

Gran Torino: What school have film writers and directors passed through?

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Directed by Clint Eastwood, screenplay by Nick Schenk

In Clint Eastwood's newest film, the actor-director plays a retired auto worker, Walt Kowalski, who's chosen to go on living in his old, seriously deteriorating neighborhood in metropolitan Detroit. With his beloved wife dead, Walt is happy to be estranged from nearly everyone: his two self-involved sons and their families; a young Catholic priest whom he considers ignorant about the important questions in life ("I confess that I have no desire to confess to a boy just out of the seminary!"); and his new next-door neighbors, a Hmong family (from Southeast Asia), at whom he mutters racial slurs.

But, then, Walt mutters or growls at almost everyone. Aside from his wife, safely deceased, no one finds favor with him. When a young neighbor, Thao (Bee Vang), attempts (and fails) to steal his prized 1972 Gran Torino, as part of the youth's reluctant initiation into a Hmong street gang, Kowalski has even more reason to be angry. When the thugs return for Thao, he and his sister Sue (Ahney Her) resist their efforts to recruit him. The altercation spills over onto Walt's property and the latter intervenes, pointing his M-1 rifle at the gang members and, baring his teeth, furiously tells them to "Get off my lawn."

More or less against his will, Kowalski becomes involved with his Hmong neighbors and their friends and relatives. He becomes friendly with independent, feisty Sue, who serves as something of a guide and translator. The Hmong families bring him food and flowers, and he's also asked to put Thao to work as a penalty for attempting to steal the Gran Torino.

In the course of his growing relationship with Sue and Thao, as well as several conversations with the priest (Christopher Carley), we learn a little bit about Kowalski, his 30 years in a Ford plant and his brutal experiences in the Korean War ("What was it like to kill a man?" "You don't wanna know"). In the end, a confrontation with the gang becomes inevitable.

Even assuming the best intentions on everyone's part, the

film is crudely done. Kowalski is largely a caricature of a working class figure. There are sequences so poorly written and performed (Kowalski's encounter with three young black men on a street corner, scenes in a local barber shop, Thao's hiring at a construction site), they simply make you wince with embarrassment. The characterization of the priest is dreadfully flat. Kowalski's own family and the Hmong gang are largely cartoonish, the one in its selfishness and the other in its unexplained monstrosity.

A couple of things need to be said about the steady stream of racial and ethnic epithets that pour from the mouth of Eastwood's character. Whatever the screenwriter and director may think they're doing (inflicting a blow against "political correctness," encouraging everyone to "lighten up" about such things), the results are inevitably more complex. Kowalski's delight in calling other people names is not so much about racism, although there is that element, as it is about his heartfelt conviction that he's the only one who 'tells it like it is,' who doesn't pull his punches. It's the egoism, self-satisfaction and misanthropy that are especially unpleasant. Kowalski has no use for "gooks," "zipperheads," "spooks" or anyone else, for that matter. This is the rancid "Don't tread on me" individualism that we've encountered too often in Eastwood's films, and that quality is never seriously criticized or repudiated in *Gran Torino*.

As we commented in a review of *Million Dollar Baby* in 2005: "The filmmaker's ... conception of a moral struggle...is remarkably limited. The characters Eastwood plays are not answerable to anyone, except themselves. As long as they pull a long face, furrow their brows and look pained after the fact, they are permitted to commit any number of crimes...."

"Eastwood's characters...take matters into their own hands and then go about their business, convinced of their essential rightness, with no indication that they would not carry out the same act in the future. In other words, as he mows you down, Eastwood tells you, with a grimace, 'This will hurt me more than it will hurt you.' "

Events take a somewhat unusual turn in *Gran* (although the “surprise” denouement can be spotted some distance away), but the essential anti-social point, that any action is available to Eastwood’s character because he *individually* is permitted to judge others and punish them, as long as he appears to suffer for his deeds, still applies.

Of course, something *could* have been made out of this story. Angry, embittered workers with terrible prejudices exist. Decaying urban neighborhoods abound, into many of which minority or immigrant populations have flowed. America is a cauldron of social tensions.

The screenwriter, Nick Schenk, asserts that he wrote the piece based on conversations with older workers in a bar, and there is no reason to disbelieve him. But it’s all treated without social or historical context.

Unwittingly, perhaps, Schenk hints at significant social phenomena. Workers of Kowalski’s generation, maturing in the Cold War, many serving in Korea, members of unions now purged of left-wing elements and presided over by deeply reactionary bureaucrats, were susceptible to anti-communism and, in some cases, racism and chauvinism.

Gran Torino also provides glimpses of the Detroit area, including devastated Highland Park (see *The rise and fall of Highland Park, Michigan*), although the picture is somewhat sanitized. (And, it must be said, the filmmakers don’t seem particularly disturbed by the wretchedness they do encounter.)

The various elements are never brought together. A movie dedicated essentially to endorsing Kowalski’s absolute moral “independence”—with a few reservations—is not likely to be sensitive to the link between “rugged individualism,” hostility to socialism, anti-immigrant sentiment and the precipitous decline in the living standards and conditions of broad layers of the American people!

In particular, the notion that owning a gun and being willing to point it at someone is a means of social resistance has been thoroughly disproved by the actual fate of the American working population over the past 20 or 30 years. Because of the lack of an anti-capitalist political perspective, nowhere in the advanced industrial world have workers proven more vulnerable to the attacks of the employers and governments, a vulnerability materialized in the sharpest and most malignant form by the physical decay of cities such as Detroit.

Unfortunately, none of this is likely to occur to Schenk or Eastwood. Their intentions may be generally decent, but what do they bring to this project?

Schenk is a newcomer, who’s *torino* of age in the past period of political reaction and stagnation. He doesn’t portray the change in Kowalski’s attitudes as the outcome of a social or class experience, but the product, more or less, of happenstance—but then how many mass struggles has his generation witnessed? Presumably he’d like to see a change of heart in the Kowalskis he encounters, but can’t yet see that as resulting organically from a widespread popular radicalization, which will not leave the older generation untouched. The gaping holes and implausibilities in his screenplay are real, but they reflect social difficulty and contradiction, not simply his own personal failings.

Born in 1930, Eastwood grew up in the Cold War himself and served in the military during the bloody Korean conflict, although he never saw action. He became a television actor in the 1950s and began directing feature films in 1971. Although a genuine presence on screen, Eastwood is a product of a fundamentally bad school, the Hollywood studio system in decline. There are interesting, amusing or truthful moments in many of his 30 or so films (and several are impressive from beginning to end), but his basically shallow, pragmatic view of American society and behavior inhibits him from consistently substantial work. Any sense of historical or social development is missing. The working class is conceived of as the sum total of resentful, passive or active-courageous individuals, but never as a social force with its own specific, law-governed character.

The lighter moments in *Gran Torino* are its most watchable: the scenes of Kowalski and Sue together, a party next door, his delight in the food and female attention. We know all the time, however, that the Eastwood character will be called on to do something “heroic” before the film is over; he can’t help himself. The filmmaker isn’t able simply to look at life and treat it in a careful and meaningful manner. He has to solve everybody’s problems single-handedly, which is to say, in reality, he solves nothing at all.



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