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Gran Torino and Star Trek

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Film Review

Gran Torino and Star Trek

Race has long been a central object of political reflection. The salience of racial difference remains hotly debated, figuring in both “utopian” and “dystopian” visions of America’s political future. If race is a primary configuration of “difference” and inequality in the nation, then intimacy between the races is often construed as either a bellwether of equality and political utopia or a re-inscribing of political dominance, typically represented as sexual predation by men against women. Quite expectedly, these political fantasies and fears are often played out at the multiplex, and we can see them in stark relief in two recent films that seem to have nothing in common, Clint Eastwood’s highly acclaimed but Oscar-snubbed *Gran Torino* and last summer’s high-octane blockbuster, *Star Trek*.

If Clint Eastwood has made a second career of directing himself as a cranky, alienated old man, his turn in *Gran Torino* may be the capstone. Eastwood stars as a freshly widowed Korean War veteran, an unabashed bigot and misanthropic isolationist who prefers the company of his Labrador, Daisy, to that of his priest or adult children, from whom he is thoroughly alienated. Much to the chagrin of his family, Walt Kowalski insists on remaining in his Detroit neighborhood, which is “transitioning” from an ethnic white working-class community of auto plant workers to one populated by newer immigrants, predominantly Hmong, struggling to find work in Detroit’s dying economy. He initially rejects any neighborliness with his Hmong neighbors, the Lors, referring to them as “gooks” and spurning their unfamiliar customs and food. Yet, in the logic of the film, Kowalski emerges as a reluctant community hero, twice protecting the twenty-something Lor children, Sue and her brother Thao, from neighborhood predators. Despite Kowalski’s avowedly grumpy insults, Sue insists on befriending him, and Kowalski eventually warms up to both her and Thao, bestowing on the somewhat directionless the secrets of American masculinity: how to get a job and girls. Kowalski and the Lors begin to cook and spend time together, trading cultural insights and jokes, and at times simply hanging out on their porches.

This portends the end of the film, in which Kowalski determines to end a Hmong gang’s grip on the Lors. As he painstakingly prepares to confront the “outlaws,” viewers might fairly anticipate a return to the Eastwood of old, who will avenge the brutal rape of Sue (*Josey Wales*, anyone?) and finally rid the neighborhood of terrorizing thugs. Instead, Walt Kowalski martyrs himself, organizing a shoot-out *Dirty Harry* meets *Pale Rider* style, but reaching for his old First Cavalry division lighter instead of a gun, thereby ensuring the gang members will be arrested for publicly gunning down an unarmed man. In Eastwood’s rendering, Kowalski’s self-sacrifice redeems the neighborhood for the Lors and other new arrivals, thereby completing the transition of the neighborhood from ethnic white to Hmong, and giving the new, non-white

immigrants the same chance for family, community, and opportunity that earlier generations of white immigrants enjoyed.

Meanwhile, for those who thought the *Star Trek* franchise had finally expired, this summer's blockbuster put the idea to rest. The "prequel" chronicles the meeting of the young Kirk and Spock, introducing an initial enmity and exaggerating the role of Kirk as rogue, belligerent upstart to Spock's disciplined and successful ship commander. With the future of the Federation called into question by Romulan and Vulcan genocide, the film chronicles how the two became the fast friends and captain/first-mate team so iconic to *Trek* fans. In addition to the central action, Trekkies and cultural critics alike anticipated that with the black starlet Zoe Saldana cast as romantic lead, the movie would give the long-awaited back-story to the infamous 1968 Kirk/Uhura kiss—the first interracial snog depicted on television.¹ But early on Uhura rejects Kirk's brash and juvenile advances, surprising audiences when her secret affair with Spock is revealed by an embrace in the turbolift. After this gasp-inducing moment, the Spock/Uhura liaison rapidly fades into a back-story to the Kirk/Spock negotiations. Intriguingly, then, the primary interracial relationship driving *Star Trek* is that of the classically Caucasian Kirk and the mixed race/other species Spock, as they battle for control of the *Enterprise*, and, of course, the role of hero and savior of the future of the Federation.

Gran Torino and *Star Trek* both render conventional (white) masculinity as in crisis, threatened by alternative masculine forms. In both films this crisis of masculinity translates into a political one that threatens the values and viability of the community. In both, a carefully negotiated, largely homo-social, interracial intimacy redeems masculinity, and, in the process, the political future.

One of the fun twists in the new *Star Trek* is Lt. Uhura's rejection of Kirk's brashly macho advances, coupled with the revelation that she is instead in love with the brilliant and decidedly unbrash Spock. Her choice of Spock over the lothario Kirk is a not so subtle metaphor for the ways conventional white masculinity is in crisis in this vision of the political future. Typically, romantic bragging rights go to action heroes; in the *Star Trek* franchise, the figure is William Shatner's campy depiction of classic masculinity, James T. Kirk, the heroic commander and stud who "hooked up" with every conceivable woman and female alien (all of whom looked suspiciously like voluptuous human women with various skin tones and face masks). Uhura's rejection defies the conventional association of romance with the white action star, who overcomes the heroine's initial reticence with his charm and heroics. If Kirk's masculine bravado might be associated with a peculiarly American form of nationalism, then Spock represents an alternate form of masculinity. In this year's version of *Star Trek*, Kirk has lost the girl, and the command of the ship, to Spock. In fact, Kirk is on his way to getting kicked out of Starfleet Academy for cheating when a crisis requires everyone's presence on the "frontier," and Kirk uses the distraction to bogart his way into the fleet. In the end, Kirk and Spock battle, not for Uhura (in fact neither appears particularly interested in her), but for command of the *Enterprise*, and, along with it, the right to lead our political future.

¹ The kiss, from the episode Plato's Stepchildren, can be viewed at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=FymuBw_VsBE>.

From its inception on network television during the race- and Cold War-torn 1960s, *Star Trek* has given expression to a carefully negotiated political utopia. On the one hand, the franchise has long naturalized American racial categories, even proffering black Vulcans. On the other, in the studiedly “multicultural” Federation, racism and genocide have been largely abolished, save the occasional rogues rapidly reined in by Starfleet. The reconciliation of “difference,” whether between races, planets, or species, is the hallmark of *Star Trek*’s utopian future (with the exception of *Deep Space Nine*). The import of this year’s iteration is that its chronicling of Vulcan and Romulan genocides in the past threatens to radically transform the political futures of the Federation, obliterating the intergalactic utopia. To save the future, as the franchise has rendered it, we learn that Kirk’s leadership must be restored. Leonard Nimoy reprises his role as Spock, now dubbed Spock Prime, who manipulates his younger self into relinquishing command to his nemesis, Kirk. Kirk thus regains command of the *Enterprise*, and with it, the right to lead this multicultural utopian universe of the future. The political future remains assuredly multicultural, but its viability literally requires the leadership of white men.

On its surface, Eastwoodan dystopian Detroit proffers a very different vision of the political future. Kowalski’s formerly ethnic white working-class community has been hit hard by the loss of auto jobs and has deteriorated into a dingy, crime-ridden neighborhood. Director Eastwood lends a decidedly racial cast to this dystopian fear: black thugs sexually threaten Sue Lor and intimidate her hapless white male companion; a Latino gang threatens Thao and the Hmong gang that saves him then demands his allegiance. This tension between the old and new racial and political economies is embodied in Kowalski’s prized possession, the eponymous 1972 Ford Gran Torino, iconic of the final glory days of American car-making and manufacturing. The Hmong gang pressures Thao to steal the car as a rite of initiation, a rather flat-footed metaphor for new, non-white immigrants (and Asian economies) stealing what is cinematically configured as the rightful property of hard-working white American men. As in *Star Trek*, in *Gran Torino* conventional white masculinity is embattled, if in a less campy way. Like Eastwood’s other recent roles, Kowalski is a relic, in this instance an artifact of an era when manufacturing dominated America’s political economy and hard work at a union factory job yielded home-ownership, economic stability, and not insignificant cultural capital for white working-class men. Sensing the coming extinction of men like their father, Kowalski’s Japanese car-driving adult sons urge him to sell the family house and abandon the neighborhood. But Kowalski, rendered as the only functional masculinity left in the neighborhood, chooses to stay, and it is he who passes on to Thao the “tools” of healthy American masculinity. Thao learns from Kowalski how to trade in crude ethnic jokes and make culturally unfamiliar eye contact, thereby gaining the cultural capital necessary to access high-paying work involving skilled labor, long the property of white men. The film confirms Thao’s status as the rightful heir of American masculinity when Kowalski’s will bequeaths the prized Gran Torino not to his spoiled grand-daughter, who views its muscle car image as cool “vintage,” but to his metaphoric son Thao, who aspires to the form of masculinity the car and Kowalski embody. Kowalski kept this symbol of conventional American masculinity garaged, but Thao puts it back to use—in the final scene he is driving the Gran Torino along the riverside, with Kowalski’s dog, Daisy, happily

riding shotgun. Director Eastwood depicts the political future as restored when Kowalski willingly relinquishes it to Thao; their improbable interracial bonding brings redemption not only for Walt Kowalski, but for the political future.

Gran Torino is arguably the apex of Clint Eastwood's complicated cinematic redemption. From the *Dirty Harry* series and his iconic Westerns—*Pale Rider*; *High Plains Drifter*—he has long been associated with alienated but heroic masculinity, making an art form of playing loner cops and gunmen drifters, estranged from society, yet necessary for its salvation. A thinking man's Charles Bronson, in the 1970s and 1980s Eastwood literally embodied vigilante justice, recuperating conventional white masculinity from the injuries of the Vietnam War and an impotent justice system. But as he has aged, Eastwood has begun to challenge and undermine the very vision of alienated and avenging masculinity he helped popularize. The critically acclaimed *Unforgiven* (1992) and *Mystic River* (2003) expose the uglier side of vigilante justice and revenge—particularly the latter film, in which the final scene leaves the audience in an uncomfortable complicity through our knowledge of mistaken revenge. *Gran Torino* completes the arc. It is a complicated redemption. In Walt Kowalski, Eastwood's alienated loner transforms into a grouchy family man and trades vigilantism for martyrdom. Yet, the ethnically white Kowalski still is the one to rescue the community, an on-going nod perhaps to Eastwood's inability to escape his Western background. This time, it is not violence he passes on to Thao (in fact, Kowalski locks Thao in a basement when the young man comes to help "plan the attack" to avenge his sister). Rather it's the other valuable property of white masculinity: girls and skilled jobs, all embodied in the gift of the Gran Torino.

In *Gran Torino*, as in *Star Trek*, the primary battle arguably is one of masculinities. Here too, conventional white masculinity and its role in the political future is in crisis. In both films, interracial intimacy redeems the future. If Detroit is emblematic of the decline of the urban economy, and with it working-class possibility, then Eastwood renders a viable future for America's city. First though, racial nationalism—here, a romanticized ethnic whiteness—must be rejected in favor of a multi-ethnic future. And of course, the *Star Trek* franchise has always envisioned the utopian political future as a "multi-cultural" one in which different species and "races" collaborate to stabilize the world cum galaxy. There are important differences, though, in how the two films configure the politics of masculinity and its relationship to interracial intimacy. Kirk and Spock collaborate to save the political future; Kowalski concedes the future to his figurative son, Thao. Still, both films configure white masculinity as emblematic of a stabilized political order, whether it is Spock's concession to a now humbled James T. Kirk or a more generic white masculinity which, once embraced by Thao, then entitles him to Kowalski's legacy. Interracial intimacy may redeem the political future, but white masculinity remains normative.

Related to this, while *Gran Torino* and *Star Trek* both largely represent the politics of interracial intimacy as a crisis and reconciliation of masculinity, these relations shape political possibility for the female characters as well. Frequently viewed as a matter of *racial* reconciliation, interracial intimacy has obvious, if often overlooked, gender components. Both films bear this out. The primary female leads, Lt. Uhura and Sue Lor, avoid a dominant cultural stereotype in which sex between white men and non-white women functions as a tool of racial supremacy. Following what I have elsewhere called the "juridical imperative," sex between

white men and black women reiterates slavery's sexual relations, while sex between white men and Asian women reiterates those of colonialism—think Suzy Wong and *Madame Butterfly*. Generated by thick histories of imperialism and racial supremacy, both of these stereotypes cast doubt on the possibility of true intimacy and equality between the races. Both Lt. Uhura and Sue Lor elude this culturally seductive stereotype. Yet, while both actresses render fine performances, as romantic and dramatic lead respectively, their characters still fall prey to other conventions of gender and intimacy, functioning as intermediaries in the reconciliation of interracial connection between men.

It is the feisty Sue Lor who initiates the cross-racial bonds in *Gran Torino*, insisting on befriending the cranky vet. Yet, by the end, Sue has been relegated to the film's periphery, transformed from an intriguingly quirky primary character to the raped victim who the now-central male characters seek to avenge. Sue brokers Kowalski's relationship with her brother and the other Hmong neighbors, expediting the interracial intimacy that ultimately redeems both Kowalski and the community. And yet in the film's final scene, it is Sue's brother Thao who the film depicts driving the prized car with that other emblem of manhood, Kowalski's dog. The political logic of inheritance has long configured it as the transfer of valuable economic and cultural property and capital from father to son. While the film expands the vision of who can participate in this transfer, in the future *Gran Torino* envisions, the heirs may not be white, but they remain male.

Facially, Lt. Nyota Uhura is a markedly different role from Sue Lor. She is the romantic lead in an action adventure, and perhaps the first such role for a black woman since Halle Berry's wildly successful turn as a Bond Girl in 2002. Indeed, the casting of starlet Soldana made some expect a steamy love plot, and perhaps even a redemption of the much-criticized original 1968 Kirk/Uhura kiss, itself emblematic of black women's reduced erotic capital. Black women are often depicted as unattractive "mammy" figures, and although many viewers found Nichelle Nichols, the original Uhura, beautiful, it still took an alien race overtaking Kirk's free will to force the intergalactic hound-dog to kiss a human woman of African descent. Yet, with the emotionally unavailable Spock playing opposite Uhura, the voluntarism lacking in the first, forced Kirk/Uhura kiss is not quite redeemed, even with the stunning Soldana playing romantic lead. Spock as action hero is no Han Solo, Indiana Jones, or Ethan Hunt, let alone Bruce Wayne or James Bond in the romance department. Uhura's passionate turbolift embrace of Spock, accompanied by her poignant plea "What do you need? Tell me," is answered by the decidedly unromantic, "I need everyone to continue performing admirably," followed by Spock's exiting the elevator without looking back. With the emotionally repressed Spock replacing the lothario Kirk as romantic lead, *Star Trek* accomplishes an unexpected plot twist, and generates some nice comic relief. But it leaves our romantic lead with her feelings ultimately unrequited. (Even Spock's injunction to Kirk to "Tell Uhura I . . ." is never completed with the requisite two words.) While viewers rooting for a different political future for black women may be gratified by Uhura's role in saving the universe, her "hotness," and even her comic spurning of Kirk's juvenile advances, they will probably remain disappointed that her poignant passion for Spock remains unreciprocated. (In fact, Spock's entrusting to Kirk the message, "tell Uhura I . . .," which Kirk completes with an "I know," never reaches Uhura, but rather serves to cement the burgeoning friendship between the two male characters.)

For movie-goers hoping for reassurance that black women will have full erotic capital in the political economy of the future (at least circa 2233), *Star Trek* may leave them unconvinced.

Instead, the real romance in *Star Trek* is, as it has always been, between Kirk and Spock. Females of countless species have come and gone, but Kirk and Spock are forever. Like Sue Lor, Uhura starts with the promise of becoming a full partner in intimacy across difference, yet, by the end, both have been sidelined. In both of these narratives of interracial intimacy as political redemption, it is a homo-social bonding that delivers racial reconciliation and redeems the political future. In both films, the women of color expedite interracial intimacy, but neither fully shares in its political promise.

Other recent films also have tackled the interplay of interracial intimacy and politics in a more straightforward way, to wit, Sarah Jessica Parker playing against type in the underrated *Spinning into Butter*, in addition to the usual fare of *Dangerous Minds* and *Crash* remakes (*Freedom Writers*, *Crossing Over*, and *Babel*). Yet, in *Gran Torino* and *Star Trek*, we find interracial intimacy the way we are more likely to encounter it in daily life, as a subtle backdrop to the “real” action, and hence barely noted until its political effects are already in place.

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