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At Any Price Dir. by Ramin Bahrani (review)

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Media Reviews

At Any Price. Dir. Ramin Bahrani. Sony Pictures Classics, 2012.

Marketed as a movie about contemporary farming families and practices, *At Any Price* instead unfolds as a crime drama projected onto the landscape of a Decatur, Iowa, summer. Henry Whipple (Dennis Quaid), patriarch of Whipple and Sons, is vying for the top spot as the major farming operation in a four county region. His hope: to create a legacy for his sons, whether they want it or not. One son has abandoned Iowa altogether while the other, Dean (Zac Efron), dreams of racecar driving. When the rise of rival Jim Johnson (Clancy Brown) turns Henry to shady business dealings, the narrative tests the Whipple family to see if they will fight for their top spot at any price.

The film firmly embeds the viewer in midwestern archetypes by opening with lovely historical black and white photos of farmers past. Iowa is further established through a proliferation of John Deere tractors—as both toys and machinery—as well as cornfields, corn mailboxes, and corn Christmas lights. Quaid’s performance of Henry also embodies midwestern “nice,” even as he becomes a desperate man singly focused on farming as a means of doing right by, and for, his sons. (Imagine Ferris Bueller’s dad with a minor drug habit.) This commitment to family values juxtaposed with bad decisions provides the basis for the film, as Henry and Dean struggle with what seems like a typically midwestern father-son relationship: Henry wants Dean to stay in the small town and take over the farming business, while Dean yearns for a more exciting life on the outside. Although somewhat removed from Dean’s life, Henry supports Dean’s ambitions, and Henry’s father Cliff (Red West) appears sporadically to remind Henry of the importance of maintaining the Whipple legacy. Even Henry’s wife Irene (Kim Dickens, who is sorely underutilized here)

sternly reminds him of their “family first” policy when he confesses that Dean committed a murder that he helped conceal.

As such, just beneath the family soil lurk numerous secrets that run the gamut from illegal seed reselling to adultery to murder. The film foregrounds Henry’s questionable practices when he approaches a family at their father’s funeral about their land. Soon thereafter, another farmer, Byron (Chelcie Ross), reveals the illegal GMO (genetically modified organism) seed activities that bind the two. Byron needs a job; Henry is reluctant to hire him; and Byron turns him over to the feds. Despite these characters’ shared criminal histories, and like an urban crime drama, their allegiances are tested when money is tight. Simultaneously, turf battles between Henry and Jim Johnson and sons for “ownership” of the block drive the story and lead to Dean’s eventual vigilantism: he takes it upon himself to uncover who reported his father. False information leads Dean to murder the wrong man, resulting in a family coverup. Paradoxically, this family secret turns Dean into a rising star in the farm community; suddenly the Whipples are back on top, and business is better than ever.

While this film purports to examine the tension between family farmers and agribusiness giants like Monsanto (the clear referent for the movie’s fictional Liberty Seeds), *At Any Price* sacrifices the depth of midwestern family, farmland, and tradition for narrative contrivances. However, Dean’s girlfriend Cadence (Maika Monroe) momentarily provides a bright spot in the film when it seems she may take over duties at Whipple and Sons (perhaps a more interesting premise than the one that plays out). Cadence is young, confident, smart, and sexy, and she understands how to speak the language of Henry’s clients. She also appreciates the Whipples’ supportiveness, since her unstable family life revolves around meth culture. Unfortunately these storylines, which provide potential insight into the struggles young women face in rural Iowa, remain undeveloped, and Cadence is eventually reduced to an inconsequential ex-girlfriend.

Just as weather can be incorporated into most conversations in the Midwest, the land also has a voice that speaks back. In the past decade, the commitment to overfarming has resulted in mass flooding and erosion. GMOs remain a hotly contested issue. Laws are created to protect companies that create and sell them—rather than the farmers who use them—even as GMOs are being more readily linked to environmental problems. Any of these issues would be interesting to explore in a fictional narrative about family farming and agribusiness giants. Instead, family and territory wars

drive *At Any Price* in a way that rings false for the region. It seems Dean is the byproduct of his father's own corrupt seed (they even share a mistress), but like a new Godfather of the four county area, Dean comes out on top ready to secure the legacy of Whipple and Sons for the foreseeable future.

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COLUMBIA COLLEGE

Chicago

Gran Torino. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Warner Bros., 2008.

Detroit's Hmong immigrant community plays a prominent role in Clint Eastwood's film *Gran Torino*. Clint Eastwood directs and stars as Walt Kowalski, a receding man in a longtime receding city that is now peopled with faces from "far away" lands. As a veteran and retired autoworker facing the end of his life, Walt eventually finds purpose in a friendship with a teenage Hmong neighbor who was caught while attempting to steal Walt's prized *Gran Torino*. Walt initially is shown to be ill at ease in his crime-ridden, increasingly nonwhite neighborhood. As the narrative unfolds, Walt confronts his racist demons and mentors a young man, Thao (Bee Vang), in the supposed virtues of white working class masculinity while Walt also comes to terms with his personal failings, which are partially rooted in the same racial and gendered paradigm.

The relationship between Walt and Thao creates a compelling, poignant, and rich viewing experience but one that does not serve real engagement with the Hmong American community. Eastwood's celebrated direction and Nick Schenk's award winning script actually flatten the Hmong characters, as the fulfillment of the white midwestern protagonist's last hurrah in life remains the film's focus. Perpetually in warrior mode, Walt responds to neighborhood crises by grabbing his gun and slinging racial epithets in all directions.

Potential violence and crime abound in Walt's racially diverse neighborhood within the urban Midwest. He rescues Sue (Ahney Her), Thao's sister, from probable assault at the hands of some black teenagers—the only African Americans to appear in this Detroit-based film. A local Hmong gang pushes Thao into a doomed initial ritual that involves stealing Walt's *Gran Torino* and that results in Thao's narrow escape from Walt and his rifle. Despite being angry with Thao after the attempted robbery, Walt grudge-