

***Gran Torino:***

**The old cowboy, the pretty girl and the cool car<sup>1</sup>**

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“Torn from my homelands, I was left to flee.  
Like dust in the wind, I dispersed silently”.  
— Shanyia Vang, “My name means free”

### **1. The silent diaspora**

Few ethnic groups suffered a diaspora as hard as the Hmong did, forced to abandon China, in the 18th century, and to migrate to Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, for political and territorial reasons. Between 1919 and 1921, they fought the French colonial authorities in Indochina; after the defeat of the South in the Vietnam War, they endured the revenge of the northern invaders; in 1975, in the year zero of the revolution, they were massacred by Pol Pot. As a result of all these conflicts, numerous Hmong travelled to the US and France, silently dispersing through several other countries (Vang 17-35).

The saga of the Hmong has rarely been object of the interest of the North-American cinematography. One notorious exception is the movie *The Killing Fields* (1984), directed by Roland Joffé, and winner of three Academy Awards. It denounces tyrant Pol Pot and his campaign of terror and ethnic cleansing, during the civil war. The Cambodian leader and his Khmer Rouge were responsible for mass murdering nearly two million individuals, including intellectuals, proprietors, businessmen, and Hmong anticommunists (Olson and Beal 294).

In the field of documentary, few movies approach, with scientific rigor, the challenges faced by the Hmong in the US. I highlight two, *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America* (1984), and *The Split Horn: Life of a Hmong Shaman in America* (2001), both directed by Taggart Siegel. These documentaries focus upon the life of a family, in 1984 and fifteen years

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later, allowing the audience to perceive the processes of interaction in a multicultural society, namely assimilation and reconfiguration (Marcus et al 36).

Since the movies on the Hmong culture are so rare, *Gran Torino* (2008), directed by Clint Eastwood, has the merit of drawing attention to the ways of life and challenges faced by this ethnic group. The movie focuses upon the life of a community, in contemporary Highland Park, Michigan, an area where there is a strong concentration of Asians (Adler 110). In an unprecedented situation in the history of North-American cinema, director Eastwood hired cultural consultants and Hmong actors to make this movie (Lee and Tapp). Such experience proved to be positive to the ethnic community, according to Chia Vang:

Hearing Hmong language and seeing people of multiple generations interacting in a film alongside one of Hollywood's greatest legends have brought much excitement to Hmong Americans throughout the country. The casting of Hmong Americans with little or no acting experience brought relief to Hmong American community leaders and activists who feared that Hollywood would call on established actors of Asian descent to portray their community. (Vang 160)

This movie raises several pertinent questions relating to problems and challenges originated in the interethnic dialogue; the different degrees of assimilation experienced by the older Hmong and their descendants; and the generation gap. I intend to briefly examine these issues, analyzing not only the friction resulting from differences, but also the strategies used to overcome problems in the context of what Lawrence Fuchs called "the American kaleidoscope" (Fuchs 276). In order to accomplish my objective, I resort to the movie, and to several articles by experts in the field of Film Studies and Multicultural Sociology.

## **2. The cowboy, the girl and the car**

"Oh, I've got one. A Mexican, a Jew, and a colored guy go into a bar. The bartender looks up and says 'Get the fuck out of here'" (Eastwood 5). Walt Kowalski, the protagonist of *Gran Torino*, never concludes this joke, but I suppose he knows many other racist stories and shares them with his friends. Educated in the discriminatory society of the fifties, a Korean War veteran ordered to commit atrocities, this is a man corroded by the past and disillusioned with the present. Up to a point, his racism towards all non-Whites constitutes a paradox, since he is of Polish origin, and his best friend, Martin, a barber, is an Italian American. However, even in the informal conversation between them, insults and stereotypes, seen as an assertion of masculinity, occur frequently:

Martin: There. You finally look like a human being again. You shouldn't wait so long between haircuts, you cheap son of a bitch.

Walt: Yeah. I'm surprised you're still around. I was always hoping you'd die off and they got someone in here that knew what the hell they were doing. Instead, you're just hanging around like the doo-wop dago you are.

Martin: That'll be ten bucks, Walt.

Walt: Ten bucks? Jesus Christ, Marty. What are you, half Jew or somethin'? You keep raising the damn prices all the time.

Martin: It's been ten bucks for the last five years, you hard-nosed Polack.

(Eastwood 8)

It is not difficult to imagine Walt's feelings when he becomes the only white resident in a neighborhood slowly abandoned by European Americans, due to Detroit's economic crisis. Houses are now occupied by Asian families, particularly of Hmong origin, such as the Vang Lor, who moved next door. When Walt sees them cut the neck of a live chicken, he grumbles: "Damn barbarians"; and when he sees the Lor matriarch resting on the porch, he spits on the floor, in contempt (Eastwood 3).

The Hmong family tries to be pleasant, by offering Walt flowers and presents, but he rejects the gifts, with despise. Suddenly, the situation changes and the old man is forced to interact with them, when he surprises Thao, one of the youngest Hmong, trying to steal his Ford Gran Torino, as part of the initiation ritual to be accepted in a gang. Walt had worked all his life at Ford factory and helped build this vehicle, a model produced between 1972 and 1976, aiming at the middle class (Dammann 450).

The car represents American pride, material success, masculinity and adventure. As Leslie Kendall, curator at the Petersen Automative Museum, in Los Angeles, states in a documentary that complements the movie, "cars are an extension of our personality. (...) Something we put on after we get dressed" (Eastwood 31). In this sense, Walt's powerful Gran Torino constitutes the horse of contemporary times, and he is an old cowboy, an anachronism, living in a country he no longer recognizes.

When Thao humbly apologizes for having tried to steal his car, Walt shows he is a man of integrity: he takes him under his wing and decides to shape him into what according to his beliefs a man should be. The old mechanic finds him a job in a construction industry; gives him tips on how to date girls (namely beautiful Youa, that Walt mispronounces as Yum Yum); and protects him from the inauspicious influence of the gang.

At the same time, Walt receives life lessons from Sue, Thao's pretty and streetwise sister, who does not refrain from confronting Walt with his ignorance about the Hmong. The

audience also learns about the History and current life of this ethnic group in the US, through the questions, sometimes provocative, that Walt asks Sue:

Walt: (...) What is a... where is Hmong or whatever?  
 Sue: Wow! You're so enlightened. Hmong isn't a place, it's a people. Hmong people come from different parts of Laos and Thailand and China.  
 Walt: Then why are you in my neighborhood, instead of back there?  
 Sue: It's a Vietnam thing. We fought on your side and when America quit, the Communists started killing the Hmong, so we came over here.  
 Walt: Why'd you pick the Midwest, for Christ's sake? There's snow on the ground near half the year. Jungle people on the frozen tundra?  
 Sue: Hill people. We were hill people, not jungle people. Boo-ga, boo-ga, boo-ga.  
 (Eastwood 10)

In order to show her gratitude to Walt for having saved her from the harassment of a gang of young African Americans, Sue invites him to a Hmong party, at her family's place. Walt accepts, though reluctantly, afraid he might have to eat a delicacy made of cat or dog meat. At the party it is possible to observe several cultural differences, in food, dressing and habits. A few misunderstandings occur in the communication between the two groups, and originate diverse humorous situations. Sue explains Walt the reasons for his involuntary blunders:

Sue: All the people in this house are very traditional. Number one: never touch a Hmong person on the head. Not even a child. The Hmong people believe that the soul resides on the head, so don't do that.  
 Walt: Well... Sounds dumb, but fine.  
 Sue: Yeah, and a lot of Hmong people consider looking someone in the eye to be very rude! That's why they look away when you look at them.  
 Walt: Yeah. Anything else?  
 Sue: Yeah... some Hmong people tend to smile or grin, when they're yelled at. It's a cultural thing, it expresses embarrassment or insecurity. It's not that they're laughing at you or anything.  
 (Eastwood 12)

At the same party, it is noticeable that young Hmong, probably already born in the US, prefer to gather in the basement, far from their adult relatives, to listen to music and flirt. They dress as young European Americans, share their tastes, and easily switch from Hmong language to English, proving they have assimilated the dominant cultural values.

In the last three decades, cultural hybridity characterized the Hmong in the US — a process consisting in the incorporation in a group's culture of elements belonging to others. As Marwan Kraidy notices, "hybridity involves the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms,

styles, or identities, cross-cultural contact, which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries” (Kraidy 5). Thanks to the constant contact with other cultures of the American kaleidoscope, the Hmong’s artistic and literary life was revitalized, and it is now object of study and interest.

Such a phenomenon is common in a multicultural society, since identities result from a dynamic process, always in transit, always in transformation, according to the wishes and needs of the group, and the daily contact with the Other (Mancelos 74-76). In the opinion of Stuart Hall:

Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. (Hall 4)

### **3. A not so happy ending**

*Gran Torino* has its flaws, partially due to the lack of experience of the vast majority of the actors and a certain exaggeration in the portrait of Walt, who becomes, occasionally, a caricature, losing his human dimension. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it is an intelligent and well directed movie, with a simple but captivating plot, sprinkled with abundant humoristic situations.

The movie contains a few surprises, such as the redeeming death of the protagonist, near the end. Walt decides to challenge, alone, the Asian gang that had beaten Thao and raped Sue. On purpose, he does not carry a gun; his plan is to expose himself so that, when the young men kill him, neighbors will witness the murder and call the police. It is the only way of condemning the gang to prison, and to retribute peace to the Hmong community. His assassination constitutes the climax of the movie and gives sense to the life of this seventy eight year old hero, who falls — spitting blood, moribund, but victorious (Eastwood 27).

In this scene, the threatening and defying Walt echoes one of his most successful roles, the policeman Dirty Harry, who starred in two movies. In the words of Bernard Benolieil: “The allusion is clear, particularly when Kowalski’s large body, just before the shoot-out on the lawn, looms like some nocturnal apparition, a clear echo of Harry Callahan’s immense silhouette at the end of *Sudden Impact*; or again like a rehearsed or returned image (...) of the famous last sequence of *Dirty Harry*” (Benolieil 88-89).

Walt’s death makes the audience reflect about this character’s altruism: he sacrificed himself for his Hmong neighbors and redeemed his soul for the war crimes that all his life

gnawed his conscience (Martin 132): “We shot men, stabbed them with bayonets, chopped up 17 year olds with shovels” (Eastwood 5).

Above all, Walt saved and transformed Thao, the son he truly wished he had brought up. That paternal love is clear when he leaves him, in his will, the Ford Gran Torino, with some conditions: “don’t chop-top the roof like one of those beaners, don’t paint any idiotic flames on it like some white trash hillbilly, and don’t put a big, gay spoiler on the rear end like you see on all the other zipperheads’ cars. It just looks like hell. If you can refrain from doing any of that... it’s yours” (Eastwood 28).

For approaching with realism the issues of the interethnic relationship in the North-American kaleidoscope, *Gran Torino* can be used in the context of the classroom, and allow a productive debate. In my opinion, it would be interesting to rise the following questions: which cultural aspects differ between the older Hmong and the new generation? Sue states that Hmong girls go to college and boys end up in jail (Eastwood 10). What does this opinion reveal about the problems faced by the community? In an article on multicultural education, Jean Ryoo and Peter McLaren suggest other questions: how does Walt play the role of the Hmong’s white savior? Why is that problematic? (Ryoo e McLaren 116). As it happens with good movies, *Grand Torino* raises crucial issues, and makes the audience think.

In the end of this story, no lonely cowboy walks towards the sunset, as it happened in some westerns, a genre that marked Eastwood’s long career. The hero died, but his mission goes on, carried by many men and women: to make the US a more inclusive society, fulfilling Walt Whitman’s prophetic dream: “Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations” (Whitman 363).

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### **Abstract**

*Grand Torino* (2008) is a movie directed by Clint Eastwood, who also plays the role of Walt Kowalski, an "old school" Polish American. When the Vang Lor, a Hmong family, moves in to his neighborhood, he blames the Asian immigrants for the increasing rate of criminality. However, gradually, Kowalski abandons his preconceptions, thanks to his daily interaction with Thao and with his streetwise sister Sue. This picture presents a variety of questions regarding: a) the issues aroused by inter-ethnic interaction; b) the perspectives on society felt by the old and new immigrants; c) the friction born out of the generation gap. I intend to examine these issues, analyzing both conflicts and strategies employed to overcome them.