



Gran Torino: a foreign neighbourhood

Direction: Clint Eastwood
Screenplay: Nick Schenk
Actors: Clint Eastwood, Cory Hardrict, John Carroll Lynch, Geraldine Hughes, Brian Haley, Brian Howe, Nana Gbewonyo, Chris Carley, Bee Vang, Ahney Her, Choua Kue, Chee Thao
Photography: Tom Stern
Editing: Joel Cox
Produced by Double Nickel Entertainment, Gerber Pictures, Malpaso Productions, Village Roadshow Pictures, Warner Bros
Distributed by Warner Bros. Italia
USA 2008
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Length: 116 Min

by Francesca Tognetti

Migration does not mean only flows of people on the move: migration, in its secondary effects, is currently an actual stable aspect of our world, cities and neighbourhoods. Since the multicultural frame deriving from migration is part of our everyday life, contemporary representations (such as literature and cinema) try to portray the contradictory image of such a complex reality. Nowadays migration turns out to live next door: it rings our bell and we have to face up to it, as the surface of a mirror reflecting something we would perhaps prefer not to see.

From the very first scenes, this film works as a looking glass, reflecting two houses and the worlds living inside them: only separated by a typical white fence and by two adjacent gardens, two twin buildings mirror each other, by shaping their inhabitants' identities. What firstly appears as completely different turns finally out to be simply reflected and overturned, as similar as only a mirror image can be.

In a typical US suburb, two small houses overlook the same street: the buildings, the gardens and the doors are both identical and different. Their identical and different sitting rooms are crowned by relatives and friends celebrating the opposite extreme segments of existence: death and life.

As an actor, Clint Eastwood is Walt Kowalski, an old white veteran of Korean war who is now burying his wife: his family is all around him, although his sons and grandchildren



are definitely far, as the film-maker – Clint Eastwood, again - unveils in the church's shot, by featuring Walt – himself – as separated from the other members of the family. Despite the blood relationship, which is supposed to be the strongest and the closest, and the ethnic, social and cultural similarities, Walt feels like a foreigner.

While the Kowalskis attend the funeral banquet at Walt's home, in the twin house – so similar, so different – Walt's neighbours are taking part to a party celebrating a new born. Even in this case a special occasion brings the family together, even in this case children, grandfathers, mothers and brothers fill the rooms of the house with their voices, chortles, tears and everyday problems.

Both the camera's eye and Walt's gaze frame the similarities between the situations: people arriving and ringing the bell, greeting parents and buzzing, food, beverages and ritual arranged to say hello or good bye to a beloved person. The white fence dividing the gardens works as a symbolic surface reflecting and overturning things, actions and lives.

However this mirror effect conveys an important distortion: by looking through the looking glass, in fact, Walt does not see an old grim wasp widower or a proud veteran: he sees – and despises – Tao, a sixteen years old 'Hmong boy.

The beginning of this film clearly states its director's intent. The way in which Eastwood stages the first scenes to introduce the relationship between Walt and his "foreign" neighbours and the evident racist intolerance the old character shows towards them symbolise and anticipate the process which the story is based on: the discovery of the Other and the discovery of the Self through the contact and the experience of the Other.

The social message the film conveys is self-evident: the migration is here considered in its secondary steps, that is the cohabitation and the everyday interactions among the "new" Americans and the old ones. The residential suburb – once absolute reign of wasp safety and respectability - becomes a borderland inhabited by a multicoloured and multicultural crowd: it is the landing space for thousands of people who surfed the tides of migrations, or who have been swept away by the stream of exile. Asian and black, Italian and Polish, Irish and Latin are mixed up within this suburban no man's land, but the US melting pot seems to forge only bullets and guns: Walt defends his property – his home, but maybe also his homeland – as it would be besieged by the others. He feels like a soldier, he refers to his neighbourhood as a war zone where two enemies – a grim veteran and an old 'Hmong woman – peer each other from identical windows thinking the same thing: why do *they* come here? Why do *they* remain?

Besides working as a looking glass, the symbolic white fence also represents an inviolable boundary dividing Walt's property from the enemies, the foreign and the neighbours. While the first representation is directly unveiled to the audience by Eastwood as a director, the second one is conveyed by the character's attitude. Racism, intolerance, ignorance, fear and similarities are melted up to weave the complex web which this human interaction is based on. Such a rigid web imprisons individuals and prevents them from getting in contact, until it is suddenly torn off by a violation of the sacred boundary. Tao's attempt to penetrate Walt's property starts the process of



knowledge and acknowledgment that will finally turn the trench into a mirror, as the first scenes suggest.

By crossing the border of his home/homeland, Walt is then able to meet the Other, embodied by a young, clumsy 'Hmong boy named as Tao. Eastwood stages the postcolonial paradigm in a very classical way, by representing the process of Self/Other negotiation in its typical steps: contact, interactions, contamination and self acknowledgement. By knowing Tao's family, not only is Walt able to understand who his enemies – his neighbours – are, but also to shape his own identity and to figure out why he sees his relatives as strangers: he has, finally, more in common with the Others than his "own spoiled-rotten family".

While the discovery of the Other influences the social and political frame (the relationship between Walt and Tao and his sister Sue involves the reconciliation of the racial question), the postcolonial mechanism this interaction carries on works at a symbolic level, and it may be applied to the narrations of migration in a universal perspective. The relationship of neighbourhood, made up of proximity and conflict, synthesises across a fence or a hedge the whole range of meanings and implications deriving from political, social and ethnic hybridisation. In framing Walt, Tao, Sue and the old grandmother, the narration continuously provides to the audience similarities and differences; the boundary existing among them is represented both as a mirror and as an enemy line but it is made more and more confused and weak, until it finally disappears. That is shown at visual level by the recurring scenes comparing Walt and the old 'Hmong woman: the camera ironically underlines their reciprocal hate and at the same time it highlights their identical behaviours: they both spit, mumbles, grumble about the neighbours and the young generations. Moreover, the audience can realise that Walt's speaking, always full of racist insults and nice expressions such as "goddamned gooks", gradually loses its hate intent, to become an innocuous jargon the actors share and play as comedy's cues.

However the main similarity Walt and Tao shares is not directly unveiled, but it is developed beside and behind the principal plot; as background for the characters' relationship, in fact, Clint Eastwood portrays a human, social and political universe which involves them as representatives of two different ways to conceive the United States. One of the most interesting elements the film stages, in fact, is in my opinion the representation of a two Americas – the old one and the young one – portrayed as in comparison and in conflict, although always dealing with the eternal chimera of the American Dream. Tao's family, as well as the other characters crowning the story (the doctor, the barber, the gangsters) perform a continuous negotiation and self negotiation in order to free themselves from the "migrants" label. The statement of their US identity comes through different ways: business, education, irony, violence and criminality. Within these human dynamics, Tao pursues, as an individual, the same Dream – or ghost – which fascinated Walt's grandfathers generation when they arrived from Poland: the social redemption. Eastwood represents all the classical aspects of the American Dream – poorness, hard work, legality and compensation – by applying them to a character previously perceived as a foreign enemy. Tao and his sister embody – in



their *foreign* bodies – the same contradictions and hope that the old America – with its pretended purity and its lost innocence – thought to have the corner on.

That is what Walt sees, when he finally looks through the looking glass. Beyond the boundary of his garden, beyond his white fence and through the mirror of the Otherness he finally sees the America reflected on his 'Hmong neighbour's face – the chimera he fought for. His final choice is then a sacrifice to preserve that innocence the old America had lost, and which is essential to pursue that American Dream made up of happiness, dignity and fabulous *Gran Torino* convertibles.

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