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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 had terrorized his adopted family of immigrant Hmong neighbors, the cantankerous Polish-American autoworker and Korean War vet, Walt, goaded the thugs into murdering him before witnesses, thereby saving the community. By dying Walt spared the life and innocence of Thao, the neighbor boy intent on exacting revenge for the rape of his sister by the gang. For Walt, his act eased the haunting memory of his killing of an enemy prisoner in Korea, a boy not unlike Thao. As the story unfolded, his young Hmong neighbor was his chance at redemption, if, as Walt described it, he could 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, was last seen at the close of the film driving Walt's beloved *Gran Torino* toward what must be presumed to be a future life of dignified manhood. This story of heroic manly self-sacrifice and of a young man's coming of age took place in the "motor city"—Detroit, Michigan. And it began 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 visual representation of auto theft in film has had more to do with the symbolic meaning cars and the act of driving held in American culture. In the early twentieth century the automobile and the act of driving

became associated with many of the classic qualities of American identity (March and Collette 107). The roots of that expectation stretched 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 147-174).

American attitudes towards the automobile were influenced by this tradition (Flink 132). In the decades after its introduction the automobile and the act of driving increasingly served as an arch-signifier of the autonomous self-determining subject—coded white and male—at the heart of American individualism. (Jackson 157-158). Indeed, the importance of the automobile and the act of driving was magnified because as the historian Cotton Seiler argued in *Republic of Drivers* both became “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 crystallized over time.

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, 143-165, and 245-269.

Walt's reverence for the Gran Torino highlighted its symbolic importance to him. The aggressive sloping posture, aggressive headlight design, muscular engine, agility, and distinctive appearance of Walt's Gran Torino provided him with a sense of mastery and freedom that psychologically counterbalanced the liberty he had lost working on an assembly line. But this link of consumption, automobility, and independence faced significant threats as women and people of color have taken to the wheel (Scharff 112-116, 170-171). Over the last sixty years the empowerment of youth, women, and minorities, many of whom increasingly became motorists, altered the social context associated with driving as a symbol of white, male self-determination (Clark 175, Heitmann, 202-6). 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* threw all of this into relief. In it Walt stood as a symbol of virtuous (if not pure), white, male, working class. Yet he was also depicted as a widowed, aging, embattled figure, whose prime has passed. Significantly, Walt now never drove his Gran Torino. The post-war America of Walt's memories has given way to gender confusion, multi-ethnicity, rebellious youths, unemployment and mindless consumption. One sign of the disorder was the way the Hmong gang had become masters of local roads as they drove menacingly around the neighborhood. The decay was underscored through the lives of Walt's children and grandchildren who the film depicted as having physical and moral retreated into suburban indifference.

It was in this context of the historical transformation of the United States since World War II, so well encapsulated in Walt's life, that the representational significance

of auto theft in film took shape. Because of the strong connection between automobility and independence, the act of auto theft became the means by which to symbolically capture popular concerns surrounding personal liberty. For example, the act of auto theft threatened the sense of self-determination embodied in automobility. Then again the thief's identity could challenge race, gender, or class-based power structures because the thief became the fulcrum between legitimate and illegitimate automobility. Finally, the increasingly indiscriminate quality of automobility raised doubts about its usefulness as a healthy measure of autonomous individuality.

One example of this cultural linkage was the way the auto thief motif in film frequently engaged the attendant anxieties surrounding the threat to white, masculine social authority and its special symbolic connection to automobility. Another was the way the car thief and his/her stolen automobility sometimes served to express the claim of the young, of women, and of 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 reflected an attempt to gain or regain autonomous independence denied by oppressive forces. However, in a reactionary fashion, since the 1970s this figure of noble auto-thief rebel has more often been reserved for the "dispossessed" mature, white male.

But the cultural mediation that auto theft imagery performed was 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 performed the cultural work assigned to myth by Claude Levi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*, namely: tempering cultural contradictions present in a society dialectically by providing an analogous but more easily resolved contradiction.

In this case the contradictory expectations versus realities of individual autonomy in post-war America, were supplanted in such films by the more easily resolved analogue 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 in which access to car ownership was on the rise (Packer 27-76). One source of concern was young automobility. Another was the suspicion that the emergence of car crime by young drivers signaled a weakness in the virtue of 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 seemed to present a challenge to the association of automobile ownership as a legitimate symbol of liberty and responsible citizenship. Described within the justice system and insurance industry literature 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 was 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 what happened when a delinquent youth stole a car and hit the town’s beloved police officer. More tragedy followed in the 1956 film *Car Theft* when three youths spontaneously decided to steal a parked car that had the keys left in the ignition and run from pursuing police. Educational film impresario Sid Davis’ 1961 *Moment of*

Decision reprised the same situation. Here the viewer listened to the internal thoughts of four young men whose desire for freedom led 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 was 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* as the films detailed the failure of each of the boys' parents. In that film it was only the boy whose attentive father taught self-discipline and personal responsibility that managed 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 178-195). 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* were so desperate they sought prematurely to claim the masculine

capacity of self-determination. One of the ways they did that was through the acts of auto theft and contests of driving skill. Though unseen in the film, the auto thefts functioned as catalysts to the tragic events that follow: the stolen cars were 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 reflected 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 was the wavering manly self-sufficiency of his father: a henpecked, and irresolute man. Without the guidance he begged his father to provide, Jim faced alone a world of increasing confusion and dangerously premature opportunities (Kimmel 243-249). Jim, like many other young male characters in films at this time, was independent of spirit, but confused by an increasing sense of dependency. The result was rebellion and auto theft.

Birth of the Auto-Theft Rebel

In the post-war 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 at this time into a heroic rebel against social oppression. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), about the lives of the infamous 1930s bank robbing duo, inaugurated the transformation of auto theft in film from a sub textual expression of a delinquent grasp for autonomy into a gradually more overt use of auto theft imagery as a reaffirming act of reclaiming lost selfhood. Along with other era defining films of automobility such as *Bullit* (1968), *Vanishing Point* (1971), and *Badlands* (1973) this story of mobile criminality captured the complex generational response to the bankruptcy

of post-war American culture (Harris 370). Lurking beneath the evident pleasures that audiences had watching Bonnie and Clyde steal cars, rob banks, outshoot and evade law enforcement, was a deep disgust 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 it was depicted in the film, the nation's financial institutions and law enforcement were running roughshod over the average man, 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 that "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," 1967). 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 to rebel and take back control over their lives (Murray 237-56). Auto theft was one of the key ways that the film depicted Bonnie and Clyde regaining their powers of self-determination.

The opening scene was one of voyeuristic anticipation. Clyde (Warren Beatty) hesitantly prepared to steal a car. Bonnie (Faye Dunaway), watching from within her bedroom, observed a handsome young man suspiciously lingering around her grandmother's automobile. It was evident her curiosity stemmed from the banality of her life. Confined in domestic imprisonment, she gazed out to freedom. Indeed, one of the innovations in this film was its connection of automobility with female desire and dreams

of autonomy (Mills 137-138). As the scholar of road movies David Laderman pointed out the opening scene “foreshadows the film’s association of freedom with the road and stolen cars” (Laderman 50). 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 Breakdown.” Repeated acts of stolen mobility followed and each conveyed the thrilling recapture of control over one’s life.

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

Yet these themes of restoration of selfhood were undercut as the film progressed. Like many of the films of the New American Cinema movement, *Bonnie and Clyde* demonstrated a reflexivity that brought into question symbols conventionally used by Hollywood. In this case the film introduced a “disenchantment with mobility” (Laderman 53). Midway through the film a darker mood of futility and inevitable doom surfaced and foreshadowed a bloody climax. In the end, viewing the bullet-riddled car, the audience was left feeling that Bonnie and Clyde’s freedom had been a transitory illusion. Societal constraints had prevailed over individual agency.

If *Bonnie and Clyde* reflected the emerging concerns in the latter half of the 1960s regarding the degree to which large-scale forces of mass society inhibited freedom, then events in the decades after 1970 intensified these fears among many Americans. The

post-war 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 wider crystallization of “rebellion” as a commodity in which the image of the rebel 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 was 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” by his emphasis upon blue-collar comradeship, skills and work ethic (Tuckman, 1974). Rather than descend into lawlessness, the working-class men of this film were depicted as retrieving their lost independence through an orderly, hard working but ethical criminality. The thieves espoused a working-class ethos of skilled, almost

artisanal, labor. The virtuous nature of that ethic was exemplified in their refusal to steal cars that were uninsured. Like Bonnie and Clyde, the men of *Gone in Sixty Seconds* only stole from oppressive big businesses. The auto thieves were heroes and the bad guys' the faceless bureaucracies and moneyed classes of the emerging post-industrial economy. At the same time, the juxtaposition of Pace's daytime "fake" job as an insurance investigator and nighttime "real" labor, served to mock dependent white collar corporate manhood (Kimmel 223-258). These sophistries permitted 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) was the young morbidly eccentric scion of a wealthy family who spent his time staging elaborate suicides and visiting funerals of complete strangers in his hearse. At one of these funerals he met Maude (Ruth Gordon), a seventy-nine year old carefree holocaust survivor who also spent her days at funerals. Maud liked to steal cars whenever she needed a ride. Maude's penchant for stealing cars expressed her determination to live her life on her own terms. Her carefree enthusiasm and joy for life revitalized Harold. After she committed 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. In this film it was someone else's bold theft of cars that led to Harold's

salvation. For him, the destruction of his own car signaled the shedding of his predilection for death and the beginning of a new life.

The most explicit example in film of a woman's attempt to achieve independence by stealing cars was Stockard Channing's heroine in the 1976 movie *Dandy: the all American Girl* (also released as *Sweet Revenge*). Channing played a young, steely, and clever auto thief named Vurria, who cannot be tamed by either the police or the love of the district attorney (Sam Waterston). Through the Waterston character the film equated institutional authority with paternalism and depicted both as enemies to women's freedom. Vurria's quest was to steal enough cars to legitimately buy a Ferrari. The endeavor was rich in implication. If Vurria's goal was simply to possess a Ferrari her approach was absurd: why not simply steal the Ferrari? But it made sense if her legal ownership of the Ferrari was meant to signify her legitimate right to self-determination. Auto theft was simply the means that the circumstance of discrimination left open to her to achieve independence.

Vurria's only true friend in the film was Edmund, a black male played by Franklyn Ajaye, who was able to relate to Vurria's disempowerment and social oppression. But Edmund died helping Vurria achieve her aim. His death altered Vurria's belief that automobility equaled freedom, and having escaped the police, she drove all night, and burned the Ferrari—her American dream—at dawn. The act communicated her disillusionment. It also signaled that a new day in her life had begun.

Edmund's death in *Dandy: the all American Girl* was 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). Because of that, black

automobility had frequently been negatively depicted in popular culture but celebrated by American Americans (Packer 190-195). It was not until the mid-1990s that *Menace II Society* (1993) and Spike Lee's *New Jersey Drive* (1994) 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 162-174).

In *New Jersey Drive* viewers were introduced to car thief Jason Petty (Sharron Corley), one of a large group of aimless young African Americans who stole cars in Newark, New Jersey, "the car theft capital of America." At first they did it to "put on a show," in time, however, they began to make money selling what they stole to chop shops. In this film Lee was self-consciously playing upon the historic association of automobility with whiteness and the way that the relative absence of mobility served as a marker of the black man's subaltern status. In fact, the film exposed the implicit racism lurking within American ideas of automobility. Lee highlighted white repression of black automobility by pitting the thieves against an all white, racist, auto theft police squad that brutalized the young men at every opportunity. Nevertheless, although these black men faced lives of hopelessness, despair, and racism, by stealing cars they built comradeship and a sense of dignity. Just as the scholar Paul Gilroy described when discussing the strong interest in automobility within African-American culture, in the characters of this film it was possible to see how the "histories of confinement and coerced labour must 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 created disintegrated under the relentless pressures of the social forces. Here Lee made clear the illicit attainment of automobility only fostered the illusion of

liberation, empowerment and self-worth. Gilroy feared this as well: while it was 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 did so “even as the whirlpool of consumerism sucks them in” (Gilroy 98).

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 can't make her appear to be sympathetic” (Canby, 1981). Perhaps what appeared to be the “uncertainty” in this film may lay more 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-off people 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, these films were part of a sub-genre of auto theft films that included *Breathless* (1983) and *Crash* (2004), which approached the promise of automobility, and the capacity to attain virtuous individual self-realization, with suspicion.

White Comic Auto Theft in B-Films

With these prejudices regarding automobility in mind, we can turn back to the historical depiction of auto theft in films and begin to see why it was that 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 post-war economic boom (Cowie 126-135, 236-247). While jobs were disappearing, white men also found themselves in an intensifying competition with female and minority workers as never before. 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 137-153). By the mid-1970s the rebellious anti-authoritarianism of auto theft made it appealing to white males who felt betrayed by the 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, was small-town, "white-trash" who took a chance by asking the local beauty out for a date only to have her demand he steal a car (Von Doviack 121). The theft led to a series of hair-raising car chases but also transformed Hoover's life for the better. Howard's own film, *Grand Theft Auto*, released a year later, centered on two young lovers bent upon getting married, Sam Freeman (Ron Howard) and Paula Powers (Nancy Morgan). Paula,

the daughter of wealthy gubernatorial candidate Bigby Powers, was 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 "borrowed" the cars of others to suit their immediate convenience. Even a policeman stole, when he commandeered a bus filled with senior citizens. The message: stealing a car was a harmless, good-hearted rebellion against authority. But it was also a means to attain self-fulfillment, equated here with money, women, and status.

Corvette Summer: A Fiberglass Romance (1978) followed along similar lines. This movie made more explicit the equation of cars with women and driving with manhood. As the trailer declared, "it's the girl, the car, and the time that separate the men from the boys." *Corvette Summer* starred Mark Hamill as Kenny Dartley whose high school shop class, led by Kenny, restored a wrecked Corvette Stingray. The sharked-nosed, candy apple vehicle with flames painted on the hood, served as a projection of Kenny's sense of his own personal distinctiveness. Kenny's shop teacher, Mr. McGrath, cautioned his students not to get too involved with the car. Automobiles, he warned, "always let you down." The phrase, often reserved for snide, male observation about women, foreshadowed coming events. Sure enough, during a night of celebration at a local cruise-in, the car was stolen. While authorities were resigned to the loss, Kenny's identification with the car made it impossible for him to let it go, and consequently he began an odyssey in search of it that eventually took him to Las Vegas. In Las Vegas, he discovered not only his car, but that Mr. McGrath was a member of the stolen car ring. He stole the car back, but rather than keep it, he returned it to the high school.

Understanding Kenny's decision requires making sense of the parallel significance for Kenny of the car and the woman he met on his journey to Las Vegas. On the road Kenny encountered Vanessa (Annie Potts), a want-to-be hooker who drove a customized love-van. At first, Kenny resisted Vanessa's come-ons, preferring the love of his car to that of a young woman. Yet Vanessa was as unique as the car Kenny loved. Vanessa's sexuality and thinness made her as enticing and as angular as the shark-nosed vehicle he has lost. Indeed they served as two different but strangely overlapping objects of desire. This parallel was highlighted by Vanessa's customized love-van where the acts of love and mobility came together. At the end, having become a man, Kenny came to his senses and realized that the girl was more important than the car. Vanessa, too, saw that true love was better than making love for money.

The conclusion of *Corvette Summer* pointed to the reflexive trend evident in *Bonnie and Clyde* that ultimately gained ground in future auto-theft films. Namely, the symbolic link between life and automobility became superseded by suspicion. While films continued to loosely compare cars, personal autonomy, and manhood, with increasing frequency many 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 gave credence to the view that movies from that decade 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 retread of 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 towards foreign luxury vehicles (Kimmel 280-289). 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 played 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 cars. Varrick's business focused upon Porsches and ripping-off insurance companies and he ran the operation like a high-flying amoral CEO, luxuriating in all the sensual perks available to the affluent. Roger Ebert sensed a "moral question" at the center of the film: why was it that those who "don't need to steal and kill" do so anyway (Ebert, 1987). 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 came in the form of D. B. Sweeney, who was cast as the working-class, undercover, rookie cop, Benjy. Benjy, a self-taught grease monkey, was 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 proved beguiling to Benjy, and for a time his allegiances became unclear. But in the end Benjy's blue-collar, commonsense led him to reject Varrick's materialism and unquenchable ambitions. As the *New York Times* critic Caryn James intimated in her review, in the figure of the auto thief the film wallowed in the sensationalist fantasies of Reagan era masculinity—aggressive entrepreneurialism and hedonistic irresponsible materialism—while siding, half heartedly, with the wholesome traditional manly virtues of self-sacrifice, self-denial, and honest labor (James, 1987).

A year later *Rain Man* engaged similar themes. Tom Cruise played 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 grey-market Lamborghinis, Charlie seemed poised to either attain the success he desperately craved or lose his shirt. Scenes between Charlie and his loving girlfriend revealed he was boorish and emotionally dysfunctional. The story thickened with news of his father's death in Cincinnati. Returning home, the secrets of Charlie's past began to come to light. We learned that the source of his troubled personality lay in his youthful theft of his father's classic 1949 Road Master convertible. That joy ride, prompted by paternal callousness, shaped the rest of his life. Angered at his father, Charlie ran away and in the

intervening years he worked hard to prove he was his father's equal. Not surprisingly, given the nature of their conflict, he sought to achieve it in the automobile business.

But here the story took another turn. Charlie learned the estate was left to Raymond (Dustin Hoffman), an autistic brother he never knew he had. Hoping to squeeze half the money out of the executor, Charlie kidnapped Raymond. Forced by the peculiarity of his brother's conditions to drive cross-country to California in the Road Master, Charlie was inadvertently put on the road to a deeper level of self-discovery. During the journey we learned that the callousness of Charlie's father was the result of the role Charlie played in Raymond's institutionalization: Raymond accidentally injured Charlie by scalding him. As Charlie rediscovered a love for his brother and a need for responsibility, the audience realized that his previous attempt to achieve autonomous manliness by selling status vehicles had been doomed to failure. His salvation rested 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 decided he must put Raymond's needs before his own. His assumption of manly responsibility reconciled him with his girlfriend and ostensibly placed 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. Elements of the celebration of vintage American cars were clearly evident in some of the films already discussed, for example, the role of a classic Road Master convertible in *Rain Man*. The powerful totemic quality of the vintage Buick Road Master became evident when contemplated in light of the significance it had in the symbolic life of the Babbitt family. Driving the point home, the film associated the emptiness of Charlie's life before inheriting the Road Master with the new European performance vehicles he sold to make money. The 2000 remake of *Gone in 60 Seconds* contained similar themes.

The reimagining of the 1974 auto theft classic focused more clearly around the storyline of the auto-thief rebel, Memphis Raines (Nicholas Cage), who was forced to reluctantly return to his masterful (if illegal) talents at taking other peoples cars. Memphis was trying hard to be an honest man. He and his former gang were teaching kids karate, restoring cars rather than chopping them, and desperately attempting to teach Asian women to drive. In the latter example, the stereotypical racial and gendered bias of the humor—and sub-textual resentment—hinted at the film's target audience. The film communicated that there was no manly dignity to be had in the bland, unfulfilling and poor paying jobs that blue-collar men could command in post-industrial America. As one character put it, "I have discovered you have to work twice as hard when it's honest."

Forced by circumstance, Memphis and former collaborators must steal 50 high-end vehicles in four days. If successful he and his brother would no longer be "owned" by the criminals to whom they were indebted. In effect, Memphis' plight was a version of the average under-employed and debt-ridden American. By returning to stealing cars, he and his brother could be liberated. But car theft had always given Memphis a sense of

individual importance. Explaining the allure to comrades, after a theft I “instantly feel better about myself.” Perhaps that was because he believed that by taking the car, he freed himself. As he tells his brother “the car is you, you are the car.” Here, unambiguously, the car represented the individuality of the thief. His capacity to steal cars and skillfully elude capture was the basis of personal dignity. The theft of one car in particular had unique significance for Memphis. Memphis’ dreamed 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* was significant. The Gran Torino, another celebrated car of the early 1970s, was for Walt the last thing of loving importance he had in his life. His wife was gone, and the rest of the family, like white America itself, was emotionally distant, having fled to the suburbs and embraced an undignified life of smug self-absorption. It was the Gran Torino that brought the various social groups into collision with one another. “What the hell does everyone want with my Gran Torino?” Walt asked during the film. Perhaps it was 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 signified the mastery and the independence – the muscle -- they desperately wanted to possess.

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 evolved to perform in the last sixty years of American visual culture. In the films examined, auto theft representations 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 revolved around contradictions between the expectations and the realities of independence. The outcome of these films presented audiences with a negotiated resolution to an underlying social issue. *Gran Torino* provided a compelling example. The expectations and realities of contemporary America, and the competing ideological perspectives regarding it, were dissolved beneath a reaffirming myth that the promise of American life was alive and well. That myth revolved round a totemic automobile.

At the outset of the film a dichotomy was established between an ideal and real United States. Walt's home and Gran Torino served as symbols of a halcyon America in which people had enjoyed economic opportunity and promise of dignified independence. But America had changed. His neighborhood lay 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 was matched by a progressive critique of the nation's dispirited condition. Audiences witnessed that Walt's attitudes had devolved into an unproductive bitterness, distrust of others, and contemptuous racism. Ideologies of individual self-interest and materialist ambition prevailed, but they had not produced true happiness. After all, Walt's withdrawal from the community and his possession of the Gran Torino had not made him whole. The Church offered only unsatisfactory platitudes. And the audience saw that the grasping materialism of Walt's biological family earned them nothing in the end. For Thao too the realities of life in America seemed to hold out little promise. He was a boy on the verge of an uncertain

manhood because he did not belong to the Hmong community of his father, and his chances of becoming an active member in what remained of American civil society appeared remote. He had few other options than to join the delinquent dead end sub-culture of his male peers that seemed to thrive on the alienation and anger produced by the realities of America's broken dreams.

Thao's attempted theft arose out of these vexing contradictions of expectations and reality. With Thao's failed car theft Eastwood's signaled his rejection of the heroic rebel auto thief we have seen elsewhere. And yet the auto theft remained the pivotal moment in the story: it was then that the principle characters and society around them began the journey towards recovery. Walt and the audience saw that the crime was motivated by coercion and a lack of self-esteem. Thao's behavior was desperate but understandable. Like the juvenile auto thieves of the 1950s Thao's attempted theft symbolically endangered Walt's own freedom, but Walt came to see he was partly at fault, and had already lost his liberty through his prejudice and withdraw from society. Walt recognized he needed to take action, not just for Theo but himself. While Thao built discipline and autonomy under Walt's guidance, Walt's self-sacrifice revitalized his sense of purpose, cover a past sin, and finally gave him the will to exert control over his fate, a fate that age and illness appeared to have wrested from him.

The film continually linked 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 symbolized the control that both men sought. The two repeatedly labored over this machine of freedom, tuning and perfecting it with their sweat

and tools. In the processes they were building and rebuilding themselves, fashioning their capacity for self-direction. Through the gradual repetition of these scenes man, machine, and mythology merged. The contradiction between the ideal and reality faded. Thao's budding manly virtue erased racial distinctions. His changed fortunes demonstrated there was no economic impediment to success. Walt's age did not prevent him from determining his fate. With his death it was clear that individuals were not powerless to revitalize community and overcome divisions between people. Nor does the credo of self-reliance preclude the pleasures of the consumer fantasy, for with the gift of the Gran Torino Walt insured that Thao enjoyed the dream of an automobile even though he never asked for it. What Thao had attempted to steal he had now earned. In the end, when Thao took the wheel, it was clear that it was not the car that made the man but the man that made the car. Audience saw that the key to an individual attaining independence, and the power to control the road of their destiny, was what lay beneath the hood.

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