Reflections on Gran Torino
Umberto Curi

“Every tragedy falls into two parts – the Complication and the Unravelling or Denouement. The Complication comprises events outside the play, and often some of those within it; the rest is the Unravelling. By the Complication (desis) I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the transformation (metabasis) to prosperity or adversity. The Unravelling (lysis) is that which extends from the beginning of this transformation till the end.”

While some writers may be very good at constructing the first part, that is, at weaving the “complication,” they often fail lamentably when it comes to the “unravelling” (Ibid., XVIII, 1456a). For if the action is to “work” as a whole, and produce the “pathetic” effects which it is supposed to provoke, the lysis must satisfy certain definite requirements, whether with respect to the modes and forms of the action, or to the “temporal dimensions” of the denouement or unravelling. Firstly, it is imperative that the “events” from which the story is constructed are internally connected with one another according to relations of probability and necessity. In fact, one can even say that an “impossible probability” is preferable to something possible that nevertheless appears improbable (Ibid., XXIV, 1460a). Secondly, the passage from the first part to the second part of the action cannot appear as an arbitrary result of chance, but should come about through a transformation or turning point. This transformation may involve a “reversal,” or a “recognition,” or in some cases both. Finally, and more importantly, the “unravelling” of the “complication” must occur in an unforeseeable manner, or contrary to expectation (para ten doxan) (IX, 1452a). In fact, the more unpredictable the transformation through which the passage from the first to the second part of the narrative is effected, the more powerful the resulting pathos. On the other hand, this transition must respect the general rule of probability or necessity, if we are to avoid the temptation to resolve the complication in a purely external fashion (by appeal to a deus ex machina for example), one which does not spring directly from the interconnected “events” already presented. Good writers can be recognised from their capacity to unite aspects which are otherwise difficult, if

1 Aristotle, Poetics, XVIII, 1455b.
not actually impossible, to combine. In short, a good writer will be able to generate the unexpected from the necessary. And to do so in such a way that the spectators are astounded by what they witness without feeling that it is intrinsically implausible or improbable. The good writer will contrive to present the development of events in such a way that the passage from the first to the second part of the action will reveal itself as a true change of state, and will ensure that the latter respects the criteria of probability or necessity, even though it challenges our expectations.

This achievement is, in short, a small miracle, one which Aristotle describes in considerable detail and with particular reference to tragedy, but which may also be extended to any form of significant story (mythos). A miracle, then, but one that must nonetheless be “necessary” if the narrative is to produce the “pleasure” that is appropriate to it, and even more if it is to realise the general end to which poiesis is oriented, namely that of arousing pathetic, rather than merely superficial, responses in the spectator. Clint Eastwood has achieved just such a small miracle with his most recent film, which is carefully (even if not expressly or consciously) constructed in accordance with Aristotelian criteria, and is thus capable of producing a powerful emotional effect upon the viewer. The complication which is created in the first part of the film seems to retrace – and to a certain extent deliberately reproduces – the sort of themes and situations encountered in numerous films of the last fifty years. The film presents us with an ageing man who has witnessed the horrors of the Korean War, during which he also compromised himself by committing terrible atrocities, such as the killing of unarmed individuals who were ready to surrender; he now lives alone after the death of his wife, surrounded by the ineradicable memories of that earlier but decisive period of his life. So much is clear from the stars and stripes that permanently festoons the front porch of his house, the chest full of mementos connected with the war, the heavy rifle that he always has to hand so that he can ferociously defend his territory and meagre belongings if necessary. But an even more striking indication of this is the way in which he relates to others: intractable with his children, cantankerous towards his grandchildren, fractious in relation to the young priest, hostile above all to the “gooks” that populate the insalubrious neighbourhood in which he lives, at ease only in the argumentative company of the Italian-American barber with whom he exchanges biting sarcastic but ultimately friendly insults. In short, a man hardened by pain, grief and loneliness, clenched within himself like the fist he is prepared to use – and sometimes ruthlessly does use – against those who seem to him to represent the degradation of a world to which he refuses to belong. The inanimate “counterpart” of his own temperament is the car which he jealously protects in his garage: an old model, lovingly polished and maintained, but also kept under wraps, safe from exposure to the dangers of “real life.” This is the “Gran Torino” which gives the film its title, and reflects his fifty years of labour as a worker on the assembly line. In more general terms, the car emerges as a symbol of his real existence, along with his desiccated flesh, the beer cans, the cigarettes and tobacco, the coughing fits in which he spits up blood, his obsessive concern for the tiny lawn in front of his house. The isolated and meaningless routine of this antiseptic existence is interrupted by an unexpected and gradually flowering relationship with his two young Asian neighbours, Sue and Thao. Encouraged above all by the affectionate initiative of the young girl, the life of the protagonist also starts to enter a new phase through a process of mutual learning in relation to the young man who is temporarily entrusted to his care and supervision. Day by day,
under the severe surveillance of this irritable character of Polish origin, Thao becomes a man, acquiring a dignity and personality of his own, through the work that he must perform for his difficult neighbour. And Walt in turn is called upon to play a paternal role that he is aware of having neglected in his earlier life, and learns through the youth in his care to open up to the world and his fellow human beings, learns to enjoy the exotic food with which his new neighbours insist on regaling him, learns to respect the ways and customs of this microcosm of Asian culture and society, whose members he had previously observed solely from behind his gun-sights. Above all, he learns to open himself up to sentiments with which he is quite unfamiliar, or which he had long since forgotten, thus discovering something that he had never really managed to experience before – a family, in the sense of a site of genuine feelings, of authentic relationships, of free and mutual giving, rather than an environment characterised by hypocrisy and desperate egotism. And he finds this family amongst the very people who for years had only reminded him of the “gooks” whom he had once so bitterly fought. One can thus understand the violent and apparently uncontrollable rage he feels when an odious gang of hooligans plays havoc with the life of his young Asian friends – by beating and humiliating Thao, and by abusing and violating Sue.

We have thus, up to this point, been presented with the “complication.” This is where the writer-director must confront the problem of introducing the “unraveling,” of constructing the transition from the extended first part of the action, which we must admit has been presented in rather conventional, even bland, terms, to the second part where the situation is decisively resolved. Here we must be presented with the metabasis, the radical transformation or turning point which is to accomplish the transition from the desis to the lysis. If this is to “work” properly and to involve the spectator or viewer in a authentically pathetic manner, it is clear that the transition should appear credible or probable, but also transpire in a way that counters our expectations. We require something that is not merely adventitious, but springs from the structure of events that have already been presented, something that is capable of subverting the horizon of expectation and producing a profound affective response as well.

This is the “small miracle” to which we alluded earlier. We could also put this in a way that sounds rather less grand or academic: while the viewer might well have expected the arrival of Inspector Callaghan here (the figure which Eastwood has played in a number of celebrated films from the earlier part of his career when he was known solely as an actor), we are suddenly and unexpectedly presented with the figure of Christ instead. Rather than seizing his gun in order to exterminate the gang of criminals responsible for the despicable crimes we have witnessed, Walt offers himself up to their lethal discharge of their weapons, thus facilitating the eventual arrest of the perpetrators, without spilling any blood other than his own. In becoming a deliberate sacrificial victim, a ransom for the young Asians who have been terrorised, the ageing Pole has also settled accounts with his own past. In a supreme act of love, he finally exorcises the spectres that have obsessed him for over fifty years. His legs unsteady, his lungs devastated by incurable disease, his shoulders weakened with age, he bears the full burden of a redemption which, in various ways, involves the entire microcosm represented in the film.

Above all, with this highly symbolic death – his body stretched out on the ground, after the final bout of gunfire, in the unmistakable form of a cross – he
attains the peace which he has sought for so long. As he takes his leave of the priest after confession Walt himself claims that he has now truly found peace. The act of vengeance, the terrible law of retaliation, the violent response to original violence, the cold demand of an eye for an eye – none of this affords a real escape from the miseries of a human condition that is deeply and intrinsically marked by suffering. The path of salvation, which is hard and difficult, wearisome and unyielding, is that which responds to hate with love, which reacts to brutality with a readiness for self-sacrifice. As we read in the Gospel:

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil [...] Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, [...] pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." 2

The same, intensely contrarian, relationship which Christ here proclaims in relation to the Jewish Law is paralleled in the film by the contrast between the expectations (and desires) of the viewer– who would like to see a redde rationem inspired by the principle of remorseless punishment for the guilty – and the ending which Eastwood actually contrives. It is all over with avenging angels, with "do-it-yourself" justice, with the spiral of violence in which spilt blood cries out in turn for more blood in an ever-increasing and interminable reproduction of grief and suffering. Walt bears on his shoulders the pain of the world, sheds his own blood in order that no further blood be shed. Like the “model” whose nonetheless incomparable exemplum he undertakes to repeat, Walt’s death may at least offer partial redemption from the misery of the little world he knows, restoring dignity and self-respect to young Sue, helping to free Thao from his adolescent shyness and timidity, bringing a glimmer of life back into an anonymous suburban environment which seems abandoned by human beings and God alike.

At the beginning of the film we heard the young priest speak at the funeral of Walt’s wife, drawing blandly on the easy repertoire of comfort and condolence that he had learnt at the Seminary. In the epilogue of the film his words are confirmed, but now with the full weight of human suffering and experience behind them. For death can truly be “bitter and sweet” at the same time. It can truly represent both an end (of earthly life) and a beginning (of the life beyond). It can truly act as a means of salvation. It can truly manifest itself in a way that coincides with an authentic dies natalis, a true birth, a new beginning. But for this to come about, for what would otherwise appear repugnant to reason to be realised – for life and death to become one, or better, for each to be itself only through the other – we must move from the abstract sermonising of a young priest to the lived experience of an old man who is a veteran of a bloody and pitiless war. In the epilogue Walt fundamentally confirms what he said about himself in reply to an earlier question from his new Asian friends. “You want to know what I do? I fix things.” And this is what he does. He “fixes things” – not simply in the sense of repairing things in his well-equipped workshop, but in a far more significant and comprehensive sense. In line with the Christological motif implicitly associated with the protagonist, the intervention of the old ex-soldier acts as a genuine “remedy” for the abuses and iniquities of the little world whose problems he “fixes,” offering his own

2 Matthew, V, 38–45, my emphasis.
Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino* 535

life as a necessary sacrifice in order to save a community of generous and unassuming individuals who have rescued him from his own tenacious and prolonged solitude.

In the cinematographic construction of the action in *Gran Torino* the *metabasis*, the transition from the “complication” to the “unravelling” occurs as rigorous consequence of another decisive transition, one which does not simply arise from the externally narrated facts or circumstances, but rather arises *in interiore homine*, in the tormented conscience of Walt himself. In short, the *metabasis* is simply the translation into a form of coherent conduct of the *metanoia* (literally the “transformed mentality”) which has already taken place in the heart and mind, in the *nous*, of the protagonist. The director has entrusted the depiction of this decisive transition to a scene which might initially appear as one of the least successful, because most conventional, of the entire film. I refer to the scene where Walt vents his rage for the terrible violence inflicted on Sue and punches in the glass panes of a cupboard in his home. The blood which drips from his wounded hands – which resemble veritable stigmata – teaches him how to accomplish his desire to help and restore the innocent victim of such barbarity. Not by spilling the blood of others, but by offering his own. Not by nourishing and encouraging the perverse spiral of violence, but by attempting an *imitatio Christi*. Not by reproducing in intensified form the unchecked brutality of those who had violated the young woman, but by confronting them with the most remarkable – and most powerful – alternative to violence which western culture has ever known. The offering of his body and blood, in the true and authentic eucharistic celebration of the scene in which he knowingly approaches his murderers, destroys the incubus which was oppressing the life of so many innocent individuals and threatening to ruin any genuine prospect of a hopeful future. The two images which open and close the film – that of the facade of the church and the long shot of a verdant avenue along the sea which appears to vanish in the infinite distance – also seem to capture the themes which have come to preoccupy the actor and director of this substantial cinematographic body of work for some years now. On the one hand, a problematic and controversial relationship – fractious and conflicted, but also inescapable – with the teaching and authority of the Catholic Church, represented here (as in *Million Dollar Baby*) by a very young priest. On the other hand, the question which evidently occupies, and quite probably obsesses, the thoughts of a now much older Eastwood, the question naturally provoked by his advanced age, and one which he and all of us must confront, regarding the path that awaits us once our earthly life is concluded. In addressing these questions, with great sincerity, and without diplomatic obfuscation, the actor and director clearly senses the urgency and necessity of coming to terms also, and above all, with himself, with the particular role that he has played in so many films during his long career. While he meditates in the dark, his hands still dripping with his own blood, searching for the right course of action, Walt seems to feel the need to complete – and indeed emphatically to contradict – not only his own past as a soldier in Korea, but also the *cinematographic identity* that has preceded him. It is time to settle accounts with Inspector Callaghan too, and with the coldly perfect gunman of the West that was reinvented by Sergio Leone. The bell tolls for them too. It is no longer possible to confront the question of violence by appealing to a *caricature*. The ironic tone of the insolent feats of the bounty-killer is no longer convincing. The time for invincible heroes has passed. One can no longer afford the illusion that we can restore order simply by entrusting ourselves to the exploits of characters who set
themselves up as judge and executioner. This self-representation, indulged for so long, now appears as a kind of sacrilege. If we would establish an order that is more than ephemeral, if we thirst for genuine justice, then such objectives will never be accomplished by recourse to the revolver of Callaghan, or the shotgun of the “handsome hero”: “il biondo,” as Ely Wallach calls him in The Good, the Bad and the Ugly. Death no longer appears as a matter of an almost endless settling of accounts, one which helps the protagonist to build a reputation as an invincible sharpshooter, or as part of a game one might choose to play out of some macabre taste for collecting trophies. Death now presents itself with the horrible countenance of the Gorgon – and insists on being confronted with all the gravity that is required.

As he approaches his own end, the “Texan with the ice-cold eyes” (to borrow the Italian title of another film of the “early” Eastwood) feels the need to rethink his entire existence, to retrace some meaning in that existence, one that is less spectacular but more authentic than that of the characters which have so often simply trusted in the gun to resolve their problems. And those ice-cold eyes seem to have turned instead to the frank and human emotions of one who chooses to meditate, with sincerity and serene dignity, upon the mystery of death, attended by the hope that it might somehow open out upon a road inundated in sunlight and brilliant colours, a road on which we may glimpse a car called Gran Torino.

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The Force of Non-Violence – Observations on Gran Torino
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For all its apparent simplicity, Gran Torino represents a sophisticated reflection on violence and on the possibility of breaking the mimetic cycle of violence. From the

Walt Kowalski (Clint Eastwood) is an elderly veteran of the Korean War who, after more than fifty years working on the Ford production line, lives out his retirement drinking beer on his veranda and indulging in little do-it-yourself jobs of one kind or another. A gruff and solitary widower, with children and grandchildren who are light years away from the old style American values in which he was bought up, he feels he has to defend his own “territory” (which is how he defines his home), the last bastion of the “whites” in an area now completely occupied by people of Asian origin. Initially prejudiced with regard to his immediate neighbours, he is gradually intrigued and eventually captivated by their world and mode of life. He takes young Thao under his wing – a boy who may provide fertile ground in which to leave some trace of a world that
early 1990s onwards Clint Eastwood has revisited various “genres” and stereotypes of popular American cinema, putting them into serious question from within and exposing the underlying mythology that sustains them. Whether we are thinking of the “Western” (Unforgiven, 1992), of the prize fighter as metaphor for the competitive struggle to survive (Million Dollar Baby, 2004), of war itself (Flags of Our Fathers, 2006, and Letters from Iwo Jima, 2007), Eastwood delves into the largely unexpressed hurt and pain of his characters, renouncing all attempts at the heroic sublimation or the aestheticising of violence. In the process Eastwood has finally become a principal narrator of the crisis that is fracturing the conceptions of self-identity and the imaginary paradigms of the American “dream.” In Gran Torino Eastwood effectively deconstructs his own persona and numerous roles of avenging “executioner without pity” that he had played in the earlier part of his career.

Is it possible to break the mimetic cycle of violence before it grows without any inner limit and results in the death or destruction of friend and foe alike? This is the question which obsesses Walt Kowalski, the protagonist of Gran Torino, after the daughter of the woman next door has been attacked and sexually assaulted by a local gang of hooligans. When the girl enters her family’s house, with her face covered in blood, Walt drops and breaks the glass he is holding in his hand; he goes back into his own house and punches in the glass front of a sideboard before he finally sits down on the sofa and manages to control his rage. In an ever increasing close-up the camera slowly comes to focus on Walt’s face, which now reveals an expression of profound pain rather than anger; his face is shown in half shadow, as if to suggest the torn and conflicting emotions which he is struggling to overcome within himself. The camera then moves onto his bloodied hand, before it finally takes a long overhead shot of the protagonist, as if to indicate the crushing burden of guilt and responsibility that Kowalski is beginning to understand.

Up until this point Kowalski has essentially behaved as an avenging protector. Although he had initially displayed a racist and hostile attitude to his Asian neighbours, he is gradually won over by their hospitality and generosity, by their sense of community and respect for traditions. In a sense, therefore, he has found a new family and new children (Thao and Sue). And this is why, when the family is harassed and abused by gangs of petty criminals who infest the local neighbourhood, Walt reacts as usual in the only way he knows: in terms of war and violence. In fact his personality has been traumatised by, and remains fixated upon, the horrors of the Korean in which he had participated as a soldier, and the military code still instinctively determines his behaviour. There are some frames of the film in which we could be watching an older version of the avenging Harry Callaghan, or at least of Munny, the gunman already has largely vanished – and he decides to protect him from the local gang who want to involve him in their own pursuits. It is precisely this decision, and the strong desire of the young man’s family to lead an honest and upright life that is as integrated as possible in the society in which they now live, which unleashes a chain of violence that will eventually lead Walt to an ultimate and extreme decision (for the plot of the film, cf. L. Lardieri, www.close-up.it, 16–3–2009).

A character that is typical of the earlier part of Eastwood’s cinematographic career, one that he has played in three films (once directed by himself) and that proved extremely popular with the “silent majority” of the Nixon era.
past his prime, in the 1992 film *Unforgiven*. When young Thao attempts to steal his car, or when the local hooligans create an affray in front of his house, Walt suddenly emerges from the darkness, gun in hand, his face frozen as if invaded by some ancient goddess of Rage. In such moments Walt physically incarnates the internal fantasy of war, a fantasy with which he is familiar and by which he is possessed. When he intervenes to save Sue from a threatening black gang, Walt makes, for the first time, a gesture with his thumb and forefinger that imitates the firing of a pistol. This anticipates the real pistol that will not hesitate to draw. The gesture will return, at the very end of the film, with a quite contrary meaning, and thus becomes the key to the entire film.

Up until the point when Sue is assaulted, Walt believes that he is fighting out of a sense of justice, out of solidarity towards his new friends, and does not feel he can possibly act in any other way. But when he is directly confronted with the pain and humiliation of the young girl, he realises that he has strengthened the mimetic cycle of violence, in which each step must supersede, in intensity and radicality, the offence originally suffered. His action results not in the peace and security of the young people he would protect, but in a sort of total war where the purpose for which Walt was fighting is compromised or forgotten altogether: “This is the nature of violence. Its power to turn human beings into things is a twofold one and is exercised on both parties; in different ways, but with equal intensity, it hardens the souls of those who endure it and of those who administer it.”

How then is Walt to respond to the violence inflicted on Sue? We would initially expect – like Thao who wants to avenge his sister – a final settling of accounts, a massacre of the enemy, a last definitive act from the iconic executioner. And in effect we then see Walt “preparing” – as it seems – his weapon. But in fact he is dismantling and disabling it. And our surprise is complete when, at the end of the film, he repeats the hand gesture in imitation of a pistol, but finally merely “draws” his lighter. Walt himself is shot and killed, but thanks to the testimony of the witnesses at the scene the whole gang is arrested and the cycle of vengeance and retaliation is broken. Tragic fate, primed by the endless cycle of revenge, is interrupted by Walt’s self-sacrificing act: the otherwise fatal outcome is suspended and the situation is opened up to a possibility that had earlier seemed denied.

Between the violence of the avenger and a passivity, or non-resistance, in the face of evil, Walt has managed to discover the narrow gateway: a non-violent gesture of effective resistance. The culminating moment in an action film – inevitably awaited by the viewer – will be that which unleashes the final contest between the good guy and the bad guys. But Walt opts for a kind of non-action, a suspension of action, which breaks the continuing circuit of cause and effect expected by the usual narrative convention. This non-action (the act of not shooting or, more literally, the non-act of shooting that is feigned by the finger gesture) creates a vacuum, a vortex, where the violence of the antagonist is dissipated into an unknown and unlimited realm and finds its power exhausted. Yet this non-action on Walt’s part is anything but passive.

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and accidental in character. On the contrary, it is precisely calculated, completely rooted in the specific details of the situation, carefully considered in every particular, and entirely plausible in relation both to his own mentality and that of his adversaries.

In reality, the act in question is defined by the deepest art of strategy. The old soldier inverts and transcends the art of war that is oriented to destruction, transforming it into a specific instrument of peace: the aggressors are not killed, which would merely unleash an infinite vendetta, but are targeted with precision, restrained and contained, and expelled from the territory which they would invade. The rage and the will to struggle against the oppressor and aggressor do not vanish, are not repressed and channelled into a self-destructive resentment that is worse than the original violence itself; instead they are refined and developed until the protagonist is capable of entangling his adversaries in a vicious circle of impotence and symbolic inferiority. The “suspense” of the final scene arises from this question: how will Walt’s adversaries interpret the gesture of the feigned pistol? Will they interpret it as a metaphor, as a simulation, or will they take it in a crude and literal manner? The latter is what happens. It is this reduction of an equivocal symbol to the crudity of univocal meaning which ensures their defeat, whereas the old soldier relies instead on the complex play of signs to deceive the enemy and win the final game. Walt has truly attained the deeper understanding of “life and death” about which he had asked the young priest in an earlier moment of the film, and which enables him to accomplish the unexpected gesture, to discover a possibility beyond the given situation itself.

The art of resisting evil by non-violent means is the ultimate wisdom of the old soldier. And it is also the visual and metaphorical shock with which Eastwood overturns the traditional narrative of the war film “genre” and of classical American cinema itself. If, as Deleuze reminds us, the “organic” construction of the action film inevitably converges on the violent duel of the protagonists in which the hero finally prevails over evil, then the hero here accomplishes his victory by not doing what is expected of him: he limits the duel to its purely metaphorical aspect, thus evacuating its power and meaning and deconstructing its mythology. What would have happened if Hector, instead of slaying Patroclus and insulting the corpse, had ignored the original offence and withdrawn to the walls of Troy to await the assault of the Greeks? Perhaps Achilles would never have agreed to rejoin the fight, perhaps, through such non-action, Hector would have saved the city and himself from destruction?

It is hard to forget the sequence in which – once again – Walt emerges from the night, his face divided between light and darkness, waiting for his enemies to reveal themselves one by one, for the potential witnesses to take their places in the windows, and then – having meticulously prepared the field of battle – pretends to draw his gun (in fact he merely produces his old military cigarette lighter, a symbol both of the Korean War and of war in general, and upon which the camera dwells as the blood flows from his veins). His body, viewed from high above, remains on the ground, his arms outstretched on an invisible cross, perhaps as an echo of Christ’s sacrifice and his original intention of arresting the mimetic cycle of violence. Yet Walt’s choice does not spring from any self-sacrificial passion or desire for death, but rather – once again – from a precise calculation of the forces arrayed against him and of his own condition. In planning the circumstances of his own death, Walt remains a military man who attempts to realise his necessary objective in the only
way that is possible. He is already a sick man, perhaps with only a few months to live, and he has transferred the desire for survival onto the young Thao, whom he has taken as his adopted son. The sacrifice of the hero – as it is usually portrayed on screen – is contaminated by a sort of narcissistic pleasure and exaltation of the self, or by a species of transfiguring martyrdom, like that exemplified by Gary Cooper at the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* But Walt practises a kind of self-euthanasia which is wisely deployed as an extreme act of faith rendered to life and to those he loves, thus sparing any pain that would only be useless to himself and to others (we may note that euthanasia was also an important theme in *Million Dollar Baby* of 2004). In fact a meditation on death, and on the most dignified way of dying, is a constant issue in the more recent films of Eastwood, something which violates the rule of popular cinema which demands that the end of life may only be presented as a moment in the unfolding action or as the ultimate consecration of the life of the hero.

In addition to this meditation on death and violence, the film also shows us how Walt is converted from his initial racism and brought towards a gradual discovery of the Other. The early sequences of the film alternate scenes from the funeral for Walt’s wife and the family reception that subsequently takes place in Kowalski’s house with festive scenes amongst the neighbouring Hmong family who are celebrating the birth of a child. The death which casts its pall over the Kowalski family is also moral and metaphysical in character. There is a marked distance and coldness between Walt and his own children, a true and tangible loss of a sense of genuine paternity. The Kowalski family is an image of disintegrated community, a microcosm of abandoned values, bereft of any sense of the past, of any sense of the future, dominated solely by considerations of material interest. Yet thanks to the Hmong family Walt can somehow find himself reborn in a new community, in a renewed and self-chosen paternity in relation to Thao and Sue. Thao in particular becomes his heir, the one to whom he will bequeath the mythical “Gran Torino,” the classic Ford automobile from 1972, which is also the symbol of a strong and confident America, rooted both in its own values and in a traditional working class that is proud of its own rights and its own dignity. Cherishing and constantly re-polishing his metallic object of beauty, Walt strives to hand down something beyond himself, some memory and document of a lost America. In a certain sense, the Gran Torino is an incarnation of social memory, of the Ford workers of Detroit, ravaged by globalisation and financial speculation, devastated by that loss of identity of which Walt’s own family is an appropriate symbol.

Walt’s essentially paternal relationship with Thao also provides an ironical inflection of another stereotype of the cinematic “genre” exemplified in the roles once played by Eastwood himself: the “instruction of the new recruit” where the tough but decent sergeant typically subjects his feeble young charge to a rigorous initiation into real adulthood (which effectively coincides with learning the art of killing others). In *Gran Torino* what happens is exactly the opposite. Thao is initiated into the art of not killing,

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7 *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1943, directed by Sam Wood.
8 The Hmong people inhabited the region between Laos, Southern China, and Vietnam. As allies of the Americans during the Vietnam war, they were forced to emigrate after the end of the conflict.
precisely when his desire for revenge is strongest, and the instruction here leads to the suspension and the ironical inversion of action. When Thao is entrusted to his service for a week, the first task which Walt consigns him is to count the birds in a tree, and the gesture of the boy, who squints at them while enumerating them with his index finger, is a mimetic symbol of the film, like Walt’s hand which imitates the feigned pistol.

And on the other side, thanks to Thao, Walt himself also undergoes a process of initiation with respect to the acknowledgement and the diversity of the Other. At the beginning of the film the visual and geographical panorama of the city is divided up into a plurality of non-communicating spaces where different ethnic identities is either ignored or despised. Kowalski, the last white face in an area which is now populated by people of Asian origin, is initially concerned only with ferociously defending his own identity and his own property. In the scenes where he is invited to eat with the Hmongs on his own birthday the film assumes a distinctly ethnographical tone, and involves a progressive and reciprocal discovery of alterity. The breakdown of an exclusive and obsessive sense of racial identity is the fundamental premise of the non-violent action with which Walt – in contrast with the figure of Munny in Unforgiven – succeeds in modifying his own sense of personal identity. Walt’s acknowledgement of the face of the Other is the condition for the discovery of a new image and conception of himself.

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