

Episode 20: The Heart and Soul of the Fast and Furious Saga

We're on the 20th episode of this season, which is incredible. Normally when we hit a nice round number like this, I like to choose something that's celebrating an anniversary for the symmetry. But between season 1 and 2 we're 35 episodes deep and I haven't yet done an episode one of my great passions: The Fast and Furious saga.

"But Alex," I hear you cry, "You've talked about the Fast and Furious movies so much. Like literally constantly. Surely you've done an episode on them." And look, you're half-right – these big stupid action films about Vin Diesel driving cars into buildings come up a lot when I talk about action movies because at this point, they're the cream of the crop when it comes to big budget, big explosion, blockbuster deliciousness. But a franchise this large and this choc-full of content needs its own episode.

So, despite the fact that I've talked about these movies when talking about everything from big hunky action man bodies to finding joy in the stupid, I have not actually talked about these films from the angle I usually do when I'm just yelling about them in the pub. Time to rectify that, I think.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner – the podcast edition – and today, I'm thinking about The Fast and Furious franchise.

Like I said in the beginning, there's about a million angles you can approach this franchise from. Contrary to the arguments I often have with film nerds, not all incredible action movies have to be masterpieces of story telling in order to be worthy of a good solid geeze under the microscope. And I've really picked at them in a couple of different ways. I've talked about the sexless, Ken doll body of the American action hero and his big punchy biceps. A worthy topic to be sure – particularly for a film franchise that has both Vin Diesel and The Rock in it. I've talked about the macho boy punching contest that means none of them can lose a fight. I've talked about the way they try to make hacking interesting, staying true to the ultimately very boring "push button, run code, wait" nature of real life hacking but then putting the only person who knows how to do the push the button bit right in a car going 180mph while a helicopter shoots missiles at them. I've talked about the fact that I really love all these things, because part of the joy of action cinema is letting the unacknowledged silliness form part of the experience. I have also, obviously, talked about how homoerotic it is to threaten a man by putting your faces very close together and whispering "Yeah... and what are you going to do about it?" The answer is always "make him!" but never in the sexy way, although I still hold out hope.

While each of these aspects of the 9-film canon of the Fast and Furious saga is very near and dear to my heart, none of them is so important to me as the character of Han. Han Seoul-Oh (that's Seoul like the city, and Oh like Sandra, a fake name and obvious play on words) is a cool, calm, silent observer type who first appears in the third franchise instalment (and my favourite) Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift. Now, look – I realise that being like “the true pop cultural boner that I have for this movie is actually about one character” just sounds like “hmmm maybe read some fan fiction, double click your mouse and get over it” but hear me out. Han is the most interesting bit of this franchise for a few reasons – first: he's sexy. I don't mean he's hot – although that is also true, congratulations to the ageless beauty that is actor Sung Kang. I mean sexy – like confident lone cowboy, doesn't have to order at the bar cos they know him here, sits in the corner lets women come to him, kind of sexy. The kind of cool that is actually really annoying in real life, but which works perfectly cinematically because it tells you something about that character. Now, this sexiness is important, not because I think it's hot (although I do) – it's important because this is a cool Asian American character, written by a cool Asian American director in a huge American franchise movie. He's not a walking stereotype – he's part of this movie.

Which brings me to the second thing that is so very important about Han – a lot of the established rules for this franchise, including how it treats life, death, resurrection and time, are purely down to the existence of Han and the decision to mess with the timeline to keep him

present in the franchise. Which really doubles down on the sexy, in my opinion, because there's literally nothing hotter to me than fucking with the concept of death until it becomes unintelligible. Hell yeah – talk non-linear story-telling to me, baby.

Anyway, with that in mind, I thought we could spend the Fast and Furious episode of this podcast not talking about the intricate, car-based rituals men use to touch the skin of other men in these films, but instead, looking at franchise logic, cash grabs, Asian American representation and the meaning of cool. Bet you didn't see that coming. Consistent but never predictable. Let's get into it, shall we?

Ok, so let me take you back to the year 2006. I am 16 years old – I cannot drive and will not learn to do so until almost a decade later. My favourite films are Gore Verbinski's Pirates of the Caribbean, Jim Jarmusch's Coffee and Cigarettes and John Waters' Cry Baby. Needless to say, I did not care about The Fast and the Furious when it came out in 2002, and I cared even less about its sequel, 2 Fast, 2 Furious when it came out in 2003, despite Dolly Magazine telling me that Paul Walker was hot. I was too deep in my Johnny Depp phase at that point. But in 2005, because I was studying Japanese and I grew up in a town that was the site of a Japanese POW camp in the WWII, I got to go on a class exchange to Tokyo, where, as a group of small-town kids, we were given a surprising amount of freedom to just... be in the world. We didn't even do anything naughty – we just like... ate pizza late at night and went to bath houses because we were from

a place where everything shut at 5pm. Anyway, Tokyo made a huge impact on all of us, which I think is why we maybe went and saw *Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift* at our single-screen cinema when it came out the next year. There was the promise of a little glimpse of some of the coolness of the city. I remember not liking it that much – too much stuff about cars – but also having it touch some of the things that would eventually be things that I look for whenever I'm watching movies now. There's one cool guy who forms the nexus for a group of misfits to come together, hang out and get into shenanigans. And that cool guy is Han.

Tokyo Drift ostensibly follows a southern white army brat who gets sent to live with his dad in Tokyo for destroying a model home while drag racing. Sean, the white kid, is supposed to be the central player, but all the good parts of the film come from Han. He strolls through the frame, unbothered, even when in imminent danger, saying little but observing everything. Snacking, before thoughtfully delivering either a friendly joke or some silly poetic two-liner about what it means to drift a car down a mountain. He seems a little haunted, it's never specified by what but it adds some depth to his mystery as he slinks between secret clubs and yakuza dens in Tokyo's neon streets. He's the social core of the film and his death is the catalyst for everyone to finally unite and achieve victory in their battle royale of silly car driving. And you could kind of leave it at that.

In fact, everyone was completely ready to leave it at that. It was the third film in a mid-tier franchise that featured none

of the main cast. No one expected it to be successful, which perhaps explains why the studios were ready to give the film the Justin Lin to direct in the first place. Justin Lin was fresh off the Sundance success of his debut film *Better Luck Tomorrow* – he'd turned the studio's offer of *Tokyo Drift* down multiple times because he didn't like the portrayal of the Asian characters as villains. So, when he was offered more creative freedom, Lin pitched Han, a cool anti-hero/ big brother type and tagged in Sung Kang, who'd played one of the leads in *Better Luck Tomorrow*.

In an interview with *The Ringer*, Kang gives a very diplomatic take on what must have been a really frustrating pitching process. He says, "[Justin] understood we can't take it personally because they'd probably never hung out with Asian people and they don't know what a cool Asian guy is. You don't have to be a gangster or a Yakuza guy to be cool, you can just be a guy that works at a bakery [and] has fucking swagger."

The character and the film as a whole worked enough that *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* was a box office success, and a little cameo from Vin Diesel's Dominic Toretto at the end of the film opened up the door for the franchise to continue. They offered the fourth film to Lin, but having already killed off Han, he turned it down. Until a fateful trip to Arby's – I swear to God, America, you're a nation of cartoon characters. Anyway, on the way back from a road trip, Kang and Lin pulled into an Arby's and the teenagers working the counter immediately begin excitedly saying "Han! Han!" and requesting Kang's

autograph. In the Ringer interview, Lin says, "There was this huge group of people just wanting to be around him. I was sitting there looking at the scene — 'Wow, there really is a connection to this character that I never knew.'" Pre-social media, Lin hadn't realised that he'd created someone that the kids were engaging with. As they drove away, even as they were saying "It's too bad Han's dead", Lin began plotting the fourth film and Han's resurrection.

Rather than having the third film take place consecutively, Lin calls it a prequel, and arranges the next three films so they take place prior to the events of Tokyo Drift. Han goes on to play a central role in *Fast and Furious* (the fourth film, not to be confused with *The Fast and the Furious*, the first film), *Fast Five* and *Fast and Furious 6* (called thus despite the fact that only one film prior has been called *Fast and Furious*) – all of which are directed by Lin. In doing so, the character comes a fan favourite and suddenly the whole tone of the franchise changes. Dying no longer has to mean death. Film time no longer has to be linear – we could be peaking in on the narrative arc of the *Fast* saga at any point. When Michelle Rodriguez's character Letty dies in a fiery wreck, it makes complete sense that she shows up two films later with amnesia working for the bad guy. And it's why, after a brief stint away from the franchise, both Lin and Han can return for the 9th film. If you're central enough to the Toretto family, cinematic death can't touch you.

When Paul Walker tragically died in the middle of shooting the 7th film, the franchise didn't go all *Glee* and kill him

off in a car wreck. Instead, they allowed him to drive off into the sunset smiling and laughing with Dom until their paths split, and Brian is officially out of the life. Family forever – because sometimes family means not running every heist together. I'm not accusing Lin of *Pulp Fiction*-esque approaches to time – it's not that deep and I don't think Lin thinks so either – but I'm not sure how that franchise would have dealt with the real-life death of a central player without already having this approach to time, space, death and grief. While Lin didn't direct the 7th film, his gentle fiddling with timeline prior to resurrect multiple characters (especially Han) and actually create a diverse and interesting cast, meant that by the time tragedy actually happened, the franchise was able to do something meaningful and in character with the end of the film. The resurrection of Han changes the whole structure of the franchise. Even though it remains as bombastic and silly as ever, it's granted a complex emotional life.

Now, because I did not get a chance to see the 9th film before our state was plunged into lockdown, I'm not going to go too deep into the Justice for Han campaign, but I will give a brief summary. Essentially, in the 8th film, Han's killer is introduced as a potential addition to the Toretto family. Fans, including a lot of film critics, were upset at this betrayal, and separately took to Twitter to voice their grievances. It wasn't a targeted campaign, but it had the desired effect and as mentioned, Han was resurrected for a second time. Which brings me to the incredible universal appeal of Han.

One of the things I really like about Han

is that he's never an Asian stereotype. I also think it's really interesting that this is so conscious on the behalf of Justin Lin, that it has been referred to in-story. There's a really great scene in the 6th film where Han and Tyrese Gibson's character Roman chase down a bad guy. Roman has already joked that the bad guy team are a less good-looking rip off of Dominic Toretto's Team of Car-Driving Bad-Asses. And when Roman and Han finally catch up to the bad guy, he's already in the process of taking down three cops with some obvious martial arts skills. When Roman and Han try and take him with big swinging street brawl punches, they're swiftly eliminated with all the grace of a guy who's probably won some tournaments prior to his life of crime. He wipes the floor with not only Han but Roman too. As he disappears into the crowd the pair agree never to speak of it again. Both Roman (a black man) and Han are allowed in on a joke usually reserved for white characters, and Han escapes a fate so often assigned to other Asian main characters where, regardless of background, they manage to pull some kung fu/ karate/ jiu jitsu combo out of their ass.

We're starting to see Asian American men as romantic leads more and more – it's obviously not common, or I wouldn't feel the need to point out that there'd been a visible shift. But I can think of a couple of instances recently of Asian leading men being portrayed as desirable and hot, which is a significant departure from previous portrayals as completely sexless. I think action cinema presents a different kind of problem for Asian American actors, which is that American audiences who have grown up on the

kung fu boom of the 1970s are used to seeing a specific type of Asian character in an action setting – something like a Bruce Lee, with precise and controlled movements, the grace of a long-studied practice and the cool of a guy who could send you off your feet with a well-placed kick. Obviously, this skill set exists, but it belongs to a very specific type of actor – your Jackie Chans, or Donny Yens of the world. Martial artists firsts, actors second, particularly in Yen's case. What Justin Lin has achieved with the creation of Han is the kind of outlaw character that's only recently become accessible to any actors of colour, let alone Asian American actors. He's above the law because he's so likeable and cool, the law couldn't touch him if they tried. He's got friends in all the right low places, and he's so good in any environment, that he doesn't need to conform to the demands of Asian stereotypes. And he especially doesn't need to do martial arts. He can just drive cars and eat chips.

In his internationally connected band of thieves, he's also granted that rarest of things – true love. He finds his criminal wife in Gisele (played by Gal Gadot) and they have my favourite type of understated criminal romance – after careful observation of each other, he decides she could kill him and he's into that, and she decides she's into the fact that he's into that, and they both decide they would die for each other. Badabing, badaboom, sexual tension, romance. That's the formula baby! While this shouldn't be something that's radical, Den of Geek points out that much was made of Jackie Chan's interracial kiss in *The Spy Next Door* in 2010. Chan claimed it was his first on screen kiss and he'd

made over 100 films at that point. Han and Gisele got together on screen in 2009, and their romance continued until Gisele sacrifices herself to save him in the 6th film. It's the kind of perfect, stupid action romance that is again, normally reserved for white guys, but which so perfectly fits for Lin's vision of cool and sexy Asian guy.

Look, I know that representation isn't the be all and end all of politics. I'm aware. But there's something about an Asian American director rewriting the rules of a whole franchise to make his Asian American colleague a cool, sexy outlaw guy that just really tickles me. I think because it actually made the films better. The existence of Han significantly improves the Fast saga, and that's a wonderful example of beating the studios at their own game.

Well, that was the official Fast and Furious episode. I just want to say one final thing – Dominic Toretto's conception of 'family' is inherently queer, and if I ever return to this subject, that's the episode I'm going to write. I hope all of my friends are looking forward to me mumbling "you don't turn your back on family" at any given moment for the rest of their lives. If you would like to be part of my family, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

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Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))

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