Violence and Truth in Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*

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Abstract

This article presents a thematic analysis of the latest movie that Clint Eastwood has directed and participated in as an actor, *Gran Torino.* We claim that *Gran Torino* is a cinema masterpiece. To support this view, we show that the subject of the movie is the mechanical logic of violence, its evolution and the possible ways of stopping it; Eastwood's intuition about violence follows the same logic that underpins René Girard's work: The leading character in the movie, Walt Kowalski (Clint Eastwood), displays his understanding of violence with outstanding conceptual accuracy, of a kind which none of Eastwood's previous movies has reached. We show that the crucial moment of the movie is the scene where Walt Kowalski sacrifices himself to end violence and for others (a Hmong community) to live. We stress that the movie explicitly states that this scene is a recreation of the Passion of Jesus Christ, and that such a Passion is the revelation of the dynamics of violence and the only way to really bring it to an end. We then show how the character of Walt Kowalski is both a summary and sequence of the different roles that Eastwood played throughout his acting career. If, almost to the end of *Gran Torino*, Kowalski is still the god of violence, typical of other Eastwood movies ("Dirty" Harry Callahan or William "Will" Munny, for example), he finally breaks away from those characters. That, we claim, explains why Eastwood recently said that *Gran Torino* was probably the last film in which he would participate as an actor.

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Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* was released in cinemas in 2008. A quite well received movie, it represents the culmination of Eastwood's fifty-year career as actor and

director. And culmination is indeed an appropriate term because, in a paradoxical way, it is a logical consequence of many other roles that the former mayor of Carmel has played over the years. It is as if *Gran Torino*‘s narrative structure summarized the careers of the characters once played by Clint Eastwood, such as The Man with No Name, the detective “Dirty Harry” Callahan or William Munny.

The film, using the usual Clint Eastwood themes, centers on the problem and dynamics of the transition from the perspective of the hero of violence to the point of view of someone who, by sacrificing himself, aims to definitely break the cycles of violence. This evolution is described with outstanding conceptual rigor. As a matter of fact, we claim that *Gran Torino* displays in a cinematographic context some of the fundamental insights of René Girard’s anthropology. The structure of the movie reveals the same logic that underpins Girard’s work: the collective dynamics of gangs, the reciprocity of violence, the acceleration of reprisals, the role of initiation rituals, the relationship between gift and violence. Furthermore, *Gran Torino* shows how the actions that led to the sacrifice of the main character in the movie, Walt Kowalski (played by Clint Eastwood), represent the only true way to definitively break with violence. In that sense, *Gran Torino* is, in an explicit way, a representation of Jesus Christ’s Path of the Cross. As in Girard’s work, in *Gran Torino* the figure of Jesus Christ is the one that denounces violence and finally breaks with its vicious circle. If we look at the whole path of Clint Eastwood as a film actor from this point of view, we consider it to be a major cultural event that he, in his final movie as an actor, should play such a *figura christi* as Walt Kowalski.

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The film begins with the funeral of Walt Kowalski’s wife. She never appears in the film and it might be thought that her death, and her funeral, would have the reconciling effects among the living that death and funerals usually have. Above all, the reconciling power of the dead should exert its effects on his family. None of this happens, however. The dissension between Walt Kowalski and his family is the dominant theme of the funeral: dissension between Walt and his granddaughter, of whose “modern” behavior he clearly disapproves; and, finally, tension between Walt and his son and daughter-in-law. There is no actual violence, only a not quite verbalized dissent (marked by Walt’s disapproving spitting at his granddaughter). The tension between Walt and his family will last throughout the movie, but for the moment we only have a testiness that barely reaches the real violence that is the main subject of the film. In any case, Walt is a lonely man without a family.

The increasing rivalry, the escalation towards violence, follows immediately. Walt is clearly a “conservative” American, an employee of the once thriving U.S. automotive industry. Successive waves of immigrants led a Hmong community to

move into the Detroit suburban area where Walt lives.(1) A family belonging to that community settled just next door to Walt's house, displaying their specific cultural practices. The relationship of mutual antagonism between Walt and the matriarch of the Hmong family is the theme that follows the episode of the funeral. The antagonism is reciprocal, made visible by words and gestures, but at the same time it is somewhat camouflaged, because the mutual verbal invectives remain largely unintelligible due to the viewer's inability to understand the Hmong language. The linguistic difficulty does not, however, prevent the antagonism between Walt and the matriarch from occurring through the mutual spitting that ends the scene.

So far, the latent violence has taken place between pairs of individuals. The movie comes to its real issue with the arrival of a member of the Hmong family, Vang Thao Lor (Bee Vang). He appears as the target of a gang of Mexicans, who cover him with all kinds of insults and threats. Thao is subject to mindless violence, whose sole purpose is to feed the gang as a gang. Thao's salvation occurs immediately afterwards, with the appearance of another gang, this time a Hmong gang. This group intervenes to save Thao from the other one, no longer triggering violence between individuals, but now between *gangs*. Following a scene of extreme reciprocal verbal violence, where the weapons only appear discreetly in the two cars sitting side by side, the Hmong gang saves Thao from the Mexican gang.

At the next moment the movie develops the logic of violent gangs. The Hmong gang, led by Fong "Spider" (Doua Moua), Thao's cousin, carries out the actions that are typical of the collective logic of gangs. After some initial resistance, the gang tries to bring about Thao's *initiation*, aiming at his acculturation, integration, and assimilation into the gang.

Rituals of initiation are among mankind's oldest cultural forms.(2) In this case, the action that brings about the initiation operates as a classic *rite of passage*. And, as with most similar rituals, the present one normally consists in an act of disorder, an offense. The offense is a crime, but in a context from which, strangely enough in twenty-first century America, public authorities (the police) will remain singularly absent. The ritual offense that must be carried out by Thao is the theft of the *Gran Torino*, a legendary car that Walt himself had helped build in his days as a worker at Ford, and which he maintains with particular dedication. The theft of the *Gran Torino* is Thao's initiation ritual.

The ritual goes wrong. Walt realizes that someone is trying to steal his car, and Thao has to flee. The failure of the ritual prevents the passage and integration of Thao into the gang. In a sense, his initiation into the order of violence has failed. We can imagine that the subsequent story of the film would be totally different if the ritual of initiation had been successful.

For the moment, Thao remains in a sort of no-man's land. Despite the failure of the ritual, the Hmong gang tries again to assimilate Thao. It is at that moment that Thao's true initiation occurs: instead of being assimilated, initiated, by the Hmong gang, he will be so by Walt. This begins to happen when, despite the opposition of the family, the gang tries to take Thao away: Walt shows up and blocks the attempt. If the Hmong gang saved Thao from the gang of Mexicans, now it is Walt who saves the disputed boy from his previous saviours. But he saves him in a crescendo of violence, because he saves Thao with a gun in his hand, the first time that weapons actually make an appearance. However, the approach taken by Clint Eastwood and represented by Walt Kowalski begins to change. Whereas until then violence (and rescue) take place in a setting of 'all against one' (both gangs against Thao) or 'all against all' (the fight between the gangs); now *it is one against all*. A singular figure begins to emerge, one that will gradually escape the logic of the reciprocity between gangs, and the unity of each gang against a single individual.

Nevertheless, at this moment of the movie, the figure of Walt still embodies violence, and all the main characters of the film (with two exceptions) will also embody it. Kowalski is the man who, through violence, restrained the violence exerted by the Hmong gang on Thao. He will later emerge as Thao's good model, as opposed to the bad model formed by the Hmong gang. Then–just after Thao's failed ritual–the film enters a different stage. While the previous phase was marked by the negative reciprocity of the violence between gangs and individuals, now a form of positive reciprocity emerges. As always, Eastwood directs as an accomplished anthropologist. So, the figure of the *gift* appears when, in gratitude to Walt for saving Thao, his neighbors place some offerings at the door of his house.

Walt does not immediately react to the positive offering by positive reciprocity. At the moment, positive reciprocity is overshadowed by the logic of reciprocal negative violence in a scene in which Walt talks with a Catholic priest, Father Janovich (Christopher Carley). The priest had already made an appearance in the film, and his role will become increasingly important. Now, he warns Walt about the extreme violence that seems to be building, urging him to "call the police." In fact, the role of the police is precisely to prevent the escalation of violence between private agents. But Walt dismisses the idea, stating the "need to act quickly," just as he acted quickly in the Korean War in which he had fought.

It will then become clear *that all action takes place within a pre-judiciary order in which there are no rules and no mediating entities that could prevent the rising level of violence.* And, indeed, almost to the end of the movie, the police will be oddly absent. Since the action takes place in twenty-first century America, and Clint Eastwood doesn't film events and narrative structures whose occurrence is nearly impossible, such an omission is extremely significant.

Mindless violence returns almost immediately. This time it is a pack of black men who block the path of Sue Lor (Ahney Her), Thao's sister, and her boyfriend. The pack, with the usual obscene verbal violence, expels the "coward" boyfriend and clearly anticipates Sue's rape. But it turns out that Walt saves Sue. Watching the scene, Walt feigns pulling the trigger of a gun with his fingers, before actually producing a gun.

Walt Kowalski first saved Thao from the Hmong gang, and now saves Sue from a pack of black ruffians. The result is that Thao and Sue's family–still an extended family with some of the characteristics of families in traditional societies–will increasingly renew their presents to Walt. He finally seems to accept this apparent logic of gift giving, evolving from the negative reciprocity that he shared at the beginning of the film with his Hmong neighbors to positive reciprocity. Always in accordance with well-known anthropological facts, this reciprocity is celebrated by a festive meal. It would appear that Walt himself was acculturated by the Hmong, and that the old dissensions–which can be dated back to the time when Walt fought in the Korean War–have disappeared. However, as the remainder of the movie will show, what really happens is that the Hmong neighbors began to see Walt *as their new god*, their god of violence who saved Thao, first, and then Sue. The transition towards the regime of gift-offering and positive changes is always grounded on a previous initial act, a foundational act, of violence.(3)

Indeed, Walt is now becoming the god of violence to the Hmong family. He will be seen as an agent of positive reciprocity within that Hmong community, and as an agent of their negativity towards the others, outside. He becomes the potentate of this fragile community. At the right moment, the community will remind him of this.

For the moment and before that happens, before the accumulated tensions reappear with an entirely destructive force, the scene where Walt and the Hmong community share a meal marks a significant shift in the atmosphere of the movie. If until then violence–a certain kind of still contained violence–reigned, now positive acculturation replaces it, at least for some time. It is the time marked by Thao's repentance, when he confesses to Walt that he was the author of the aborted theft of the Gran Torino. Thao undergoes a new initiation, but a good initiation this time, driven by positive values. As stated above, the bad model of the Hmong gang is replaced by the good model that Walt now turns out to be. He initiates Thao in the value of work, in the prospects of a normal adult life, perhaps even rooted in university studies. The movie then goes through a set of sequences that last a little under a third of its length, following the initial phase of violence and paving the way to the final reign of violence.

Walt has acculturated Thao, and to that extent he has created a profound dissent in

the Hmong community, taken as a whole. He separated Thao from the gang as he also separated the gang from Thao's family. Basically, Walt has been sowing violence. He had previously somehow anticipated what he was doing, and it is that reality that will be imposed in an increasingly unavoidable form. The third part of the movie will display the relentless *acceleration* of violence. From now on the pace of the movie will be vertiginous.

Everything starts with the response–a response that was bound to come–from the Hmong band. The response begins by being centered on Thao, who suffers a new kind of "initiation" at the hands of the gang. Thao, who broke the unanimity once desired by the group, will be put at the center of a circle formed by the members of the gang. The gang members then brutally punish him by burning his face with a cigarette. It is a new ritual, but one now closer to the pure form of violence, in which a pack of men encircle and punish a single man. At that moment the vicious cycle of violence finally accelerates: *until then, physical violence had never existed*. There had been only verbal violence and simulations of weapons being fired. Now, there is actual physical violence. The cycle will unfold in an accelerating crescendo.

It is the nature of violence to appeal to more violence, "violence attracts violence," precisely. And the problem is that each person is always *responding*, without anybody being able to know exactly who started it. If, earlier on, in the first stage of the movie, Walt resorted to violence (albeit not consummated physically) to contain other forms of violence, he will now resort to an increasing level of violence with the sole purpose of *directly responding* to previous violence. It is the first time that he really *responds*. Only later will he fully understand the vicious circle in which he became the main actor.

Walt replies to Thao's burning by raising the stakes: he waits until one member of the Hmong gang is alone, punches and kicks him until he is left unconscious, in a scene filmed with such appalling realism that the viewer has to experience the brutality of the act. As is the case with the best moments of Clint Eastwood's movies, violence now is not the senseless, fanciful, implausible violence of the majority of films that so delight millions of viewers. It is realistic violence, which displays its own naked and mindless brutality.

Violence is an escalation of difference towards indifference. This dynamic is, until its absolute end, masterfully displayed in *Gran Torino*. Initially, violence was only verbal. Then, there are simulations of shots being fired. The response comes in the form of burns. The response is always a difference from the previous level and prepares indifference by a new kind of difference: brutal punches and kicks. The counter-response can only be a further escalation of the difference towards indifference.

The Hmong gang will in fact respond. Always according to well-known anthropological facts, the band will respond obliquely, to the side, as it were. The gang will not respond directly to Walt (who was the aggressor of one of its members). The band unleashes its revenge on Thao's family.

This is the logic of reprisals, which go from the "periphery" to the "center." The reason is that, although it was not directly responsible for the violence someone is responding to, the "periphery" is usually the weakest link. Only later will there be an attack on the central target. That is what the gang does: it attacks the "periphery" instead of the "center" (the central target), which is Walt Kowalski. And the gang does this by *shelling* the home of Thao's family (the periphery). If the difference is still operating, in the transfer of reprisals from the central target to the more vulnerable periphery, the truth is that the escalation continues with the shift *from punching to shooting*. This is the escalation of violence: those who respond raise the stakes in a vertiginous acceleration of time.

At this point, when the film speeds up dramatically, it is clear that Walt finally begins to understand the cycle in which he has been involved, and to which, at the same time, he has decisively contributed. This reflection by Walt (not yet quite explicit) is interrupted by yet another response from the Hmong gang. After strafing the house, the gang picks up Sue, who is raped and brutally beaten. It is only then that blood appears, this link between life and the menstrual cycle, on the one hand, and death, sex, and rape, on the other. At the same time, in an odd way, all this takes place in Detroit in the twenty-first century, with an absent police force! As mentioned above, this means that Clint Eastwood wants to direct the dynamics of violence that unfolds in the private space of reprisals.

After Sue's brutal beating and rape, Walt goes back to his "reflections." But not before, in an act of rage–the rage of someone who understands the fire that he had ignited and so understands the origin and dynamics of violence–he has mutilated himself and bled. The *wounds* in the hands of Walt are displayed in an ostensive way. To the viewer, this scene is barely understandable at the time, and in fact it will only be clear in the light of the unusual ending of the film. In the scene that follows, Walt becomes even more explicit about his "reflections" when he talks with the priest Janovich. The dialogue is always accompanied by several shots that highlight Walt's still wounded hands. He says that "Thao and Sue will never have peace in this world as long as gangs are around," finally realizing that the cycle of violence has no end, and that only death can follow and replace it. But the priest Janovich does not seem to fully understand what he is hearing, and instead points out that "he (Walt) knows what Thao expects." And then asks, what will he, Walt, do?

At that moment, the audience knows perfectly well “what Thao expects.” And what Thao “expects” is also what his family “expects.” Is it not the case that Walt is their god of violence, the avenger of the received offenses? And what Thao and his family “expect” is clearly what the viewers also begin to “expect.” What else could be “expected” from someone with Clint Eastwood’s record? We could even say that everyone was not only expecting, but rather *desiring,* Walt’s response. And what everyone was expecting was evidently a violent response, at least at the level of the earlier violence. It should be a response of such brutality that it would have to move in the circle of death.

We must confess, perhaps in a personal way, that at this stage of the film we asked ourselves some questions. In fact, Walt seemed to give clear signs of not being inclined to continue the cycle of reprisals. It was apparent that he had understood that this could only lead to more destruction. But then, as the priest asked, what will Walt do? Only two possibilities seemed to be open. Either Walt would do what everybody “expected,” perhaps thinking that some final deaths could put an end to the cycle of violence; or, the priest’s interventions seemed to suggest, he would try some form of “understanding,” some kind of “dialogue.” But this latter possibility seemed to be completely discarded by the structure of the film. It seemed impossible for some kind of mediation between enemies in the blood to exist. The outcome appeared mysterious. Personally, we confess that we never anticipated the extraordinary ending of the film.

Walt has taken his decision. He has to solve some minor problems, including locking in his house a Thao mad with rage and thirsty for revenge, and for whom Walt could not do what everyone was “expecting.” But Walt has other ideas. He goes to an open square in front of the Hmong band’s house. They were also “expecting” him.

The scene that then takes place is a remarkable one, even if taken in the light of criteria of analysis that consider a cinematographic work as pointing only to itself, and therefore with no reference. However, the final scene will *refer*, and refer to the source of the truth. Walt arrives alone at the front of the house. The members of the gang appear at the doors and windows–in a larger number than usual, so that they almost constitute now a real crowd–displaying some perplexity about the way Walt presents himself. With an increasing dramatic intensity, Walt begins by saying:

“I’ve got to jump on your way.”At this point, one might think that Walt is telling them that he came “to cross their path,” in the sense of being a barrier that exerts a still greater violence than the gang’s violence. In other words, Walt is announcing that he has come to “respond.”

We are quickly disabused of such an interpretation. Walt demands fire from the

members of the band. At that moment, neighbors of the gang's house show up to witness the events. Walt puts his hand in his pocket (will there be a weapon?), raises his arms and utters the capital phrase:

"No, me I have got the light."Believing that Walt will pull out a gun, the crowd responds in unison, riddling Walt with bullets. He then falls into a position that forms a cross. We quickly learn that Walt had no weapon. The police arrive. The gang is arrested. We witness Walt's funeral and the union of the living that usually follows death. In the final scene, Walt's will is read, which gives Thao the Gran Torino, contrarily to the family's hopes.

The ending of the movie, the reading of Walt's will, etc., is a happy ending that makes the movie abruptly step down from its previous extraordinary level. It is a totally conventional ending that could have been replaced by many others. Clint Eastwood possibly found it necessary, for commercial reasons, for the sake of the viewers' habits, or for others reasons, to end the movie in a conventional manner. Above all, and we think this is the main reason, this ending was chosen in order to *produce an effect of catharsis of the drama that has just been narrated*. The drama is somehow erased and the viewer can leave the theater on a more familiar territory. It is as if, after all, Clint Eastwood's genius is still present when he chooses a conventional happy ending, deliberately targeted at the public's reactions. However, in truth, the ending of the movie is the scene in front of the gang's house, Walt's murder and the arrival of the police. We claim that this final scene, to which we now return, is a Passion.

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We can now evaluate Walt Kowalski's final decision. He understood that the stupidity and brutality of violence only generate more lethal and indiscriminate violence. And he understood that his actions had also contributed to the unfolding of the cycle. He then made his decision. Not exactly that he "has repented" or that he has thus "atoned his guilt." Walt clearly shows that his decision is an objective response to the objectivity of the situation: either the continuation of violence that will eventually devour everybody, or–what? The *sacrifice* of himself, by which he puts an end to the cycle of violence. This is the only and truly radical solution to the problem. It is also the only one that men never follow. The usual solution is what everybody "was expecting," or what places the solution on someone else's shoulders.

Walt sacrifices himself so that the others might live. He offers his sacrifice so that a community could be viable. Is this a solution that has appeared at some juncture in mankind's history? Clint Eastwood is quite explicit on this point, and it definitely

captures the anthropological dimension of *Gran Torino*. In the truly final scene, Walt embodies the Passion of Jesus Christ.

This is the movement of the film: from the mechanical cycle of violence to its end and *denunciation*. It is the movement in which Christ is sacrificed for the sake of humanity, to redeem all its past crimes and prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God, the realm of positive reciprocity of all men in love. The Passion of Christ, as described in the four Gospels, is the denunciation of all forms of violence and points the way to mankind's redemption. With his sacrifice, Christ redeemed all past crimes, denounced the nature of violence, its mechanical nature, its injustice; in other words, Jesus Christ wanted all men to live. That is exactly what Walt does: he denounces lays bare, before everyone's eyes, the truth of violence, breaks away from violence and thus he wants the others to live.

None of this is "interpretation." Clint Eastwood's films, and in particular *Gran Torino*, require very little "interpretation." The allusion to the Passion and to Jesus Christ is fully explicit. Remember that Walt begins by saying:

> "I've got to jump on your way."

Next, Walt apparently asks the members of the gang if they "have light" (to light a cigarette). More precisely:

> "Do you have light?"

After a few interjections from the members of the gang, and in a crescendo of dramatic intensity, perfectly marked by the direction, Walt raises his arms as if already forming the figure of the cross on which he will fall, and says:

> "No, me I have got the light."

"No, [not you], but I bring light." The light that Walt brings through his death is the light of truth, the truth about the violence of the violent. Walt makes public, brings to light, the truth about violence. He displays–through his unjustified murder–in broad daylight for all to see, violence as something purely destructive and absolutely meaningless. It should be strongly pointed out that just before the exact moment when Walt says that he "brings the light," Clint Eastwood films the appearance of *witnesses*. These are the witnesses–in fact, all of us–whom the

sacrifice of Walt is addressed to.

It’s true that the role of the witnesses has some ambiguity. Their role can be interpreted in the light of the scene following Walt’s murder, when the police (finally) arrive. Then, in fact, the witnesses can testify against the gang in a criminal case (as referred to by a policeman). But the permanent absence of the police and the entire organization of the script show that Clint Eastwood’s primary objective is to show an anthropological situation of the near absence of judiciary power, that is, a situation in which the violence that men are capable of is displayed. But, contrarily to what happened to Jesus Christ, where the killers acted with impunity (even backed by the powers of the time), Walt’s killers will be punished. Walt stopped and denounced violence through his death and, additionally, through the legal punishment of the violent. These murdered an innocent, unarmed man in an orgy of collective violence. So, we can say at the same time that Walt’s sacrifice was a foundation for a future condemnation and that it was a light directed to the witnesses. Both ideas converge in the sacrifice and *denunciation* of violence by Walt.

Walt Kowalski is a *figura christi*, a repetition of the Passion where Jesus Christ was killed. In the instant before being riddled with bullets and falling in the shape of the cross, the figure we all know is that of Jesus, he says in an almost imperceptible whisper:

> “Hail Mary, full of grace.”

All this is literally visible in the film. However, another interpretation should also be briefly mentioned, one that could claim that Walt’s death was a sort of “calculated suicide.” Perhaps such an interpretation is based on two or three scenes of the movie we have so far omitted. This applies to the scene in which Walt received the results of medical exams that apparently (this is not entirely clear) indicate a poor state of health. It is also the case of two scenes in which he spits blood, confirming, again, health problems. But should we say that Walt gives his body to the bullets because he was in bad shape, that he takes advantage of the Hmong story to commit suicide? This is totally implausible. A suicide is a negative, self-destructive act, not the foundation of anything. On the contrary, Walt sacrifices himself so that violence can be stopped and so that the others can live. Therefore, it is a positive act, quite opposed to any suicide.

But we think that what has been said is not enough to truly understand the singular

position of *Gran Torino* in Clint Eastwood's career. Something else should be briefly pointed out.

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In an interview,(4) Eastwood said that *Gran Torino* was probably the last film in which he would participate as an actor. This statement may be construed as an admission that "he is old" (Eastwood is 78), and, as himself admits in the interview, it may not be easy to find roles for actors of that age. In any case, we think that decision is a logical one if one considers the path that leads Eastwood to the portrayal of Walt Kowalski in *Gran Torino.*

Let's remember in very broad lines Clint Eastwood's career. He was the impenetrable and ruthless gunman in the trilogy that began with *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), where he played the Man With No Name. He was then the detective "Dirty" Harry Callahan, this relentless vigilante, always on the razor's edge between the implementation of private justice and public justice, restoring order by ruthlessly killing rioters. He brought violence and triumphed by violence.

In 1992 he directed the rightly acclaimed *Unforgiven*, a story of cycles of violence caused by a huge moral and criminal offense: disfigurement of a prostitute by stabbing. Eastwood is William "Will" Munny, a retired gunman who returns to work and, at the end of the film, carries out a general killing. He is the god of relentless violence that comes in the final night and destroys all his enemies. As always, the order restored by death is brought about at the hand and by the gun of the hero, who embodies violence. As in other movies, in *Unforgiven* the intentional killing of men is represented as what it is in itself: literally what brings peace by eliminating those who, alive, are an obstacle in the path of others, and who, dead, are no longer such an obstacle.

As has been pointed out, and as is exemplified by the final actions of "Dirty" Harry or "Will" Munny, violence in Clint Eastwood's films nearly always has a cathartic effect, both for the other characters and for the audience. This effect is caused by the murders carried out by the gods of revenge represented by Eastwood. It is a founding violence, in the sense that it brings peace through brutal killing, through the murder of an enemy at the hands of the god of violence. This is Eastwood's typical character, his "brand image": the ruthless avenger who restores order with shots and produces a catharsis when the troublemaker is eliminated.

A more recent example is *Blood Work* (2002). The film tells the story of Jasper "Buddy" Noone (Jeff Daniels), who finds a pseudo-justification of murder by claiming

that the bodies of the dead may be used to save other lives. “Buddy” Noone illustrates an archaic sacrificial logic, in which death is justified because it saves the lives of others. But those that are killed are victims that we know were innocent; so, for us, rightly, “Buddy” Noone is just a psychopathic killer, whatever the arguments emphasizing sacrifice with which he disguises himself. In the film, Clint Eastwood is the former detective Terry McCaleb. He is once again the ultimate god of violence who finally kills “Buddy” Noone and thus restores order (*catharsis*).

In most of his films, those that made his “brand image,” Eastwood is always the active agent that brings peace through death. However, we can see in some of the latest movies an emphasis of the moral dilemmas and a prelude to the absolutely unique position taken by Eastwood in *Gran Torino*. The great example is *Million Dollar Baby* (2004). In a movie filled with almost unbearable violence, Frankie Dunn (Clint Eastwood) faces the dilemma of practicing euthanasia on Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank). The dilemma is a serious one, and here we no longer find the usual Eastwood who quickly gives death to his enemies. It is after all euthanasia, and it could certainly be argued that Frankie kills Maggie to put an end to her suffering.

Therefore, in most of his films, Eastwood is the relentless gunman/detective, the judge who is both the god and the angel of death. According to the usual sequence of these films, Eastwood is the judge who punishes the disorderly offenders, often with some physical disabilities. In *Million Dollar Baby*, the disability is acquired, and Frankie Dunn inflicts death for love, no longer for revenge.

If, at least until *Million Dollar Baby*, the usual logic of Eastwood’s films was followed, in *Gran Torino* Walt Kowalski will also punish the pack of rioters. As stressed above, it was just what everyone was “expecting.” But now we fully understand that Walt Kowalski/Clint Eastwood represents the end of the gunman and of the god of death. In *Gran Torino*, the *perspective is inverted*. The ending of the movie inverts the point of view of Clint Eastwood’s previous roles, just as Walt Kowalski’s role is inverted when he becomes the victim rather than the avenger. In its narrative structure, *Gran Torino* represents Clint Eastwood’s whole path. Kowalski/Eastwood *himself is now the victim of the crowd* (the gang). The sacrifice is not the sacrifice of others for order to prevail. The sacrifice is now, finally and for the first time in Clint Eastwood’s work, the sacrifice of himself and not, we emphasize, of *others*. It is the sacrifice of his own life to end violence and for the others to live, not the death of others at the hands of the god of violence for order to be restored. It is a radical solution to the problem of violence that Eastwood has always pondered. It is a unique and singular solution. It is a Passion. When Clint Eastwood embodies such a Passion as an actor, when he takes the logic of violence to the extreme–its absolute denunciation through self-sacrifice–then, in fact, it is the end of the road for Clint Eastwood as a film actor.

Notes

1. The Hmong is an ethnic group originated from Southeast Asia. (back)

2. Cf. René Girard, (1977), *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. (back)

3. René Girard, Idem. (back)

4. Cf the interview to Rich Cline, available at: http://shadows.wall.net/features/eastwood.htm. Ac. 02-07-2009. (back)