption and another's dream of achieving independent manhood came together in two life defining moments: one of self-sacrifice, and the other, a rite of passage into manhood. Confronting a gang that has terrorized his adopted family of immigrant Hmong neighbors, the cantankerous Polish-American autoworker and Korean War vet, Walt, goads the thugs into murdering him before witnesses, thereby saving the community. By dying, Walt spares the life and innocence of Thao, the neighbor boy intent on exacting revenge for the gang's rape of his sister. For Walt, his act eases the haunting memory of his killing of an enemy prisoner in Korea, a boy not unlike Thao. As the story unfolds, his young Hmong neighbor becomes his chance at redemption, if, as Walt describes it, he can manage "to man [Thao] up a bit." Thao, whom Walt guided in the previous months into self-respecting appreciation of hard work, independence of mind, and success with the ladies, is last seen at the close of the film driving Walt's beloved Gran Torino toward a future life of dignified manhood. This story of heroic manly self-sacrifice and of a young man's coming of age takes place in the "motor city"—Detroit, Michigan. And it begins with Thao's attempted theft of Walt's Gran Torino.

In the real world today auto theft is usually about gangs, drugs, and money (Heitmann and Morales 5). However, since 1945 the cinematic representation of auto theft has had more to do with the symbolic meaning cars and driving hold in American culture. In the early twentieth century, the automobile and driving became associated with many of the classic qualities of American identity (March and Collette 107). The roots of that expectation stretch back even further to the role that movement played in the colonization of the continent. The unrestrained capacity to move became equated early in the American cultural imagination with personal reinvention and self-determination (Feldman 13–19). Those who could control their own movement were deemed self-sufficient, independent agents. Thus, the capacity of movement became linked to political economy.¹ Indeed, mobility came to stand for liberty itself. But, as in early America the capacity to move freely was frequently denied to those not white or male. The lack of mobility marked African-American slaves and women as unfit for individual liberty and incapable of sovereign selfhood. The American vision of the mobile, liberal individual was both raced and gendered (Cresswell 147–74).

American attitudes toward the automobile have been influenced by this tradition (Flink 132). In the decades after its introduction, the automobile and driving have

increasingly served as arch-signifiers of the autonomous self-determining subject—coded white and male—at the heart of American individualism. (Jackson 157–58). Indeed, the importance of the automobile and driving has been magnified because, as the historian Cotton Seiler argued in *Republic of Drivers*, both have become “the crucial compensation for apparent losses to the autonomy, privacy, and agency registered by workers under the transition to corporate capitalism” (Seiler 13). Depictions of cars in films after 1945 suggest that this relationship has crystallized over time.

Walt’s reverence for the Gran Torino highlights its symbolic importance to him. The aggressive sloping posture, muscular engine, agility, and distinctive appearance of Walt’s Gran Torino provides him with a sense of mastery and freedom that psychologically counterbalances the liberty he lost working on an assembly line. But this link of consumption, automobility, and independence has faced significant threats as women and people of color have taken to the wheel (Scharff 112–16, 170–71). Over the last sixty years the empowerment of youth, women, and minorities, many of whom increasingly have become motorists, has altered the social context of driving as a symbol of white, male self-determination (Clark 175; Heitmann 202–06). Simultaneously, since the 1970s, deindustrialization and relative declining economic fortunes of laborers has also strained the link between driving and autonomous individuality. Again, the film *Gran Torino* throws all of this into relief. Walt stands as a symbol of a virtuous (if not pure), white, male, working class. Yet he is also depicted as a widowed, aging, embattled figure, whose prime has passed. Significantly, Walt never drives his Gran Torino. The postwar America of Walt’s memories has given way to gender confusion, multi-ethnicity, rebellious youth, unemployment, and mindless consumption. One sign of the disorder is the way the Hmong gang members have become masters of the local roads as they drive menacingly around the neighborhood. The decay is underscored through the lives of Walt’s children and grandchildren whom the film depicts as having physically and morally retreated into suburban indifference.

In this context of the historical transformation of the United States since World War II, so well encapsulated in Walt’s life, the cinematic significance of auto theft has taken shape. Because of the strong connection between automobility and independence, auto theft has become the means to capture symbolically popular concerns surrounding personal liberty. For example, auto theft threatens the sense of self-determination embodied in automobility. Then again the thief’s identity can challenge race, gender, or class-based power structures because the thief becomes the fulcrum between legitimate and illegitimate automobility. Finally, the increasingly indiscriminate quality of automobility raises doubts about its usefulness as a healthy measure of autonomous individuality.

One example of this cultural linkage is the way the auto thief motif in film frequently engages the attendant anxieties surrounding the threat to white, masculine social authority and its special symbolic connection to automobility. Another is the way the car thief and his/her stolen automobility sometimes serves to express the claims of youths, women, and people of color to social rights denied them. Indeed, since the later 1960s, the car thief has largely evolved into a sympathetic figure whose actions reflect an attempt to gain or regain autonomy denied by oppressive forces. However, in a reactionary fashion, since the 1970s, this figure of the noble auto thief rebel has more often been reserved for the “dispossessed,” mature, white male.

The cultural mediation that auto theft imagery performs is not simply representational. The attempt by some of these films to reconcile the various expectations associated with the imagery of auto theft and automobility into a satisfying conclusion for audiences, frequently performs the cultural work assigned to myth by Claude Levi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*, namely: tempering cultural contradictions dialectically by providing an analogous but more easily resolved contradiction. In this case, the contradictory expectations versus realities of individual autonomy in postwar America have been supplanted in such films by the more easily resolved analog between the auto thief and legitimate automobility.

Hide the Keys: The Unfit Driver

Film portrayals of auto theft in the decades immediately after World War II highlighted a latent apprehension that often accompanied the association of authority with automobility in a consumer society with rising car ownership (Packer 27–76). One source of concern was youth ownership. Another was the suspicion that emerging car crime by young drivers signaled a lack of virtue in the traditional master of mobility, the American male.

Driver education films released after the war focused on the dangers of “joy riding” youths whose premature access to automobility challenged automobile ownership as a symbol of liberty and responsible citizenship. Described within the justice system and insurance industry as crimes of opportunity and mischievousness, the joy-riding auto thief emerged alongside other figures of juvenile delinquency: the hot-rodder, motorbike hooligan, and “greaser” boy (Gilbert 63–78). An early version of the troubled teenage joy rider is featured in the 1940 short *Boy in Court* that follows a young man through the consequences of his decision to enjoy himself by stealing a car. Similarly, the 1955 short *Teenagers on Trial* told the story of a delinquent youth who steals a car and hits the town’s beloved police officer. More tragedy follows in the 1956 film *Car Theft* when three youths spontaneously decide to steal a parked car that has the keys left in the ignition and run from pursuing police. Educational film impresario Sid Davis’s 1961 *Moment of Decision* reprised the same situation. Here the viewer listened to the internal thoughts of four young men whose desire for freedom leads them to joy ride.

Significantly the underlying message in each of these films centered upon the negligence of adults. The stolen cars were linked to the growing opportunity of the young to indulge in pleasures they were not yet responsible enough to undertake. These films also suggested that the problems of these wayward youths were a result of temptations society presented, and the inability of overworked or self-interested parents, especially their fathers, to tend to their children’s development. Indeed “to a greater or lesser degree we are all products of our environment,” declared the narrator in *Moment of Decision*. Only the boy whose attentive father taught self-discipline and personal responsibility manages to avoid the mistake of joy riding.

Like the public service films above, Hollywood feature-length films of the 1950s, such as the sensationalist *The Young and the Wild* (1958), often situated the act of car theft within the emerging fear of juvenile delinquency (Gilbert 178–95). The most complex and penetrating of these films explored adult fears that they were partly to blame for the emerging problem. Films such as *Quicksand* (1950) and *Rebel Without a Cause*

(1955) suggested that men were losing the willpower to behave responsibly, and thus were forfeiting the capacity to direct their fate. These films implied that the pursuit of consumer desires, the pressures of social conformity, and the assertiveness of women were weakening the masculine virtues of responsible self-sufficiency and independence of mind needed to be a truly autonomous self-directed individual. The young men in *Rebel Without a Cause* desperately seek the masculine capacity of self-determination, proven through auto theft and contests of driving skill. Though unseen in the film, the auto thefts function as catalysts to the tragic events that follow: the stolen cars are used by the two central characters, Buzz Gunderson (Corey Allen) and Jim Stark (James Dean), in their “race to the edge.” As in the public service films, the stolen cars and game of chicken reflect the young men’s unruly grasp at an adult world of responsibility they are incapable of managing (Slocum 7). At the center of Jim’s confusion is the wavering manly self-sufficiency of his father: a henpecked and irresolute man. Without the guidance he begged his father to provide, Jim faces alone a world of increasing confusion and dangerously premature opportunities (Kimmel 243–49). Jim, like many other young male characters in films at this time, is independent of spirit, but confused by an increasing sense of dependency. The result is rebellion and auto theft.

Birth of the Auto Theft Rebel

In the postwar era many Americans had begun equating youth with rebellion (Hale 13–48). By the end of the 1960s both had become firmly connected to images of automobility and the road. Building upon the implications evident in *Rebel Without a Cause*, the auto thief was reconfigured into a heroic rebel against social oppression. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), about the lives of the infamous 1930s bank robbing duo, transformed movie auto theft from a subtextual expression of the delinquent’s grasp for autonomy into a more overt display of reclaiming lost selfhood. Along with other era-defining films of automobility such as *Bullit* (1968), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Vanishing Point* (1971), and *Badlands* (1973), this story of mobile criminality captured the complex generational response to the bankruptcy of postwar American culture (Harris 370). Lurking beneath the evident pleasures that audiences had watching Bonnie and Clyde steal cars, rob banks, and outshoot and evade law enforcement was a deep disgust in and distrust of institutional authority. The Great Depression was a period in the history of The United States when economic and political leaders had failed. As depicted in the film, the nation’s financial institutions and law enforcement were running roughshod over average citizens, robbing them of their rightful power of self-determination. By attacking authority Bonnie and Clyde appeared the friends of everyday people. “The fact is when Bonnie and Clyde were killed, they were regarded as enormous folk heroes,” declared the film’s director Arthur Penn (Penn 21–22). *Time* magazine concluded, “It is a measure of the movie’s excellence that it has transformed those unlikely, unlikable criminals into the leading characters of an epic folk opera” (“Low-down Hoedown”). Many viewers of the film in the late 1960s believed the nation’s leaders had again failed (Cook 11–37). The depiction of Bonnie and Clyde’s private war against authority in the 1930s satisfied the audiences wish in the late 1960s to rebelliously take back control over their lives (Murray 237–56). Auto theft is one of the key ways the cinematic Bonnie and Clyde regain their powers of self-determination.

The opening scene is one of voyeuristic anticipation. Clyde (Warren Beatty) hesitantly prepares to steal a car. Bonnie (Faye Dunaway), watching from within her bedroom, observes a handsome young man suspiciously lingering around her grandmother's automobile. Her curiosity stems from the banality of her life. Confined in domestic imprisonment, she gazes out to freedom. Indeed, one of the innovations in this film was its connection of automobility with female desire and dreams of autonomy (Mills 137–38). As the scholar of road movies David Laderman points out, the opening scene “foreshadows the film’s association of freedom with the road and stolen cars” (Laderman 51). Soon after, the two commit their first robbery together and escape by stealing a car to the accompaniment of the rousing banjo classic “Foggy Bottom Break-down.” Repeated acts of stolen mobility follow, each conveying the thrilling recapture of control over one’s life.

Clyde’s reasons for stealing cars are rooted in masculine frustrations that compliment Bonnie’s longings. Clyde’s volatile combination of diffidence and rashness are expressive of suppressed manhood, a condition embodied in Clyde’s sexual impotence. Bonnie’s assertive sexuality repeatedly spurs him into substitute actions of auto theft, bank robbery, gunplay, and stolen mobility. His manliness has been diverted into a bold usurpation and defiance of authority using cars and guns.

Yet these themes of restoration of selfhood are undercut as the film progresses. Like many of the films of the New American Cinema movement, *Bonnie and Clyde* demonstrates a reflexivity that brings into question symbols conventionally used by Hollywood. The film introduced a “disenchantment with mobility” (Laderman 56). Midway through it, a darker mood of futility and inevitable doom surfaces and foreshadows a bloody climax. In the end, the bullet-riddled car reveals that Bonnie and Clyde’s freedom has been a transitory illusion. Societal constraints have prevailed over individual agency.

If *Bonnie and Clyde* reflected the emerging concerns in the latter half of the 1960s that mass society was inhibiting freedom, then events in the decades after 1970 intensified these fears among many Americans. The postwar economic boom ended. With that the social contract between management and workers forged during the Depression and World War II began to dissolve. After this, the number of visual representations of auto theft exploded as more people felt disempowered. While the conclusion of *Bonnie and Clyde* might communicate the futility of individual resistance, it also casts the auto thief as a freedom fighter (Gitlin 200). This transfiguration was part of the commodification of “rebellion” in which the rebel image was sold as a surrogate for true liberty (Frank 74–87; Gilbert 196–211). Ultimately, that conceit became a key reason the auto thief attained cultural cache in the coming decades.

One theme evident in film of the 1970s was the populist, blue-collar celebration of auto theft as a rebellious reclaiming of a lost working-class respectability. H.B. “Toby” Halicki—the owner of a Los Angeles junkyard—wrote, directed, produced, and starred in the 1974 car theft cult classic *Gone in Sixty Seconds*. Halicki played the part of Maindrian Pace, a respected insurance investigator and owner of Chase Research by day. At night and in and around parking lots, streets, chop shop, and dealerships, however, Pace is the head of a highly organized car theft ring.

The *Los Angeles Times* backhandedly referred to *Gone in Sixty Seconds* as a “genuine primitive work of art” that had the feel of a “well handled documentary.” Despite the

film's problems, Halicki had indeed "found exploitable art in his own backyard" through his emphasis upon blue-collar comradeship, skills and work ethic (Tuckman, 1974). Rather than descending into lawlessness, the working-class characters are depicted as retrieving their lost independence through an orderly, hard working but ethical criminality. The thieves espouse a working-class ethos of skilled, almost artisanal, labor. The virtuous nature of that ethic is exemplified in their refusal to steal uninsured cars. Like Bonnie and Clyde, the men of *Gone in Sixty Seconds* only steal from oppressive big businesses. The auto thieves are heroes and the bad guys are the faceless bureaucracies and moneyed classes of the emerging postindustrial economy. At the same time, the juxtaposition of Pace's daytime "fake" job as an insurance investigator and his nighttime "real" labor serves to mock dependent white collar corporate manhood (Kimmel 223–58). These sophistries permit the car thief to be acclaimed a "real man" and a populist hero whose theft of mobility might satisfy the audience's wish for rebellion and self-determination.

"Sticking it to the Man": Representations of Female and Black Auto Thieves

In the subsequent decades the motif of the auto thief rebel emerged in a number of films that explored the struggle of women and people of color to attain a measure of autonomy. One of the first of these was the 1971 dark comedy *Harold and Maude*. Harold (Bud Cort) is the young, morbidly eccentric scion of a wealthy family who stages elaborate suicides and visits funerals of complete strangers in his hearse. At one of these funerals, he meets Maude (Ruth Gordon), a 79-year-old, carefree, Holocaust survivor who also spends her days at funerals. Maud likes to steal cars whenever she needs a ride. Maude's penchant for stealing cars expresses her determination to live her life on her own terms. Her carefree enthusiasm and joy for life revitalizes Harold. After she commits suicide, again having chosen to determine her own fate, we last see Harold walking away from the edge of a cliff off which he had just driven his hearse. Maud's bold theft of cars leads to Harold's salvation. The destruction of his own car signaled the shedding of his predilection for death and the beginning of a new life.

The most explicit cinematic example of a woman's attempt to achieve independence by stealing cars is the clever auto thief Vurria, played by Stockard Channing, in the 1976 movie *Dandy: the All American Girl* (also released as *Sweet Revenge*). Neither the police nor the love of the district attorney (Sam Waterston) can tame Vurria. Through the Waterston character, institutional authority is equated with paternalism and depicts both as enemies to women's freedom. Vurria's quest is to steal enough cars to legitimately buy a Ferrari. The endeavor is rich in implication. If Vurria's goal is simply to possess a Ferrari, her approach is absurd: why not simply steal the Ferrari? But it makes sense if her legal ownership of the Ferrari signifies her legitimate right to self-determination. Auto theft is simply the means that discrimination left open to her to achieve independence.

Vurria's only true friend in the film is Edmund, a black male played by Franklyn Ajaye, who is able to relate to Vurria's disempowerment and social oppression. But Edmund dies helping Vurria achieve her aim. His death alters Vurria's belief that auto-mobility equals freedom, and, having escaped the police, she drives all night and burns

the Ferrari—her American dream—at dawn. The act communicates her disillusionment. It also signals the beginning of a new day.

Edmund's death in *Dandy: the All American Girl* is not surprising because black male automobility in American history has also been perceived as a threat to the ideology of white, male social dominance (Franz 132). Black automobility has frequently been negatively depicted in popular culture but celebrated by African Americans (Packer 190–95). It was not until the mid-1990s that *Menace II Society* (1993) and *New Jersey Drive* (1995) explored the topic of black auto theft and attempted to do for the black, male rebel what the above films sought to achieve for women (Massood 162–74).

New Jersey Drive introduces car thief Jason Petty (Sharron Corley), one of a large group of aimless young African Americans who steal cars in Newark, New Jersey, “the car theft capital of America.” At first they do it to “put on a show”; in time, however, they begin to make money selling what they steal to chop shops. The historic association of automobility with whiteness lingers in the background of the film. It further suggests the systematic white repression of black automobility by pitting the thieves against an all-white, racist, auto theft police squad that brutalizes the young men at every opportunity. Nevertheless, although these black men face lives of hopelessness, despair, and racism, they build comradeship and a sense of dignity by stealing cars. Paul Gilroy describes the strong interest in automobility within African-American culture, and in the characters of this film it is possible to see how the “histories of confinement and coerced labour. . . have given them additional receptivity to the pleasures of auto-autonomy as a means of escape, transcendence and perhaps even resistance” (Gilroy 84). In the end, however, the bonds the men create disintegrate under the relentless social forces. Here, the film makes clear that the illicit attainment of automobility only fosters the illusion of liberation, empowerment and self-worth. According to Gilroy, while it is perhaps the case that the preoccupation with automobility in African-American culture “may on some level be gesturing their anti-discipline to power,” it may also be true that it does so “even as the whirlpool of consumerism sucks them in” (Gilroy 98). Perhaps it is for this reason that in 1973, three years before *Dandy: the All American Girl*, Ralph Ellison has the African American protagonist of his short story *Cadillac Flambe* burn his dream car. As Jeremy Packer has written, Ellison's hero in the story realized his “Cadillac no longer signified freedom and upward mobility, but rather entrapment” in the white man's world. (Packer 189-90).

It is significant that *Harold and Maude*, *Dandy: the All American Girl*, and *New Jersey Drive* did not do particularly well with broader movie audiences. As the *New York Times* reviewer observed of *Dandy: the All American Girl*: “It's easy to understand why [the film] failed to find an audience. It seems unsure of itself. It wants to sympathize with the ambitious, disturbed, inarticulate heroine but cannot make her appear to be sympathetic” (Canby, 1981). Perhaps the “uncertainty” lay in the difficulty some viewers had in understanding the characters' social perspective. To those who revered automobility, burning a Ferrari was “disturbed.” Perhaps what put people off was the implication that the democratic promise embodied in automobility—and thus of America—was denied to some. Or perhaps the lack of sympathy was simply rooted in sexism and racism. Whatever the reason for their unpopularity, these films were part of a subgenre of auto theft films, including *Breathless* (1983) and *Crash* (2004), that approached with suspicion the promise of automobility and its capacity to inspire virtuous individual self-realization.

White Comic Auto Theft in B-Films

B-films featuring depictions of car theft by working-class, white males became popular at the box office beginning in the 1970s (Nystrom 21–58). The popularity of these films was rooted in two developments. First, it resulted from the converging pressures on white, male, working-class Americans caused by the end of the postwar economic boom (Cowie 126–35; 236–47). While jobs were disappearing, white men also found themselves in an intensifying competition with female and minority workers. The second development was the declining respect for authority triggered by the Counterculture, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal, but worsened by the backlash of some white working-class men against government. These men perceived government support for the civil liberties of minorities and women to be an attack upon them (Edsall and Edsall 137–53). By the mid-1970s the rebellious anti-authoritarianism of auto theft made it appealing to white males who felt betrayed by society. Most of these films were low budget affairs and part of the white rebel exploitation cinema of the day (Mills 148–150). Much of it was aimed at rural, drive-in theater audiences in the South and Midwest. The most successful of these films combined car theft motifs with comic elements. The farcical elements may have deflected the audience's growing suspicions toward the naïve association of automobility with authentic freedom, thus permitting the older myth to function without being overtly challenged.

In 1976, B-film entrepreneur Roger Corman produced the hit film *Eat my Dust!* starring Ron Howard (Corman 209). Howard's character, the teenager Hoover Niebold, is small-town, "white-trash" who risks asking the local beauty out for a date only to have her demand he steal a car (Von Doviack 121). The theft leads to a series of hair-raising car chases but also transforms Hoover's life for the better. Howard's own film, *Grand Theft Auto*, released a year later, centers on two young lovers, Sam Freeman (Ron Howard) and Paula Powers (Nancy Morgan), bent upon getting married. Paula, the daughter of wealthy gubernatorial candidate Bigby Powers, is a headstrong and independent young woman determined to marry Sam, rather than the wealthy prig planned for her. In one comic scene after another the characters "borrow" the cars of others to suit their immediate convenience. Even a policeman commandeers a bus filled with senior citizens. The message: stealing a car is a harmless, good-hearted rebellion against authority. But it is also a means to attain self-fulfillment, equated here with money, women, and status.

Corvette Summer: A Fiberglass Romance (1978) follows along similar lines, explicitly equating cars with women and driving with manhood. As the trailer declares, "It's the girl, the car, and the time that separate the men from the boys." *Corvette Summer* stars Mark Hamill as Kenny Dartley, whose high school shop class, led by Kenny, restores a wrecked Corvette Stingray. The sharked-nosed, candy apple vehicle with flames painted on the hood, serves as a projection of Kenny's sense of his own personal distinctiveness. Kenny's shop teacher, Mr. McGrath, cautions his students not to get too involved with the car. Automobiles, he warns, "always let you down." The phrase, often reserved for snide, male observation about women, foreshadows coming events. Sure enough, during a night of celebration at a local cruise-in, the car is stolen. While authorities are resigned to the loss, Kenny's identification with the car makes it impossible for him to let it go, and consequently he begins an odyssey in search of it that eventually takes him to Las Vegas. In Las Vegas, he discovers not only his car, but that Mr. McGrath is a member of

the stolen car ring. He steals the car back, but, rather than keep it, he returns it to the high school.

Understanding Kenny's decision requires making sense of the parallel significance for Kenny of the woman he meets on his journey to Las Vegas. On the road Kenny encounters Vanessa (Annie Potts), a want-to-be hooker who drives a customized love-van. At first, Kenny resists Vanessa's come-ons, preferring the love of his car to that of a young woman. Yet Vanessa is as unique as the car Kenny loves. Vanessa's sexuality and thinness make her as enticing and as angular as the shark-nosed vehicle he has lost. Indeed they serve as two different but strangely overlapping objects of desire. This parallel is highlighted by Vanessa's customized love-van where the acts of love and mobility come together. In his rite of passage to manhood, Kenny comes to his senses and realizes that the girl is more important than the car. Vanessa, too, sees that true love is better than making love for money.

The conclusion of *Corvette Summer* points to the reflexive trend evident in *Bonnie and Clyde* that ultimately gained ground in subsequent auto theft films: namely, the link between independence and automobility was superseded by suspicion. While movies continued to loosely compare cars, personal autonomy, and manhood, many frequently drew at least a nominal distinction between automobility and true manly independence.

Shiny Cars and Empty Men

Film depictions of auto theft in the 1980s were characterized by an earnest effort to revitalize the masculine ideals of autonomous selfhood and social authority (Jeffords 24–63, Martin 77–78). The comedic auto thief hero, still evident in films like *Risky Business* (1983) and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), was joined by more serious explorations into auto theft masculinity. Films such as *No Man's Land* (1987) and *Rain Man* (1988) did not offer the viewer a simple retreat of the 1950s fear over masculine decline. Rather they combined the 1960s suspicions of the equation of cars and true manhood with a cleverly indirect pro-American, blue-collar populism by channeling that skepticism toward foreign luxury vehicles (Kimmel 280–89). In the 1980s, foreign-built luxury performance cars began to rival the hold of the classic American muscle cars in the nation's cultural imagination. Both films equated flamboyantly expensive foreign cars with a shallowly materialistic and merely performative manliness identified with the yuppie middle class. The films revolved around male entrepreneurs who sold such cars to make money and prove their manhood. At the same time, however, these films merged the 1960s link between automobility and self-discovery with the older ideal of rugged manhood. In effect, both films deftly presented hypertrophic imagery of heroic masculinity while at the same time blunting the absurdity of such narcissistic self-inflation by posing as cautionary tales.

Ron Howard's penchant for the subject of auto theft resurfaced a decade after the release of *Grand Theft Auto* in his role as the director of *No Man's Land* (1987). Charlie Sheen plays Ted Varrick, a cocky rich kid turned master auto thief and ringleader. Born to wealth, Varrick has set out to build his own fortune and self-esteem through the nefarious but lucrative business of stealing Porsches and ripping-off insurance companies. He is the wealthy rebel businessman luxuriating in all the sensual perks available to the affluent. But he is not corporate. If he is "bad," it is mostly in the pop-cultural

sense of the word. Roger Ebert sensed a “moral question” at the center of the film: Why is it that those who “don’t need to steal and kill” do so anyway? (Ebert) Ebert suspected an addiction to risk. Perhaps Varrick longed for something that money could not buy but stealing a car could give.

The foil to the alluring but soulless Varrick comes in the form of D. B. Sweeney, who is cast as the working class, undercover, rookie cop, Benjy. Benjy, a self-taught grease monkey, is able to assume the identity of mechanic Bill Ayles in order to take Varrick down. The attractions of a fast life surrounded by sleek cars and sleek women prove beguiling to Benjy, and for a time his allegiances become unclear. But in the end Benjy’s blue-collar commonsense leads him to reject Varrick’s materialism and unquenchable ambitions. As the *New York Times* critic Caryn James intimated in her review, through the figure of the auto thief, the film wallows in the sensationalist fantasies of Reagan era masculinity—aggressive entrepreneurialism and hedonistic irresponsible materialism—while siding, half heartedly, with that other side of the Reagan masculine fantasy, the blue-collar manly virtues of self-sacrifice, self-denial, and honest labor (James).

A year later *Rain Man* engaged similar themes. Tom Cruise plays Charlie Babbitt, a superficial, slick, hard driving, but quasi-legitimate importer of luxury performance automobiles. Caught in the middle of a financial crisis involving four gray-market Lamborghini, Charlie seems poised to either attain the success he desperately craves or lose his shirt. Scenes between Charlie and his loving girlfriend reveal he is boorish and emotionally dysfunctional. The story thickens with news of his father’s death in Cincinnati. Returning home, the secrets of Charlie’s past come to light. The source of his troubled personality lies in his youthful theft of his father’s classic 1949 Road Master convertible. That joy ride, prompted by paternal callousness, shapes the rest of his life. Angered at his father, Charlie ran away and, in the intervening years, worked hard to prove he is his father’s equal. Not surprisingly, given the nature of their conflict, he seeks to achieve it in the automobile business.

But here, the story takes another turn. Charlie learns the estate is left to Raymond (Dustin Hoffman), an autistic brother he never knew he had. Hoping to squeeze half the money out of the executor, Charlie kidnaps Raymond. Forced by the peculiarity of his brother’s conditions to drive cross-country to California in the Road Master, Charlie inadvertently rides to a deeper level of self-discovery. During the journey, the callousness of Charlie’s father is revealed as the result of Charlie’s role in Raymond’s institutionalization: Raymond accidentally injured Charlie by scalding him. As Charlie rediscovers a love for his brother and a need for responsibility, the audience realizes that his previous attempt to achieve autonomous manliness by selling status vehicles was doomed to failure. His salvation rests in a return to the classic, straight-eight, American car he once stole and the moral solidity of emotional commitment it signified. At the end of their journey, Charlie decides he must put Raymond’s needs before his own. His assumption of manly responsibility reconciles him with his girlfriend and ostensibly places him on the road to a happy future.

Vintage Vehicles and the Longing for Lost Manhood

As we see in the above films, the use of the car and driving to express positive realization of autonomous manhood remained a powerful motif in American visual culture at the end

of the twentieth century. However, there were two notable developments. One was the rise of a subtler, more nuanced equation of auto theft with autonomous individuality. The second was the evolution of a nostalgic automobility that equated classic vehicles with individual independence, leading to the treatment of vintage cars as fetish objects. The celebration of vintage American cars is clearly evident in some of the films already discussed, for example, the classic Buick Road Master convertible in *Rain Man*. The powerful totemic quality of the vintage Buick Road Master is significant in the life of the Babbitt family, and the empty materialism of Charlie's life before inheriting the Road Master is equated with the new European performance vehicles he sold. The 2000 remake of *Gone in 60 Seconds* contained similar themes.

The 1974 auto theft classic is reimagined in the auto thief rebel, Memphis Raines (Nicholas Cage), who is forced to reluctantly return to his masterful (if illegal) talents at taking other peoples cars. Memphis is trying hard to be an honest man. He and his former gang are teaching kids karate, restoring cars rather than chopping them, and desperately attempting to teach Asian women to drive. The stereotypical racial and gendered bias of the humor—and subtextual resentment—hints at the film's target audience. The film communicates that there is no manly dignity to be had in the bland, unfulfilling and low-paying jobs that blue-collar men hold in postindustrial America. As one character puts it, "I have discovered you have to work twice as hard when it's honest."

Forced by circumstance, Memphis and his former collaborators must steal 50 high-end vehicles in 4 days. If successful, he and his brother will no longer be "owned" by the criminals to whom they are indebted. In effect, Memphis' plight is a version of the average underemployed and debt-ridden American. By returning to stealing cars, he and his brother may be liberated. But car theft had always given Memphis a sense of individual importance. Explaining the allure to comrades after a theft, he explains that "I instantly feel better about myself." By taking the car, he frees himself. As he tells his brother, "The car is you, you are the car." Here, unambiguously, the car represents the individuality of the thief. Memphis's capacity to steal cars and skillfully elude capture is the basis of personal dignity. The theft of one car in particular has unique significance for Memphis. Memphis' dreams of possessing his "unicorn": a gold, 1967 Shelby Mustang GT 500 – again, a high-powered V8 from the last mythical age of the American working class.

Just as in the remake of *Gone in Sixty Seconds*, the age of the car in *Gran Torino* is significant. The Gran Torino, another celebrated car of the early 1970s, is for Walt the last thing of loving importance he has in his life. His wife is gone, and the rest of the family, like white America itself, is emotionally distant, having fled to the suburbs and embraced an undignified life of smug self-absorption. The Gran Torino brings the various social groups into collision with one another. "What the hell does everyone want with my Gran Torino?" Walt asks. Perhaps it is desired by those in the present—from his flabby son and grasping granddaughter, to the irresponsible immigrant youths who plagued his neighborhood—because the car signifies the mastery and the independence that was available in the past and that they desperately want to possess today.

Conclusion: *Gran Torino* and the Resolution of Cultural Contradictions

The end of this essay has taken us back to where we began, namely Clint Eastwood's 2008 film *Gran Torino*. We are now in a position to better grasp the cultural work that the imagery of auto theft has performed in the last sixty years of American visual culture. In the films examined, auto theft representations have had a great deal to do with shifting expectations of legitimate and illegitimate automobility, hence the larger issues of social authority and personal sovereignty. Indeed, much of the dramatic force in many of these films revolves around contradictions between the expectations and the realities of independence. The outcomes of these films have presented audiences with negotiated resolutions to an underlying social issue. *Gran Torino* provides a compelling example. The expectations and realities of contemporary America, and the competing ideological perspectives regarding it, are dissolved beneath a reaffirming myth that the promise of American life is alive and well. That myth revolves around a totemic automobile.

Gran Torino poses a dichotomy between an ideal and real United States. Walt's home and Gran Torino served as symbols of a halcyon America in which people enjoyed economic opportunity and dignified independence. But America has changed. Walt's neighborhood lies blighted by unemployment, decay, and a decline of the work ethic, personal restraint, and civic responsibility among the people. This conservative depiction of America's recent decline is matched by a progressive critique of the nation's dispirited condition. Audiences witness that Walt's attitudes have devolved into reactionary fulminations fueled by an unproductive bitterness, distrust of others, and contemptuous racism. Ideologies of individual self-interest and materialist ambition have prevailed, but they have not produced true happiness. After all, Walt's withdrawal from the community and his possession of the Gran Torino has not made him whole. The Church offers only unsatisfactory platitudes. And the audience sees that the grasping materialism of Walt's biological family has earned them nothing in the end. For Thao, too, the realities of life in America seem to hold out little promise. He is a boy on the verge of an uncertain manhood because he does not belong to the Hmong community of his father, and his chances of becoming an active member in what remains of American civil society appear remote. He has few other options than to join the delinquent, dead-end subculture of his male peers that seem to thrive on the alienation and anger produced by the realities of America's broken dreams.

Thao's attempted theft arises out of these vexing contradictions of expectations and reality. With Thao's failed car theft, Eastwood's signals his rejection of the heroic rebel auto thief we have seen elsewhere. And yet the auto theft remains the pivotal moment in the story: after it, the principle characters and their society begin the journey toward recovery. Through Walt, the audience sees that the crime is motivated by coercion and a lack of self-esteem. Thao's behavior is desperate but understandable. Like the juvenile auto thieves of the 1950s, Thao's attempted theft symbolically endangers Walt's own freedom, but Walt comes to see he is partly at fault and has already lost his liberty through his prejudice and withdrawal from society. Walt recognizes he needs to take action, not just for Theo, but for himself. While Thao has built discipline and autonomy under Walt's guidance, Walt's self-sacrifice revitalizes his sense of purpose, covers a past

sin, and finally gives him the will to exert control over his fate, a fate that age and illness appear to have wrested from him.

The film links these virtues of personal mastery and civic responsibility to the masculine culture of barbershop put-downs, tools, violence, paternal duty, martial sacrifice, but most of all, to the Gran Torino. The car's latent muscular capacity of self-directed mobility symbolizes the control that both men seek. The two repeatedly labor over this machine of freedom, tuning and perfecting it with their sweat and tools. In the process, they are building and rebuilding themselves, fashioning their capacity for self-direction. Through the gradual repetition of these scenes, man, machine, and mythology merge. The contradiction between the ideal and reality fade. Thao's budding manly virtue erases racial distinctions. His changed fortunes demonstrate that there is no economic impediment to success. Walt's age does not prevent him from determining his fate. His death makes clear that individuals are not powerless to revitalize community and overcome divisions between people. The credo of self-reliance does not preclude the pleasures of the consumer fantasy, for, with the gift of the Gran Torino, Walt insures that Thao enjoys the dream of an automobile, even though he never asked for it. What Thao had attempted to steal he has now earned. In the end, when Thao takes the wheel, it is clear that the car has not made the man, but rather the man has made the car.

Note

1. For background discussion on the relationship between the values of autonomous individualism, personal responsibility, and masculinity in the liberal and republican ideological traditions see Mark Kann's *On the Man Question: Gender and Civic Virtue in America*, especially pages 37–64, 143–65, and 245–69.

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