

## GRAN TORINO

US, 2008, Clint Eastwood



At age 78, Clint Eastwood had two films in the US National Board of Review's top ten of 2008, *The Changeling* and *Gran Torino*. *Gran Torino* was far more popular at the American Box Office, over \$100,000,000 in tickets, which says a great deal about Eastwood's reputation as an actor – or screen presence - even more than as a director.

*Gran Torino* is an impressive film on many counts.

Nicholas Schenk's screenplay opens up many questions for contemporary American society, especially xenophobia (this time for the Hmong people from China/Laos/Vietnam who, despite fighting alongside the US troops in Vietnam, were not always welcomed when they had to migrate to the US). With an old Detroit neighbourhood setting where Eastwood's Walt Kowalski seems like a relic of different and distant times, the film also takes up themes of gangs and urban violence as well as economic questions like the closing down of car manufacturing plants (while one of Walt's sons working for a car-maker outside the US). And it takes up the question of ageing, especially after the death of a spouse and the loss of emotional contact with children and grandchildren – but how could one love a flimsily dressed teenager who texts during the requiem mass for her grandmother!

The film is framed by funerals and sermons on life and death ('bitter because of grief, sweet because of salvation' according to the young priest). And there are several discussions about the meaning of life and the effect of death between Walt and the persistent priest (because Walt's late wife wanted her husband to go to confession) with Walt telling the priest that he is 'an over-educated, 27 year old virgin who holds old ladies' hands, promising them eternity!', something the priest quotes in his final sermon. Interesting that Clint Eastwood would have a priest and Catholic themes (in a positive rather than critical light) in this film as well as the priest that he goes to Mass to each day and asks for advice in *Million Dollar Baby*.

You may never have heard an actor or a character growl so much in a film and Eastwood has the perfect grimace and sound for constant growl. You know he is going to get to know his Hmong next door neighbours, but we wonder how and with what consequences. Perhaps it is best simply to say that prejudice is overcome by contact and bigotry by sharing in the lives of those who are initially detested or condemned. Clint's friendship with the young girl next door helps him to understand and socialise. Her quiet, polite teenage brother, provoked by his cousin and a local Hmong group into trying to steal Walt's *Gran Torino*, learns many a lesson from Walt: hard work, responsibility, how to talk to a girl and, in comic manner, how to do provocative banter and 'man-talk'.

Someone is probably writing a thesis (or has written one) on the dramatic arc of the characters Eastwood has played from *The Man with no Name* but a gun to this man with a name but sometimes a gun and sometimes not. *Dirty Harry* (whom everyone quotes when an Eastwood character goes into action) has not lost his anger at injustice but has found other means, which will surprise the audience, to deal with that injustice.

Eastwood knows how to make interesting and entertaining films with excellent craft, never drawing attention to himself, but with something worthwhile to say and be listened to.