Race and Representation in the Fast & Furious Series

By Daniel Roeder

Purchase College
State University of New York

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Sponsor: Professor Joel Neville Anderson
Second Reader: Professor Nathan Holmes

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Introduction

If there is any absolute that is to be stated about the Hollywood film industry, it's that it has always been plagued with issues regarding race and representation. Hell, you can even go as far back as the "first blockbuster," which was of course D.W. Griffith's epic of racism and KKK hero worship, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film whose success is credited with sparking the rebirth of the Klan. While Hollywood has obviously moved a little past that form of blatant white supremacism, they also haven't completely shifted away from it. There's always going to be racism in Hollywood as long as there's racism in America, and that's that. But just because Hollywood is racist, that doesn't mean that diversity in Hollywood films cannot exist, and there are indeed many Hollywood films that one could present as being racially diverse, and perhaps even politically progressive in some ways when it comes to certain economic or social issues. And why is this? Because of the other absolute in Hollywood, that there is absolutely nothing that comes before money. So at the end of the day, it all comes down to maintaining a large and consistent audience, and if that means doing the bare minimum to convince moviegoers that they've turned over a new leaf with regards to race, then that bare minimum will be done, no question about it.

Having said all of that, I do think these trends are worth discussing because as the saying goes, even a broken clock is right twice a day. There are, to be fair, times where this feigning of progressive values does create something legitimately progressive. I highly doubt that the bigwigs at Universal Studios were filled with righteous anger about police brutality when they decided to distribute Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), but in doing so they gave the largest platform they could to a man who genuinely was and continues to be. Cases like this are the

exceptions that prove the rule, yes, but these exceptions still exist and there are some truly great exceptions.

Now, when one thinks of the massively popular *Fast and Furious* franchise (2001-present), radical politics are perhaps not what immediately comes to mind. I would agree, and even as I write this, I'm not fully convinced that I would list these films among the exceptions described earlier. Ultimately the aspirations of these films are not in the realm of the political, and they never really seek to ruffle any feathers, unless you happen to be a staunch defender of gravity and physics.

That said, these films remain interesting precisely because of that. With a film like *Do the Right Thing*, when you're watching it, you know you're watching something "important," something that actually matters, a piece of art that wants to make a difference in the world, because the film tells you this on the surface. With *Fast and Furious* on the other hand, the fact that it's a genre film complicates things. The function of a genre film is primarily to entertain. Whether you're looking at horror or comedy or action, any message the film is trying to get across tends to play second fiddle to the genre itself. Anyone can watch Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and enjoy it purely for the horror elements, but it takes a little more effort to reveal the film's scathing critique of capitalism as well as the implication of its psychosexual overtones. Again, there are exceptions to this too, but I would definitely not count any *Fast and Furious* movie among them.

Instead what's really interesting about the *Fast and Furious* franchise can be found in its contradictions. Where the films combine their remarkably racially diverse ensemble casts with continuous white savior narratives. The way the films gradually embrace Dominic Toretto's Latino heritage, but only after the studio decided to ramp up Spanish language marketing with

the release of the fourth film, when they realized there was a large Latino market. How it strives for an all-encompassing racial utopia, while still maintaining a regressive "colorblind" streak. It's through these lenses that these become a far more fascinating series than one might initially suspect. It is also worth looking at why these movies choose to include or omit certain content, and how much true progress can really be made on film while still remaining within the constraints of the studio system.

In this essay I will be writing about, for the most part, three of the first four entries in the *Fast and Furious* series. In the first chapter, I will take a look at what has already been written about these films, academically as well as in popular film criticism, while also examining the idea of "cheering fictions" as coined by screenwriter Hanif Kureishi, and whether or not these films fit into that bracket. The second chapter will focus on *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) and the similarly titled *Fast & Furious* (2009), and how despite sharing the same Los Angeles setting and characters, the ways the two films differ in how they each choose to portray their central character, Dominic Toretto's cultural background. Also covered in chapter two are two short films directed by Vin Diesel, *Multi-Facial* (1995) and *Los Bandoleros* (2009), both of which give valuable insights into the franchise's main star's crises of identity which end up being directly tied to the aforementioned feature films. The third chapter will shift focus to the Japan-set third entry, *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006), and will examine how the film depicts the assimilation of its white lead into Japanese culture (or lack thereof), and what Hollywood pitfalls it avoids and which ones it falls into. It will also look at *Tokyo Drift* in the context of the career of prolific *Fast and Furious* director Justin Lin who makes his series debut with this entry, and the expectations that this particular film comes with given his Asian-American heritage. The conclusion of the paper will delve into the increased transnationalism of the series starting with

the entirely Brazil-set *Fast Five* (2011), and continuing through to the casual globe-trotting and drone attacks of *Furious 7* (2015), as well as looking at how the targeted audiences may have changed over the years.

Chapter One: Cheering Fictions

One of my initial goals in writing this paper was to champion something that I deemed underrated by the general public and under discussed in academia, so I figured that as a massive fan of the Fast and Furious franchise, these films would make the perfect subject. Let me note that while I do refer to these films as "under discussed in academia," they have not been written off entirely, as you will see throughout this chapter. In fact, some scholars, such as Mary Beltrán, have written extensively about the series. That said, in keeping with the populism of the films, I'll be drawing from academic sources (such as writings by Jun Okada and Stuart Hall) as well as more popular critics (such as Roger Ebert and his famous defense of *Better Luck Tomorrow*) to get the full picture of what has been previously written about these films.

In the essay, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall discusses a film which could not be more different from the *Fast and Furious* series, Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). Hall describes *Laundrette* as the "most transgressive text there is," and calls attention to the film's distinct lack of "positive images" (Hall, 1991). Basically what Hall is getting at is the way the film doesn't shy away from complexity when it comes to presenting diversity. For example, the film is centered around an interracial romance between two men, one from a Pakistani immigrant family, the other white and British. Most films would take that kind of diversity and celebrate it, leaving the audience feeling good about themselves for consuming such a progressive piece of art, while perhaps also reassuring them that the world might really be that simple and open hearted. *My Beautiful Laundrette*, being the "most transgressive text there is", does not adhere to this philosophy. Instead, Frears (as well as

screenwriter Hanif Kureishi) shows the true complexity of diversity, and a lot of it is not pretty. The two main characters, Omar (Gordon Warnecke) and Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis), are in an interracial and homosexual relationship, and while their relationship is often presented tenderly, the film does not forget that Johnny is also a skinhead, or that Omar's family holds a number of racist views, in addition to their conservative Thatcher era politics. Screenwriter Kureishi said of it, "There is sometimes too simple a demand for positive images. Positive images sometimes require cheering fictions… I'm glad to say that the more I looked at *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the less positive images I see" (Hall).

In 2002, future *Fast and Furious* director Justin Lin's debut solo feature film, *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002), made its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival. The film follows a group of stereotypically overachieving Asian-American high school students who use their status as perfectionists to cover up a series of gradually escalating crimes, eventually culminating in murder. Following the screening, there was a Q&A in which one audience member questioned and criticized Lin for the negative image his film had put forward of Asian-American teens. "Why, with the talent up there and yourself, make a film so empty and amoral for Asian Americans and for Americans?", asked the audience member. Before Lin could respond to the man, film critic Roger Ebert stood up to offer a passionate defense of the film. Ebert yelled at the man, calling his comments condescending to Asian-Americans and that he would have never asked the same question of a white filmmaker. As the crowd cheered him on, Ebert continued to berate the man, saying that "Asian American characters have the right to be whoever they hell they want to be. They don't have to represent 'their people!'" Later on, in his print review of the film, Ebert wrote, "Like African-American films that take race for granted and get on with the characters and the story, Lin is making a movie where race is not the point but simply the

given…", and that "His film is uncompromising and doesn't chicken out with a U-turn ending." (Ebert, 2003). The whole event recalls Kureishi's idea of cheering fictions. The audience member who called out Lin was essentially denouncing his film for not being one, and not going out of its way to make the audience feel good about themselves or their worldview, which is of course progressive in itself. And the defense by Ebert of the film being "uncompromising" and his description of it as being a movie where "race is not the point but simply the given" appears to actively be rejecting the idea of a "cheering cinema", as it very intentionally subverts the commonly portrayed stereotype of Asian-American teens being straight A students.

Better Luck Tomorrow also sparked discussions elsewhere, as evidenced by the chapter of Jun Okada's book, *Making Asian American Film and Video: Histories, Institutions, Movements*, titled "Better Luck Tomorrow and the Transnational Reframing of Asian American Film and Video." Okada begins her book by talking about the formation of the National Asian American Telecommunications Association as a response to the formation of PBS, and how it led to the rise of independent Asian-American cinema, which is described as beginning in 1972 and "peaking" in 2002, the year that *Better Luck Tomorrow* made its debut. The chapter dedicated to *Better Luck Tomorrow* begins with Okada describing the film as almost an outlier in the subgenre of independent Asian-American film. Typically in Asian-American cinema up to this point, there was what Okada refers to as an "ongoing theme of ambivalence towards selling out" (Okada, 107). These were films that attempted to tell specifically Asian-American stories and cared about social change above commercial success. Then along comes *Better Luck Tomorrow*, a crowd pleasing crime drama produced by MTV Films and distributed by Paramount Pictures that was a festival hit turned box office success. Okada determines *Better Luck Tomorrow*'s success to be down to the film being "a seemingly contradictory mixture of Hollywood genre cinema, Hong

Kong action film, and crucially, a socially conscious message about race and representation". *Better Luck Tomorrow* wasn't just entertaining, it managed to maintain the core values of Asian-American cinema, without getting bogged down in them or ever feeling alienating, on a much larger scale and for a much larger audience than any of its predecessors.

To quote Roger Ebert once again, "Lin is making a movie where race is not the point but simply the given". Okada takes issue with this quote however, and the film's enthusiastic reception by American critics in general. If the film is being praised for not focusing on race, is it doing enough to promote the values of Asian-American cinema? Do all Asian-American films need to say something important about race? Does the biggest Asian-American hit at the time being a Hollywood-esque crime story diminish all that came before? Should the burden of an entire subset of independent cinema rest on the shoulders of one director in his debut film? It's a complicated subject to say the least, and certainly raises a lot of questions that could be asked of Lin's later film, *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*, as well as the other four entries in the series he has helmed since 2006..

Speaking of *Fast and Furious*, Mary Beltran's article about the series titled "The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast, Furious, (and Multiracial) Will Survive", covers some similar ground, albeit in a slightly different context. Beltran's article is about two films, *The Fast and the Furious* and Andrzej Bartkowiak's *Romeo Must Die* (2000), released about a year apart. The thread that ties the two films together is that both are what Beltran refers to as "multiculti" blockbusters, both have multiethnic casts and are set against stylized urban backdrops. *Romeo Must Die* focuses on a struggle between two criminal organizations in Oakland, California, one African American, one Chinese. The Romeo and Juliet angle comes from the two non-white leads, Jet Li and Aaliyah, who bridge the gap between gangs and races to put an end to the

violent conflict, while falling in love along the way. Notably, a kiss between the two of them at the end was axed. According to Jose Antonio Vargas in his article “'Slanted Screen' Rues The Absence Of Asians”, this was done because the original scene allegedly didn’t test well with “urban audiences”. There’s also the case of the film’s main villain, played by Russell Wong, a mixed race actor who is depicted as a traitor who goes against his Chinese crime family.

On the other hand, there’s Rob Cohen’s *The Fast and the Furious*. In Cohen’s film, Los Angeles is presented as a “raceless” utopia. The leader of this utopia is the star of the film, Vin Diesel, a racially ambiguous actor. In this world, anyone can be a great street racer, and we see different racers of all creeds and colors during the many street races throughout. That being said, this is still a Hollywood movie, and it sticks to quite a few racist Hollywood tropes. Even though Vin Diesel is arguably the star of the film, Paul Walker is the cast member with the most screen time, and is ultimately the hero of the film. He also gets to show off his impeccable driving skills by making a fool out of African-American and Asian-American racers, similarly to the way Jet Li’s martial arts skills are deployed in *Romeo Must Die*. To this end, the film is no different than countless other white savior centered Hollywood films. Yet at the same time there are aspects of the film that do feel progressive in ways that contradict my previous statement. Returning to Hanif Kureishi’s idea of “cheering fictions”, it is hard to determine where exactly *The Fast and the Furious* falls. On one hand, there is a distinct lack of positive images, as even our mixed race lead is portrayed as a violent criminal (albeit a mostly sympathetic one). On the other hand, there is the near utopian depiction of a “post-racial” Los Angeles, in which we see people of all races gathered together in harmony to ogle bikini clad women and drive fast cars. Even then, one could argue that depiction does not necessarily equal endorsement, and that these visions of a “utopia” are merely accurately portraying the racial makeup of a very niche subculture, rather than

actively striving to be a “cheering fiction” or to present a positive image of Los Angeles. The racial politics of the series are typically that contradictory and complex, so the best place to start analyzing them would be the very beginning.

Chapter Two: Los Angeles

In 1998, prolific 20th Century Fox producer turned director Rob Cohen read a *Vibe* magazine article by Kenneth Li about New York street racing titled "Racer X," which would eventually become the basis for *The Fast and the Furious*. The article is focused around Rafael Estevez, a Dominican racer famous in the scene, but what stands out the most is Li's description of the overall racing scene itself. Li paints the street racing community as incredibly colorful and ethnically diverse. He talks about how the craze began in southern California with a group of young Asian-Americans, but has since spread much further, and describes New York's racers as "an urban polyglot of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Chinese, Filipino, Jamaican, Italian and other ethnicities who have one thing in common: They love hurtling metal, meat and rubber through the concrete jungle at dangerous velocities", which could almost serve as a tagline for *The Fast and the Furious*. Ironically enough however, *The Fast and the Furious* was initially written as a "mostly white and suburban story" set in New York, but eventually the script was altered radically once Vin Diesel and screenwriter David Ayer were brought onboard. Now the film was to take place in Los Angeles and heavily foreground the diversity of the illegal street racing scene.

The Fast and the Furious revolves primarily around two characters, Brian O'Conner and Dominic Toretto. Brian O'Conner, played by the late Paul Walker, is a young LAPD officer who is sent undercover to investigate a crew of street racers who have been hijacking delivery trucks in a series of escalating heists. Dominic Toretto, played by Vin Diesel, is a professional street racer and ex-convict who is in direct opposition to Brian as the leader of the crew that has been

pulling the heists. The two begin the film at odds, but eventually gain a mutual respect for each other as Brian proves himself to be a worthy member of Dominic's racing team. Unfortunately, their newfound brotherhood is inevitably put to the test once it is revealed to Dominic that Brian has been undercover the entire time, and to complicate things even further, Brian has also been falling for Dominic's sister, Mia (Jordana Brewster). Ultimately the two come together to outspeed and defeat a rival gang of Vietnamese hijackers, with plenty of vehicular destruction along the way. In the end, instead of arresting him, Brian gives Dominic his car and lets him escape, sacrificing his own career as a police officer in the process, as well as setting the stage for the next entry in the series.

Upon its release, the film proved to be a success at the box office, raking in $207 million on a budget of $38 million, but the critical response was not entirely positive. Much of the criticism leveled at *The Fast and the Furious* is about what you might expect an action movie to be criticized for. While the racing sequences were generally praised, like by George Meyer of the Sarasota Herald Tribune, who says that "When the cars race and crash and chase and spit flames and do all that car-flick stuff, the movie runs rather well", or by Ken Hollings of Sight and Sound, who says that the action scenes "have a gear-grinding intensity about them, edited as if they're being run by getaway drivers following a bank heist", but other aspects of the film were less well received. Take for example, the tellingly named review of the film by Dann Gire, "Bad dialogue, silliness come 'Fast and Furious' in racecar thriller", in which Gire points out the numerous ridiculous lines of dialogue littered throughout the film, such as Mia describing her brother Dominic as "living gravity" because "Everybody gets pulled to him!", or a cop yelling "You want time? Buy a magazine!". To me, the people who criticize these films for containing silly dialogue or the frequent lapses in logic when it comes to physics are missing the

fundamental point of them. At its heart *The Fast and the Furious* (as well as the rest of the series) is just a B movie, and one does not typically watch a B movie with the expectation of anything more than cheap, simple entertainment and on that front the film more than succeeds, goofy dialogue and all.

The criticism the film received wasn't just limited to the dialogue though. Larry Saavedra of the *Los Angeles Times* in his review titled "Carmentary; 'The Fast and the Furious' Is Lame Yet Lively", writes about the film with regards to race. Saavedra describes the film as exploitation, and the characters as "street thugs who rule the road by intimidation, all set to a backdrop of gritty rap music", while bemoaning the film being "aimed directly at an impressionable youth market". Beyond the inherent racism (as well as the ableism in the title of the review itself, which uses "lame" as a perjorative) in using the word "thug" to describe non-white characters, Saavedra seems, to me at least, to be misreading the portrayal of the racers. Look at the scene where Brian meets all the racers before the first race for example. Saavedra claims that the Latino characters are portrayed as "thick-accented gang-bangers" and African-Americans as "devilish", but neither seems to be the case here (I will give it to Saavedra that he's right about all the Asian characters being portrayed as "swarthy gangsters", but I'll get into that a little later when I get to *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*.). The two characters that Brian meets, Hector (Noel Gugliemi) and Edwin (Ja Rule), both appear to be pretty amicable as they give him an introduction to the racing scene. There's some trash talk, sure, but nothing that you wouldn't expect between competitors, it feels natural in this environment, and never at any point feels as exploitative as Saavedra makes it out to be.

And then of course there's Dominic Toretto. Vin Diesel has gone on record describing himself as being "of ambiguous ethnicity", and having never met his biological father, all he

knows about his ethnic background is that he "has connections to many different cultures." It's clear that cultural identity has always been something that Diesel had struggled with, as evidenced by his own semi-autobiographical short, *Multi-Facial*. The short stars Diesel as a young multiracial actor named Mike who auditions for several different parts, playing a different ethnicity each time. First he tries out for a role as an Italian-American, then he goes to an audition for a Spanish soap opera and speaks with a Cuban accent, and so on. Unfortunately every time Mike auditions, he gets rejected for not quite fitting the bill as far as race goes, either he's too dark-skinned or too light-skinned, and he ultimately ends up feeling like he can't fit any role.

Cut to six years later, and Vin Diesel is playing the lead role in *The Fast and the Furious*. In this film, the role of Dominic Toretto almost feels like a direct response to Diesel's earlier role as Mike. Here, instead of a character struggling with his multiracial identity and failing to fit in anywhere, Diesel is playing a character who is symbolically the exact opposite of Mike. We first meet Dominic Toretto working alongside his sister Mia at the family's small market, but I would argue that the character's true introduction takes place a little bit after, at the film's first street race.

After Brian is given his introduction to the scene of street racing by Hector and Edwin as described earlier, Dominic Toretto finally arrives, ready to race. As he exits his 1993 Mazda RX-7, he is greeted like a king and immediately commands the attention of all those present for the race. Here is a man who never for a second feels like he doesn't fit in. Dominic wades through the large crowd mingling with many racers and onlookers of various ethnicities. While most of the attendees remain confined to their own racial circles (All of the Asian-American extras hang out in one space, all the African-American racers in another, etc.), Dominic is able to

fluidly cross through these invisible barriers, while also existing in his own, almost elevated space. Where Mike saw his multiracial background as a limiting factor in figuring out his own identity, Dominic uses the power of his ethnic ambiguity to create a sense of unity amongst the already diverse melting pot of the Los Angeles racing scene. And all of this being conveyed by an actor who had already openly struggled with his identity through his art makes it seem all the more sincere and genuinely affecting, especially in an otherwise mostly silly movie. In a "post-racial" world, the "post-racial" actor is king.

Interestingly enough, as the series goes on the idea of racelessness begins to disappear as far as Dominic Toretto is concerned. The fourth film in the franchise, the confusingly titled *Fast & Furious* (2009), serves as a soft reboot of sorts after the preceding two entries omitted Vin Diesel (outside of a small cameo) and shifted location from Los Angeles to Florida and eventually Japan. This entry attempts to recapture what made the first entry work eight years earlier by bringing back the duo of Paul Walker and Vin Diesel as Brian and Dominic, who hadn't made an appearance together since the end of the first film, as well as supporting cast members Michelle Rodriguez and Jordana Brewster.

Fast & Furious follows Dominic Toretto once again, who has been on the run for eight years following the events of the first film, but is eventually forced to return to Los Angeles to hunt down the men who murdered his girlfriend Letty (Michelle Rodriguez). Meanwhile, Brian O'Conner, now inexplicably an FBI agent despite also being shown to be on the run from the law during *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003), is tasked with tracking down notorious drug lord Arturo Braga (John Ortiz), who just so happens to have a connection to Letty's death. Eventually Brian and Dominic's paths cross and the two set aside their differences to take down their mutual enemy and get justice for Letty. The duo get their revenge on Braga and his men, but Dominic decides

he's done running from the law and turns himself in. The film ends with Dominic receiving a 25 year prison sentence and being carted off to prison on a bus. All seems lost until we suddenly see Brian and Mia speeding up to the side of the bus to break Dominic out, once again setting the stage for the next film in the series, *Fast Five*.

Probably the most interesting thing about this entry is the shift in focus as far as Dominic's race goes. Where the first film seems to emphasize Toretto's racelessness, this one leans heavily into his Latino heritage. In fact, the influence of Latino culture can be seen all over the film, right from the opening scene. As is generally the case with these films, *Fast & Furious* opens with a big action scene, in this instance an elaborate heist on a tanker truck transporting a large amount of fuel on an isolated stretch of road in the Dominican Republic. In addition to reintroducing returning characters Dominic, Letty, and Han from *Tokyo Drift*, we meet two new characters, Tego Leo and Rico Santos, played by popular Puerto Rican reggaeton musicians Tego Calderón and Don Omar respectively. In a series first, the duo speak exclusively in Spanish accompanied by stylized subtitles throughout, that bounce all over the screen in different fonts. One gets the impression that these subtitles are so stylized because Hollywood executives can't imagine the American public watching a movie with subtitles (no matter how infrequent their "intrusion" may be) so they decided that the subtitles themselves have to be "exciting", but hey, if that's the only way to get a language other than English in the movie, then so be it. These two characters don't make another appearance until the very end of the film, but the film's Latin influences don't end there. Where the first film's soundtrack was an odd mixture of hip-hop, grunge, and electronic music, the soundtrack for *Fast & Furious* is mostly made up of Spanish rap and reggaeton with contributions by the aforementioned Calderón and Omar, as well as Cuban-American artist Pitbull. Even the marketing for the film leans into it, with a Spanish

language ad campaign running spots on Telemundo during European football matches, and even having bilingual stars Vin Diesel and Michelle Rodriguez participate in Spanish language press tours in Mexico as well as Miami, a city with one of the largest Hispanic populations in the United States..

Dominic himself also goes through a significant shift. Unlike his last appearance, the Dominic Toretto we meet in this film is very clearly intended to be of Latino origin. He now lives in Panama and speaks fluent Spanish, a skill he was never hinted to possess beforehand. His Catholicism is also emphasized far more in this entry, such as in a scene in which a prayer over dinner serves to bring Dominic and Brian closer together. This shift in character, like his racelessness in the first film, appears to be a result of Vin Diesel's personal struggles with his identity. In fact, there's even another short film directed by the man himself to help with this analysis.

Directed by Vin Diesel, *Los Bandoleros* serves as little more than a short prologue to *Fast & Furious* to bridge the gap between it and the first film. The plot of this one is pretty simple, Dominic Toretto has been hiding out in the Dominican Republic and gets word that a local politician might be able to set up a heist for him. So Dominic gets a crew together consisting of Leo (who Dominic has to break out of prison first), Santos, Han, and Cara (Han's girlfriend who appears very briefly in the opening scene of *Fast & Furious*), and they set up a meeting with the politician, who gives them information about a shipment of gasoline that would be possible to hijack. Afterwards, Dominic finally encounters Letty after years of her trying to track him down, and the two rekindle their relationship on a beach as the short film comes to an abrupt conclusion.

What is immediately striking about *Los Bandoleros* is that it is almost entirely in Spanish. Other than the scenes with Letty and Han, almost all of the dialogue is in Spanish (presented to the audience with regular, stylized subtitles unlike the feature it is advertising), which is fitting given the setting, but still surprising for an American blockbuster franchise of this scale. The other thing that instantly stands out is Diesel's attempt at inserting overt political commentary into the short, something none of the other entries have done this blatantly. The opening scene of the film takes place in the Dominican prison where Leo is being held for unknown reasons. As Diesel moves the camera around the prison, we hear Leo's rantings about the evils of capitalism, how the government ultimately ends up profiting off of "bandoleros" (outlaws/bandits), and how everybody in there with him is trapped in the same exploitative cycle. It's not a super complex or in-depth critique, but the naturalistic, almost documentary-like approach with which Vin Diesel shoots the scene, as well as the fact that it's in there at all, I do think is notable if only for the fact that this isn't something that would ever make it into a blockbuster that costs $85 million. As far as identity goes, it seems as though Diesel has finally found one that he can fully embrace, and after this short, the movies do follow suit, leaning heavily into Latin culture with *Fast & Furious* as well as the direct sequel *Fast Five* which takes place entirely in Brazil.

As great as all of that sounds, it is still important to keep in mind that the primary function of *Los Bandoleros* is to help sell *Fast & Furious*. As personal as the film feels to Diesel, in the end it's only allowed to be so as part of a much larger, less personal marketing scheme that is not in Diesel's control. It's great how eager Diesel is to show off his love of Dominican culture, but he only does so in the context of promoting a larger film in which he won't be able to do that. In that case, one would not be entirely off-base in calling the short something of a cheering fiction. It is a cheering fiction in the sense that we are presented with "good" politics

with which to cheer at and feel good about, while ringing hollow because of just that, especially when you take the film's conception being essentially rooted in a very big ad for an even bigger product. *Los Bandoleros* is clearly a part of Universal's attempts to reach a Latin audience and thus comes off feeling a little bit insincere, especially when it comes to the left-leaning (although very watered down and simplistic) politics, even though it's obvious Vin Diesel's heart is in it.

Chapter 3: Tokyo Drift

Perhaps the most important thing to happen to the *Fast and Furious* series since its inception was the hiring of Justin Lin in 2005, still pretty fresh off the success of *Better Luck Tomorrow*, to direct the third entry in the franchise, titled *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*. *Better Luck Tomorrow* had not only proved to be a critical and financial success, it was also lauded for its blending of a typical Hollywood crime narrative with a coming of age story about the Asian-American experience. Considering this *Fast and Furious* entry's focus on contrasting suburban America with the city life in Japan, Lin seems like an ideal pick. While I would defend John Singleton's decision to make his entry, *2 Fast 2 Furious*, into a pulpy buddy cop movie as a pretty fun one, it's Lin who elevated the franchise by taking it global. Obviously the producers of these films would agree, as Lin would go on to helm four more entries in the series, as well as the final two, which have yet to come out as of this writing.

The big change that *Tokyo Drift* makes right off the bat is that other than a cameo at the very end of it, the first two films in the franchise are disregarded entirely. With no Dominic and no Brian, we instead follow Sean Boswell (Lucas Black), a high school student sent to live in Tokyo with his father after an incredibly reckless street race almost lands him in juvenile detention. Soon Sean becomes enamored with the Japanese racing scene, specifically drifting, something the racers often do to show off their driving skills. Sean's inability to properly drift leads to him losing his first race to the antagonistic Takashi "D.K.", (Brian Tee) the "Drift King" and nephew of Yakuza boss Kamata (Sonny Chiba), and as a result he begins to work for Han Lue (Sung Kang) who's car Sean destroyed during the race. Han mentors Sean, teaching him how to drift, and the two become close. Eventually Han gets caught stealing from the Yakuza,

and gets into a high speed chase with Takashi through the crowded streets of Tokyo in which he is t-boned by a random car and meets a fiery end right in front of Sean (Although this is later heavily retconned multiple times throughout the series as an excuse to keep bringing Sung Kang back). Sean decides to face Takashi himself with the stipulation that the loser is to leave Tokyo forever. With Han's training, Sean is able to maneuver around the perilous mountain track and is able to use his newfound drifting skills to win the race and avenge his friend. Later on, Sean gets word that a friend of Han wants to meet him, who turns out to be Dominic Toretto, and the film ends with the two about to race.

Where the fourth film in the franchise is focused on integrating Latin culture into the series, this one is all about Japan. The big difference between the two is what characters are foregrounded and for what reasons. In *Fast & Furious* Dominic Toretto is fully immersed into his Latino heritage, whereas the entire plot of *Tokyo Drift* revolves around Sean Boswell being a fish out of water in Tokyo. Furthermore he doesn't seem to learn much about Japanese culture, or even really attempt to. Sure it's primarily a movie about street racing, and that's what Sean ends up learning, but it almost makes the foreign setting seem like set-dressing at times, an aesthetic for the sake of it.

For a clear example of this, let's go through the exact sequence of events that leads Sean to Tokyo, and gives the film an excuse to indulge in some cultural fetishization. Ironically, the very first scene of the film is about as blatantly American as it gets, almost reaching the point of parody. Following the opening credits which roll over footage of high schoolers arriving at school played by actors who look nearly 30, as is tradition, we meet our protagonist Sean Boswell, a disinterested student with a passion for cars. Before Sean can get two lines of dialogue out of his mouth, he's already getting into it with a football jock named Clay (Zachery

Ty Bryan), inexplicably holding a baseball, who accuses him of flirting with his girlfriend Cindy (Nikki Griffin) and proceeds to throw said baseball through the window of Sean's car. Soon the two are ready to settle things on the road, or more specifically, ready to settle things in a housing development that happens to still be under construction, with the "prize" being none other than Cindy.

What follows is a scene of unbridled hypermasculine chaos as the two (along with a ton of other high schoolers packed into trucks following behind) speed through the construction site weaving in and out and at one point literally through unfinished houses. Eventually Sean gains the upper hand prompting Cindy to break up with Clay and begin flirting with Sean on the spot in the car while still racing. In a rage, Clay begins ramming his car into Sean's while Cindy screams at him to stop. Clay refuses to stop and continues to attack Sean, running them both off the road and causing lots of destruction in the process. This entire sequence of events is so ridiculous, so misogynistic, and so needlessly destructive that there's almost no way that Justin Lin didn't intend it to be an exaggerated portrayal of American machismo and American action movies in general. There's even what appears to be a shot of a CGI bra flying off of a high schooler's chest and directly into the camera as soon as the race begins, which only furthers my theory that this is intended to be parodic. That last shot in particular strikes me as Lin poking fun at how often American media tends to sexualize teenagers, and taking that idea of exploitation to a laughably crude level. This ultra-American intro seems designed to contrast with the remainder of the film, which of course takes place in Japan, and while it does contrast on a literal, geographic level, I would argue that the film remains pretty damn American in terms of ideology throughout, and not necessarily in an intentional way. That's to be expected of an American

action blockbuster for sure, but it does feel slightly disappointing given the involvement of Lin, who can surely make something more thoughtful than this.

The main problem is the perspective from which the story is told, and how little it changes throughout the film. *Tokyo Drift* is ostensibly a fish out of water story about Sean Boswell adjusting to life in Japan while also learning to street race, and while the latter happens, the former doesn't really at all. The first scene in Japan after Sean meets up with his father is one played mostly for laughs, as Sean rushes to attend his first day of school. He awkwardly puts on his school uniform, struggles to read directions, and sprints through the streets all to the tune of an upbeat Japanese pop song. When Sean finally arrives in his classroom he is greeted by a teacher who knows no English and repeatedly gives him commands in Japanese, much to Sean's bewilderment, and that's about as far as the film goes in portraying any sort of cultural clash. Following this, Sean immediately meets two American characters, Twinkie (Bow Wow) and Neela (Nathalie Kelley), one a friend, the other a love interest. It is at this point that the film mostly stops being a fish out of water story, and turns into a racing movie with Tokyo merely serving as a pretty backdrop.

With three Americans in the leading roles, the perspective remains an American one, even if it isn't as blatant as the opening scene. Even the one Asian lead, Han, is still American, and really only exists to better Sean by taking him under his wing before his eventual demise. Compare *Tokyo Drift* to another film that also deals with an American assimilating into Japanese culture as well as its criminal underworld, Sydney Pollack's *The Yakuza* (1974). In this film Robert Mitchum plays Harry Kilmer, an American detective who travels to Japan to rescue the daughter of an old friend from the grasp of the Yakuza. Throughout the film we see Harry unravel a complex crime plot while also immersing himself in Japanese culture and attempting to

fully understand their values. In the climactic scene Harry chooses to slice off his own pinky finger in an act of *yubitsume*, as an offering of atonement and respect to his Japanese friend. In *Tokyo Drift*, the climax involves Sean beating Takashi, the best racer in Tokyo, by using his own move against him, resulting in Takashi playing dirty and eventually falling off a cliff and being banished from Japan. There is no interest in Japan or Japanese culture beyond the aesthetic value of foreignness and the idea of drifting, which did originate in Japan and is used to its fullest potential by a white Arizonian who just found out what it was.

Now with all that said, I don't think that *Tokyo Drift* is without value. The main reason I say this is because of the involvement of Justin Lin. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, Lin was hired to direct *Tokyo Drift* in 2005 right off the success of his solo debut feature, *Better Luck Tomorrow*, and seemed like the perfect fit for it, what with that film's crowd pleasing blend of Hollywood crime dramatics with more personal ruminations on what it's like growing up Asian-American. Lin was interested too for a number of reasons, with a major one being the way the Asian characters were portrayed in *The Fast and the Furious*. Lin describes thinking "Wow, all the Asian-Americans were all the bad guys" upon exiting the first film when it came out in theaters, and that "*Tokyo Drift* was a really interesting opportunity to come in with the freedom to do whatever I wanted to". If anyone was to correct the wrongs and racism of the first film, it would be Justin Lin. The studios however, did not initially see the potential in hiring a director of Asian descent to tell a specifically Asian story. Upon reading drafts of the original *Tokyo Drift* script, Lin was offended. It was chock full of racist cliches, with Lin saying that the only way he'd possibly tackle the film would be if the studio would allow him to "get rid of all the gongs and temples and Buddhas and the visual gags about how the white guy is a foot taller than all the

Asians", and direct the film his own way, which was unexpectedly agreed to immediately by studio executives (Yang, 2012).

In spite of that, Lin describes his experience directing *Tokyo Drift* as a "constant challenge" as far as working with Universal Pictures went (Yang). Even though the studio heads agreed to let Lin make "his movie", they still wouldn't let him cast an Asian-American in the leading role due to a lack of bankable Asian stars, which considering the subject matter as well as the director's previous work, seems like a totally misjudged move. Lin would eventually agree with the producers of the film that Lucas Black was the best choice for the role of Sean Boswell, but there's still something disheartening about the casting of a white man in the lead role of a movie called *Tokyo Drift*.

Lin was however, allowed by the studio to cast Sung Kang from *Better Luck Tomorrow* in the role of Han Lue (implied to be the very same Han that Kang portrayed in *Better Luck Tomorrow* as well), Sean's mentor, which is where the film's true success lies. When *Tokyo Drift* was first screened for audiences, the character of Han was met with a record breaking 100 percent perfect approval rating from polled audience members, higher than any single character in Universal Studios history. How did this no-name actor in the third entry of a seemingly failing franchise that already ditched its two original leads somehow manage to endear himself to viewers so much over the course of a single film in which he only plays a supporting role? The answer is very simple, Han won audiences over just by being a really cool character. Han doesn't embody any of the typical stereotypes regarding Asians that you often see in Hollywood films. He isn't an academic genius or nerd, he doesn't do kung fu, and he doesn't have a stereotypical accent. There aren't any of the traits present that are usually there to define an Asian-American

character in a Hollywood movie, he's just a charismatic rogue much in the same vein as another famous cinematic Han, Solo.

Han being a character who is explicitly not defined by his Asian-American heritage brings back to mind Roger Ebert's argument with the audience member at the premiere of *Better Luck Tomorrow*. Is it necessary for an Asian-American filmmaker to make their art about the experience of being Asian-American? Does one Asian-American character have to represent every Asian-American? Is Justin Lin obligated to make race a major factor in all of his films so as to remain authentic to his Asian-American, as well as independent film roots? My answer would be, in this case, the same as Ebert's, let the artist make his art, it's his art, and if he wasn't Asian, the question wouldn't even be asked. *Tokyo Drift* may not be that deep a film (it is after all, still a *Fast and Furious* movie), but I would say there's inherent value in having an Asian-American director tell a story about Asia, even if it's not necessarily the main focus of the film.

Shortly after the release of *Tokyo Drift*, Justin Lin and Sung Kang stopped by an Arby's in the middle of a parade in San Francisco. As the two entered the restaurant, Kang was "mobbed by a group of Latino kids yelling 'Han! Han!'" (Saito, 2014). Lin, who despite the immediate success of *Tokyo Drift*, had turned down the opportunity to direct the fourth entry in the series, was affected by the moment. In seeing these kids interact with Kang so positively, Lin realized the true importance of what he made and the impact he could continue to have, and decided then that he would direct *Fast & Furious*. On the positive reception of the Han character, Lin said, "It's not a revolution or anything -- it's winning one gunfight, not the war. But it's important. Little by little it adds up." (Yang). Lin may not have been able to make a blockbuster with an Asian American lead like he intended, but much like Vin Diesel did with bringing his own

unique cultural perspective to *Los Bandoleros*, Lin did what he could do under studio pressure, and he got his Asian breakout character in there. It doesn't seem like a lot, but it is indeed a small victory, and they do indeed add up.

Conclusion

After the release and massive success of *Fast & Furious*, there was no way for the franchise to go anywhere but bigger, which is exactly what *Fast Five* did. In fact, the film went so big that it abandoned its street racing roots almost altogether. Where the first three films in the series are relatively low stakes crime dramas set in the world of street racing, Justin Lin's *Fast Five* is a full on action epic centered around a massive bank heist perpetrated by Dominic Toretto and his crew composed of nearly every major protagonist in the series. Instead of any actual street racing, the action in *Fast Five* consists of elaborately staged on-foot chases, large scale shootouts with DSS agents, and a climax involving cars dragging a gigantic vault carrying $100 million through the streets of Rio de Janeiro and causing an unprecedented amount of wanton destruction along the way.

This shift in focus was intentional on the part of Universal Studios, who sought to bring more global appeal to the series by shying away from the car culture that was such an integral part of the first couple of entries. Former Universal Pictures chairman Adam Fogelson said of the transitional nature of *Fast Five*, "The question putting Fast Five and Fast Six together for us was: Can we take it out of being a pure car culture movie… We wanted to see if we could raise it out of about racing and make car driving ability just a part of the movie" (Finke, 2011). This is of course somewhat understandable, as the franchise grows in popularity so does the urge to make it more broadly appealing, but to jettison such a core subcultural aspect of these movies in an attempt to make them more palatable for a wider audience (not that the series even necessarily needed a change in that area, the first four films all did well financially on an international level) does leave a bad taste in my mouth.

The next two films in the series continue on this trajectory of change and double down even more on the excess. *Fast & Furious 6* (2013), Justin Lin's fourth franchise outing, no longer bears any resemblance to the relative scrappiness of the first film. Every character is now essentially superhuman and can perform ridiculous physics defying feats that you might see in one of the later *Die Hard* movies. Suddenly our heroes are jumping off overpasses from moving cars onto other moving cars, battling a tank speeding down a crowded highway, and having intricately choreographed martial arts fights. Interestingly enough, as the action scenes are ramped up to an insane degree, the melodrama is as well. Not only is Dominic Toretto taking down an enormous cargo airplane by attaching cars to the outside of it before it can take off, he's also dealing with the return of his presumed dead girlfriend Letty who now has amnesia and is allied with mercenaries attempting to kill him. Each *Fast and Furious* movie after this one has a similarly insane soap opera-esque twist like the aforementioned amnesia one, whether it be the surprise introduction of Dominic's evil brother played by John Cena in *F9: The Fast Saga* (2021) or Dominic seemingly betraying his crew in *The Fate of the Furious* (2017), to the point where the drama almost threatens to overtake the action. Although they did occasionally occur in the first four films, every one of the movies from *Fast Five* on has at least three scenes in which Dominic monologues about the importance of family and sticking together and teamwork and whatnot. These themes have definitely been present since the start of the series, but now they've become just as central to the franchise as the cars. In fact, one could even say that the idea of "family" in these movies have essentially replaced the role the street racing culture once played in the series. Where the street racing scene was once the source of the "found family" aspect in the first few entries, it has since grown into the main emotional drive of the films on its own, and

is barely linked to racing anymore, instead opting for a more broadly relatable emotional approach.

It's all very odd the way this series continues to shift gears in so many unexpected ways with each successive film, but it all seems to come down to the earlier quote by Adam Fogelson about trying to attain a larger international audience. The further these films stray from cars and the further they lean into being pure action movies, the more successful they become. In spite of the car culture element (and the inherent diversity that comes along with it) being suppressed in recent entries, I would say that the series is actually more diverse than ever, and honestly probably in a more meaningful way than in the past.

With the tragic passing of Paul Walker, the series was left with no white lead characters, and has been this way since *The Fate of the Furious*. It is, to my knowledge, the only multi-billion dollar Hollywood franchise to feature an entirely non-white main cast. That alone is noteworthy, think about those kids mobbing Sung Kang at Arby's, now they have an entire cast of characters who don't look like any other blockbuster heroes to idolize. As the series has gone on, it may have lost sight of what it originally was, but here I'm not so sure that's a bad thing. Where the first film's show of diversity was rooted in the setting of the Los Angeles street racing scene, the new films, not being tethered to that anymore, do eventually open it up to new possibilities. Now that the entire cast are globetrotting superspies, there are no longer any boundaries, no more crews divided by race, the series has become a big bombastic melting pot, and I would say it's much better for it. It goes without saying that some of the thornier aspects of the series have been sanitized when it comes to race, and I'm sure there's a case to be made for why this is a bad thing, but I think it's more complicated than being strictly a good thing or a bad thing. Ultimately these films are pieces of art, and I don't see any need for them to fit cleanly

into any boxes, like I said in the introduction, it's these contradictions that make the series interesting to analyze. It may very well be one of Hanif Kureishi's "cheering fictions", but who's to say that we don't need a cheering fiction now and then?

Filmography

Asterisks indicate in-depth analysis.

- *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915)
- *The Yakuza* (Pollack, 1974)
- *Alien* (Scott, 1979)
- *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Frears, 1985)
- *Do the Right Thing* (Lee, 1989)
- *Multi-Facial* (Diesel, 1995)
- *Romeo Must Die* (Bartkowiak, 2000)
- *The Fast and the Furious* (Cohen, 2001)*
- *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Lin, 2002)
- *2 Fast 2 Furious* (Singleton, 2003)
- *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (Lin, 2006)*
- *Los Bandoleros* (Diesel, 2009)
- *Fast & Furious* (Lin, 2009)*
- *Fast Five* (Lin, 2011)
- *Fast & Furious 6* (Lin, 2013)
- *Furious 7* (Wan, 2015)
- *The Fate of the Furious* (Gray, 2017)
- *F9: The Fast Saga* (Lin, 2021)

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