On the Case for Criss Cross, THE LA Noir

Ross Noble

"What is the best LA film noir?" There is no wrong answer to this question, of course, as long as you can make a solid argument for why. Me? I'm a total sucker for all things noir, especially LA noir: *Double Indemnity, The Big Sleep, Sunset Boulevard, In a Lonely Place, Chinatown, The Long Goodbye, LA Confidential*. 100 more. Let's pour some stiff brown water and break it down.

Catch me another day and I'll make the case for any of them, but my latest obsession is with Robert Siodmak's 1949 masterpiece *Criss Cross*, which checks all nine of the LA Noir boxes:

* Angel's Flight/Bunker Hill

* B&W

* Chiaroscuro

* Doomed from the get-go

* Fat Ties and Bad Lies

* Voiceover told by a dead man

* Suggestion, not depiction

* The trampy tomato

* Wifebeaters and heaters

Lesser known than Siodmak's *The Killers* from 1946 two years prior, *Criss Cross* is a case study in efficiency. It clocks in at just under 90 minutes and not a frame or moment is wasted. It's amazing, all that's packed into it. Yet it does not lose any of noir's trademark layering of plot or complexity of character. Three scenes come to mind.

The opening aerial is a Pollockian splattering of LA nightlife that helicopters us from the LA skyline quickly into the parking lot of The Round Up, Slim Dundee's swinging supper club. We're swept into Ann (Yvonne de Carlo) and Steve (Burt Lancaster) necking between a couple of parked Pontiacs. They're suddenly headlighted, outed to us but not yet to Dundee (Dan Duryea). Is this THE defining moment in noir?

Criss Cross has one of the most gorgeously evocative *dance scenes* in film, let alone noir. Set to legendary rhumba band leader Esy Morales' "Jungle Fantasy," it has DeCarlo glowing as she congas with a young Tony Curtis, in his first movie appearance and credited as "*Gigolo*." Ha. Side note: tragically, Morales would die just a few months after filming at age 33 from a sudden heart attack brought on by excessive drug use, likely cocaine, according to Ginell's *The Evolution of Mann: Herbie Mann and the Flute in Jazz* (2014). But there is more to it than pure dance. When Steve walks in, he is obsessed, smitten on an unfulfilled promise from the past. You're just waiting for the moment when he and Anna lock eyes, then they do and it's over. She feeds him some BS like a farmer feeds his pigs, and Stevie the slow slops it up silly. He's all in. We know it won't end well, but *how* unwell? They talk openly about the days they used to fight, almost lightheartedly, and when Anna segues into how great it was when they ended and they made up, oh how they made up, Steve melts. That was the best part, wasn't it, Steve, the making up part?

And, during the plotting scene near the middle of the film, where do we even begin? Ann smoking with An-

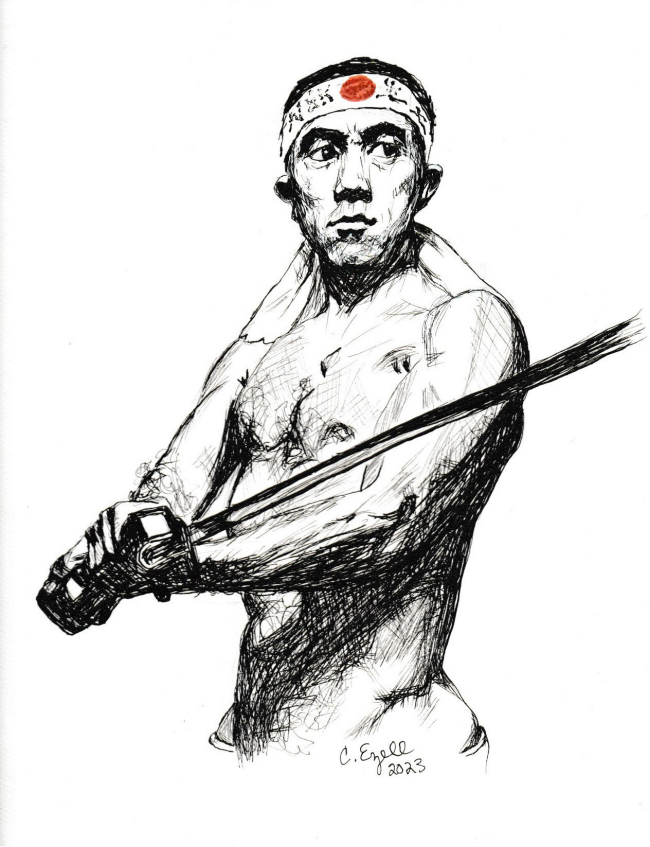
gel's Flight in the backdrop may the defining scene in noir. Call it *Ann-gel's flight* in this scene from the middle of the movie. Chiaroscuro overload!

A note about Yvonne de Carlo. Kids of boomers, like me, know her as Lily Munster, the matriarch of the Munsters, but here she is, 15 years prior, and striking. She's taken some critical heat for not being Rita Hayworth or Ava Gardner, but she holds her own easily. She's sexy in an Eva Mendes kind of way and is worthy of more accolades for her performance of Anna the trampy tomato. Her "You and me, the way it should have been, right from the start" echoes Phyllis Dietrichson's "Straight down the line" from *Double Indemnity* three years prior.

And, little did anyone know that 8 years later, in 1957, Curtis would star in Alexander Mackendrick's Gotham noir *The Sweet Smell of Success*.

Perfect Purity, or Artist's Scheme?
Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters

Constantin Waldschmidt



Yukio Mishima

Over a 25-year writing career, Yukio Mishima published 34 novels, 50 plays, a film, and at least 50 collections of short stories and essays. Art, to him, was not a career but a compulsion. On November 25, 1970, he and members of his private army infiltrated a military base, took its commandant hostage, and attempted to rouse the soldiers to revolt. The attempted coup failed, and Mishima committed ritual suicide in the samurai style. He was Japan's last literary genius, and his magnum opus was his own methodically planned death.

Paul Schrader's *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* is aesthetically rich, to the point of delirium. Expertly edited, and lacquered with an eloquent voice-over, the film depicts both the author's life and several of his most iconic novels. Eiko Ishioka, the production designer, is responsible for the sets in the sections adapting Mishima's works. Each is unique in color palette, lighting, and atmosphere. None is like anything else you'll ever seen onscreen again. All feature young men, remarkably physical, displaced by the unrelenting murmur of some perfect ideal.

In the first story, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, a handicapped student is tormented by a glorious temple and the sense of inferiority it instills in him. The opaque setting shimmers with ambers and greens; Schrader shows us "Mishima as self-hating poet," oppressed by beauty.

In the second, *Kyoko's House*, a narcissistic actor sells his body to a gangstress to settle a family debt. Blues, whites, and gorgeous pinks rule this segment; conversations start darkly alluding to the destiny of the story's author. The main character of *Kyoko's House* identifies a paradox: the greatest sculptures and paintings are of human bodies, implying that the body is the true source of beauty; at the same time, the body decays rapidly, and even the most beautiful bodies are soon destroyed by age. Mishima's answer is grim: to embody (and not just observe) beauty in a lasting way, one must "devise an artist's scheme" to preserve it: noble death at the aesthetic climax. Here, Schrader serves us "Mishima as auto-erotic narcissist."

The last adaptation, *Runaway Horses*, tracks closest to Yukio Mishima's ideal: a zealous young athlete assembles a band of his peers and aims to assassinate corrupt oligarchs. The protagonist rebuffs all efforts to pacify or moderate him: an ideal, unless "perfectly pure," is no ideal at all--and perfectly pure ideals are worth killing and dying for. Bold crimson leaps at us throughout, and sets without boundaries fade eerily to black. Paul Schrader, by including "Mishima as charismatic warrior," finally provides the viewer a map to his magnum opus.

Indeed, it's only when showing his last day that reality is finally shown in color. The colors are balanced and naturalistic, suggesting the personae Mishima crafted in his previous works have combined and matured. Gone are the sets that exaggerate their own artifice; this time, the set is in real life, and he is playing for keeps.

With Yukio Mishima as its subject, this challenging narrative format meets its perfect match. Only his life could be mapped to a film this feverish, and anything less creative would have failed to capture his mad prodigy.

A common response to his philosophy is to frame it as a pathological reaction to childhood trauma. This is, after all, the interpretation preferred by Schrader, who in interview and commentary around the film describes Mishima's creative process as purgative. "Art works," explains Schrader, and by creating it, an artist may satisfy desires otherwise too antisocial to fulfill. Schrader posits that for Mishima, art failed to work. His literary body grew, but so did his shadow behind it. Greater did it grow, and darker, until it boiled and stretched into political territory. Idealistic young men were wrapped in its tendrils. It gave them slogans and uniforms, lured them into an ultranationalistic death cult.

But, to what extent was Mishima a genuine idealist, and to what extent was he merely sliding through psychodrama?

It's a fact that his grandmother trampled his childhood; she was utterly devouring, manipulative, interred him constantly, and drilled softness into him like a fairytale witch. In phrasing Mishima's life this way, however, Schrader simplifies and dismisses decades of Mishima's historical scholarship and essays. To call Mishima's thought inauthentic for this reason is lazy, and ignores the cultural-historical environment that shaped his ideology. It would be equally ridiculous to accuse Nietzsche, another chaotic visionary, of having praised Greek tragedy because he was raised by a house full of women.

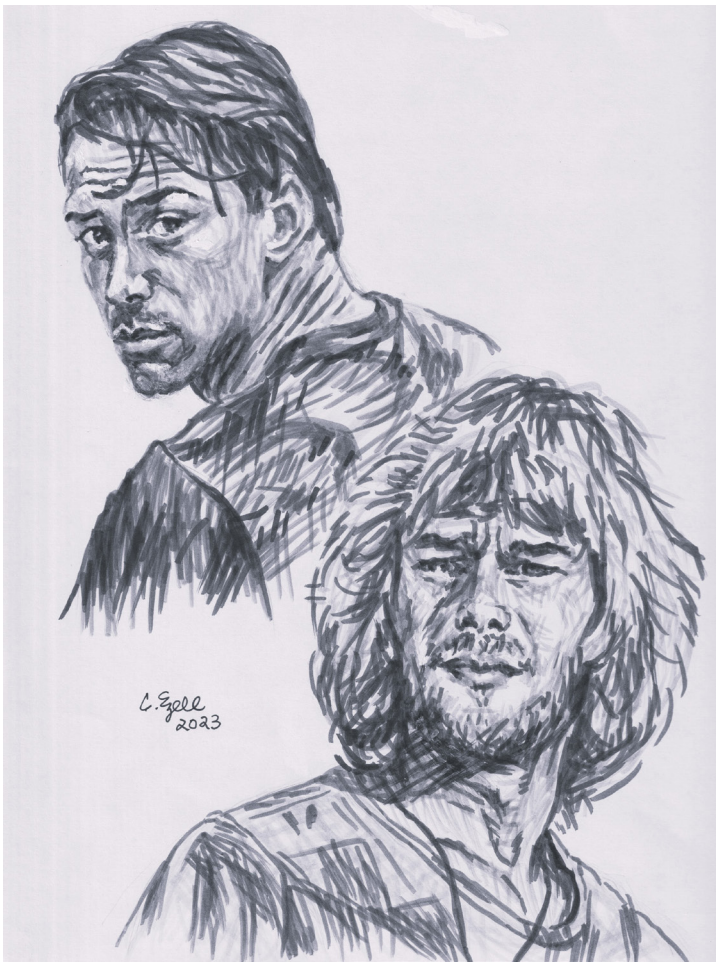
Rather, Mishima was born at the right time and with the right tools to diagnose his people with sickness of will. By wedding the richness of life with the finality of death, he struck at the heart of a modern cowardice that would only uncloak itself decades after his own transformation. No reader can deny that, after having witnessed years of pointless and exhausting medical tyranny, our dominant moral law is to reduce the possibility of harm. Mishima demanded with vengeance a return to both principled ideals and the primal satisfaction of a real world. He decried the commercial abstractions that were starting to dominate Japanese society, the political right and left being just two styles of one clammy economist. He asserted the uniqueness of his ancestral people, and their right to be armed in their own homeland. He gave shape to ideals, actions to words. He mastered life, tangibly.

The meticulousness of Mishima's last day often goes understated: consider that its director chose a set, picked a date well in advance (November 25 was the day he began his writing career), wrote a script, gathered an audience, selected a cast, and even designed their uniforms. In other words, the last day of his life was essentially a stage play, a masterpiece worth more than any book because it was both witnessed and lived. And, while Schrader's biopic-drama is marvelous in its own right, a thorough and textured appreciation of Yukio Mishima demands something similar. To understand his philosophy means not just to study, but to watch, to read, and, like him, to experience and live.

Point Break

Alexander Hughes '25

Kathryn Bigelow's 1991 action movie *Point Break* is not the most obviously philosophical film. Its trailer offers the last gasp of the 1980s action movie, setting Patrick Swayze and Keanu Reeves against one another in feats of athletic one-upmanship. However, the competition between the two men—Reeves' Johnny Utah, a rookie FBI agent, is responsible for catching Swayze's Bodhi, the leader of a surfing crew-cum-bank robber—quickly becomes an exploration of the interaction between manhood and law.



Keanu Reeves and Patrick Swayze

Set in contemporary southern California, *Point Break* depicts an America whose cracks are starting to show despite its affluence. The otherwise apparently efficient FBI is incapable of nailing Bodhi's "Ex-Presidents" because their robberies are not primarily motivated by financial gain. He robs banks for the same reason he surfs: as a rejection of his anesthetized society. In this, Bodhi represents untrammeled thumos. He intends to show "those guys that are inching their way on the freeways in their metal coffins that the human spirit is still alive," or to die trying. Despite his criminality, he is idealistic enough to be believable. Perhaps Americans, newly unburdened by the challenges of the Cold War, really do need to be shaken out of their stupor.

Utah, for his part, is a former collegiate star quarterback, and the film's opening montage shows him acing a marksmanship drill. His physical prowess offers a worthy match for Bodhi. But where Bodhi's manly self-assertion admits no limitations, Utah tries to play by the rules. In the first part of the movie, Bigelow makes a strong case for Bodhi's brand of manhood. Utah's boss at the Bureau is worse than useless, continually insulting him despite his own inability to solve the case. Even Utah's partner, though sympathetic, has given up on the case until Utah reenergizes him. Bodhi and his crew elude the Bureau at every turn, without so much as collateral damage during a robbery. Even their choice of disguise mocks the legal system that cannot constrain them. One, wearing a Nixon mask, reminds us that he "is not a crook!" The moral distinction between the law and the lawless is thus erased.

Utah clearly feels tempted by this lifestyle. He goes undercover to infiltrate the Ex-Presidents, another indication that enforcing the law requires stepping outside of its normal confines. Furthermore, though Utah may be as athletic as Bodhi, they are not equals. Bodhi initiates Utah into his adrenaline-junkie lifestyle, teaching

him to surf, saving him from a local gang, and taking him skydiving. The temptation reaches its peak when Utah catches Bodhi in the act, leading off an extended chase scene. Utah is unable to catch Bodhi, staying close enough behind to shoot him; buthe does not do this, even when a knee injury ensures that he will not apprehend Bodhi alive. A certain honor exists between them. Utah fires round after round into the air, unable to take down a man he has not fairly bested. Bodhi's spirit demands to be met in kind, and Utah acquiesces to this despite its consequences.

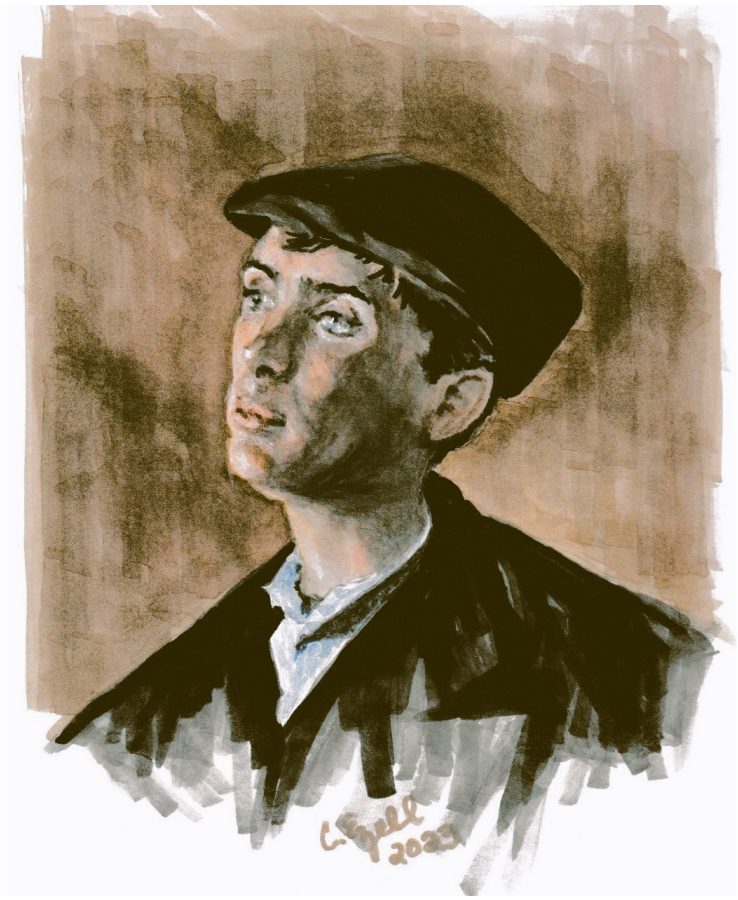
Those consequences come roaring back. Having already denied the limits of both nature and law, Bodhi finally loses his self-control as well. He kidnaps Utah's girlfriend and uses her as leverage to force Utah into helping him with a final robbery. He gets greedy, stopping for the first time to rob the bank's vault, and people die—including one of his own. In the ensuing escape, he forces Utah to choose whether to kill them both or to let him go. The destructive power of pure thumos is finally revealed.

The film ends on a beach with once-in-a-lifetime swells building. After a final fight, Bodhi is reduced to begging to be allowed to surf one final wave. He will not survive it, but a glorious death is preferable to an ignominious life in prison. Utah lets him go, throwing his badge into the surf. The conflict between their forms of manliness is left unresolved. Bodhi's, of course, is unacceptable; transcending physical limits makes him great, but violating moral ones makes him repulsive. Yet law-abiding men like Utah have little recourse against men like Bodhi; they are only stopped when they exhaust themselves. In earlier eras, Bodhi might have been a knight, a samurai, a frontiersman. The tragedy of *Point Break*—the tragedy of a comfortable society—is that it offers no path for such a man to work for society instead of against it.

The Wind that Shakes the Barley

Mathieu Ronayne

Stories are concrete abstractions, arguments about ideals whose premises and conclusions are human acts, not propositions. They help us see the implications of our convictions. The political arts—law, statesmanship, and war—each practically apply abstract principles to particular situations. A politics devoid of reason is animalistic, and a politics divorced from practical, material circumstances is angelic; neither is human. Our contemporary concern for the quality of our political discourse attests to this. If politics are only practical, then we must justify why arguments, rather than actions alone, matter; but, if politics are only abstract, then we must explain why our concern for political argument is more than merely academic. Stories help us think abstractly about practical matters; in a sense, they help us think politically.



Cillian Murphy

The Wind that Shakes the Barley is a story of how disagreements about abstract ideals can lead to concrete conclusions of fratricide and war. The historical-fictional film's protagonist, Damien O'Donovan, fights in the Irish War of Independence rather than moving to London to practice medicine, and he dies in the Irish Civil War rather than obeying the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Teddy, his brother, orders his execution by firing squad.

The tragedy runs deeper than familial rift, for not only were Teddy and Damien brothers, but they were also close comrades in the same unit of the Irish Republican Army in the months preceding Damien's death. They both desired an independent Ireland, but did their disagreement over its form need to end so brutally? Midway through the film, Damien says, "I hope this Ireland we're fighting for is worth it." What Ireland do Damien and Teddy believe they are fighting for?

Consider what kept Damien from leaving Ireland for London. Teddy and others try to convince him to remain following the death of their friend Micheál—"a real Irishman," according to Teddy—at the hands of the Black and Tans "because he wouldn't say his name in English." Damien does not deny the injustices of the British; he rejects the call to fight because of either the improbability of winning or the lack of value in trying and failing. He is not swayed by appeals to culture and kin.

Damien stays in Ireland after witnessing a train driver and flagman beaten by British soldiers. His decision is not merely driven by compassion, for presumably he cared more about Micheál than those strangers. He was moved by the reason for their resilience: they refused the soldiers entry onto the train according to their

union's orders. Damien's ideal is essentially economic, united with the concerns of labor, among those of other groups.

The friendship Damien later forms with Dan, the train driver, further reveals how he understands Ireland. Damien and Dan start speaking with each other when Dan completes, by memory, a line from an anticlerical poem of the Englishman William Blake that Damien began reading off the prison wall. Damien is not allured by "Catholic Ireland" as his ideal, which he makes clear later when he rebukes the Church, saying "once again, the Catholic Church, with honorable exception, sides with the rich." Damien and Dan bond over their admiration for James Connolly, quoting together his argument that an Ireland free of the British army and Union Jack would, in reality, remain under British rule if it were not a socialist republic.

Teddy does not define Ireland in strictly economic terms, and this causes his explicit disagreements with Damien: first, over the court's ruling with the peasant woman against the wealthy man; second, over the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Similarly to Damien's early disagreement with the appeals made to him to remain in Ireland, Teddy disagrees, not with the justice of the woman's cause, but with the practical implications: "What Mr. Sweeney did to Mrs. Rafferty was wrong. It was wrong, but I need the man's money to buy weapons. We can't fight a war without weapons." Teddy subordinates the question of economic justice to that of how to protect the institutions necessary for such justice, like independent courts. He similarly disagrees with the practical results of rejecting the Treaty: "Immediate and terrible war." He does not support the Treaty for its own sake, and he tells Damien as much in his promise that "We'll tear up the Treaty once we're strong enough, but I need you to be with me on this." Damien argues that the election that decided the Treaty's fate was not fair because the "most powerful country in the world threatens war." Teddy does not deny the injustice of the threat; he merely refuses to deny its reality. This disagreement ultimately lays down the logic for Damien's eventual execution.

Our stories—historical, fictional, and their combination—remind us that our rhetoric and arguments have real, and possibly grave, consequences. Even when we do not speak of violent measures, we must remain aware of the real weight and implications of our arguments and the political acts that follow from them. Politics are practical, and we must not deny the reality of circumstances that influence our acts, nor the real consequences that follow.

Gran Torino Illustrates the Way Forward for the American Man

Jason O'Dwyer

Clint Eastwood's 2008 drama *Gran Torino* was a controversial hit. Eastwood decided that he would both direct and star in this film after reading Nick Schenk's screenplay without changing one word, believing that any changes would "emasculate" the film. Aside from Eastwood, this cast featured no famous actors; yet, it tells a gripping story of America's decline and hope with a budget half the size of the average Hollywood film.

Clint Eastwood portrays Walt Kowalski, a grizzled Korean War veteran and former Ford factory worker in early 2000s Detroit. Walt's loss of his wife before the movie sparks a process of alienation and rage that echoes the downward spiral of the American psyche. This course is reversed only when he finds himself inadvertently mentoring a troubled young Vietnamese man. Through this relationship, *Gran Torino* crafts a story of how American men, and American culture more broadly, might dig their way out of some of the worst ills that currently plague them. This movie was controversial and was ignored by the Academy, making the film a classic in the eyes of many moviegoers interested in the problems facing America in postmodernity.

Eastwood exhibits an older masculine archetype at 78 than he did in *Dirty Harry* and *The Man with No Name*. As the film begins, Walt grapples with his loss, which reunites his family. However, Walt is only reminded of the contempt that he has for his family, engrossed in Baby Boomer culture and Millennial modernity. Having lost the joy of his wife's presence, he clings to the only good things he still has—his dog, his nice lawn, his gorgeous car, and cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon—while he sees that the America he loves has degraded. His family has become ungrateful and untraditional after moving away, and his neighborhood has become filled with diverse ethnic groups with no affinity for one another.

Walt's bitterness furthers after a young Vietnamese boy named Thao, pressured by a local gang, attempts to steal Walt's pristine Ford Gran Torino, the movie's symbol of American heritage and ingenuity. Walt catches him and scares him off, after which, Thao is sent by his family to pay off the debt of his attempted theft. The rest of the film follows these characters and their families as Walt slowly becomes a mentor to the young Thao, teaching him to be a classic American man who properly assimilates, while Walt realizes that he has a lot more in common with these traditional Vietnamese neighbors than his own untraditional family.

Gran Torino accomplishes a great deal considering the small size of its production budget. Nick Schenk writes a compelling script, and despite a few lines that don't quite land properly, the screenplay as a whole does a very good job at portraying the dynamics of the film. Eastwood's direction is entirely on point, and it seems clear that his decades of production experience carry the film to great heights. Simple camera shots, first-time actors, and a complete lack of special effects, under Eastwood's leadership as an actor and director, come together to form a work that is anything but mediocre.

The screenplay of this movie is so strong that Clint Eastwood was not interested in changing a single syllable of the script when he read it. Unsurprisingly, Schenk has personal experience with the cultures that he writes about. He worked in a factory in 1990s Minnesota as the state's industrial activity was declining, and many of his fellow factory workers were Hmong, the same ethnic group that Walt's mentee, Thao, belongs to. Schenk wrote the screenplay while at a local dive bar in Minneapolis years later. These experiences shine through the words of the movie, as the language and attitude of Walt and his peers are exactly of the sort of language you hear at any working-class, old-school American construction site in the country. Furthermore, Schenk and the Hmong consultants on his team add to this drama colorful and lively scenes of cultural interaction between the different ethnicities portrayed in the film.

While the script is high quality, Eastwood's phenomenal direction makes *Gran Torino* what it is. His signature directing style is apparent throughout this movie. The characters portray just as much through their body language and hand motions as they do with their words, and one can often foresee the mood of a given scene just by the music, the colors, and the environment. Fans of Clint Eastwood might recognize the similarity that this film has to his other works, such as *Mystic River* or *Revolutionary Road*.

Gran Torino's view on religion is an engaging one, though it is more of a philosophical view of religion rather than any sort of theology. However, viewers should not count this against the film, as the movie isn't an explicitly religious one, but rather uses religion as a means to consider ideas of tradition and social ethics. Walt is Catholic, and part of the movie revolves around the dissonance between his traditional religious view, the modern "softness" of his priest, and the Eastern tradition of his Hmong neighbors. We see the movie simultaneously glorify Walt's Catholicism and the Hmong spiritual practices for being rooted in tradition and family, while it subtly disparages the modern, uprooted faith of Walt's priest and family. Interestingly, the movie does not seem to put the two very distinct faiths of Walt and the Hmong in conflict; rather, it seems to suggest a potential unity between them, despite their differences, because of the tradition and unity that their practitioners are striving toward.

I do not know if Eastwood intended this film to be such a philosophical one, but he clearly lays out certain problems in philosophy and religion with compelling style. *Gran Torino* proposes as the ideal of American masculinity one that philosopher Edmund Burke would call a "prejudiced" one, and he would say this approvingly. For Burke, prejudice is a set of traditions, assumptions, and stereotypes that allow us to sift through the plethora of choices quickly and successfully we are faced with every day. For Walt, that prejudice is mowing your lawn, keeping your house in order, and sticking to the cultural standards that have kept him happy all these years—its's as simple as that. The skills of masculinity are like the tool kit in Walt's shed, which he explains to young Thao. Any man, according to Walt, should be able to accomplish just about anything with a few tools—WD-40, a vice grips, and duct tape—but as for the finer tools, Walt says, "a man acquires this over a period of 50 years."

Gran Torino unapologetically—and humorously—calls out some of the worst aspects of liberal, multicultural modernity and gives a good-faith effort at describing the road that we might take in the future. In the film's vision, the future could and should be one in which the emasculated, wayward youth looks to the pre-Boomer era for inspiration and guidance on how to live, eschewing the dominant cultural narrative for a more traditional one. In doing this, the youngest among us might just bring the "antiquated" aspects of our tradition into the present, and if we're diligent, everyone may be the better for it.