Aging, Gran Torino-Style
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What is This?
aging, gran torino-style
by stacy torres

Gran Torino (Warner Bros., 2009)

From the trailer you might get the idea the Clint Eastwood film Gran Torino is about a 78-year-old Eastwood growling, “Get off my lawn,” while pointing a shotgun at Asian gangbangers. But the film is more than a story of erupting racial tensions and gang violence in a distressed Detroit suburb—it’s profound insights into aging in America rescue it from devolving into a hackneyed plea to overcome our differences.

The film takes up issues anyone over 65 or with an aging family member soon confronts, including widowhood, isolation, failing health, and the meaning of work and retirement. By grappling with these problems, often with dry humor, Gran Torino offers a complex portrait of old age that defies stereotypes of the old as either doting grandparents enjoying a worry-free retirement or as physically helpless victims. The film also serves as a timely reminder of the demographic changes we face with the graying of the baby-boom generation, whose first members will turn 65 two years from now.

In Gran Torino, Eastwood plays Walt Kowalski, a retired Ford autoworker and Korean War veteran who recently lost his wife. From the opening scene, his strained relationship with his family is clear. Walt grows through his wife’s funeral service as his disrespectful grandchildren snicker, and his bored, midriff-baring granddaughter alternately text messages and sulks. His adult sons wonder, “What are we going to do with him?”

To describe Walt as brusque would be an understatement. Throughout the film, Eastwood’s character peels off racial epithets like “gook,” “chink,” “spook,” “dago,” and “mick.” He’s a man of another generation, and his raw language makes you flinch. On the surface, Walt’s gruffness seems to explain the alienation between him and his sons, that he leaves them no choice but to abandon him. But in true Hollywood fashion, Walt grows more sympathetic and his ability to befriend the unlikeliest candidates, the Hmong brother and sister who live next door, suggests that his family bears some responsibility for their non-existent relations.

Everyone wants to lay their hands on Walt’s prized, mint 1972 Gran Torino—a classic muscle car and a symbol of youth and virility. His granddaughter asks early in the film what he’ll do with it when he dies, and the major action begins when his teenage next-door neighbor, Thao, attempts to steal it. This is Thao’s initiation into his bullying cousin’s gang, but he bungles the effort, which ends when Walt confronts him with an M-1 rifle and accidentally squeezes off a shot, missing him.

His family doesn’t know about this confrontation, and Walt’s son and daughter-in-law reappear on his birthday with assorted “gifts”: a metal device for grabbing things off high shelves, a telephone with jumbo-sized numbers, and a stack of retirement home pamphlets.

On that topic, Walt’s son gives him the hard-sell: “They’re beautiful, like top-notch resorts. It’s like staying in a hotel practically.” His daughter-in-law proffers, “They have wonderful stores ... You can buy new shoes ...” Aside from the absurd incongruity of anyone addressing Dirty Harry in this way, Walt is the last person who belongs in an assisted-living facility. His days are filled with physical labor, whether it’s mowing the lawn or fixing his neighbors’ car, sink, or washing machine. His self-sufficiency begs the question: Whose life becomes easier with Walt in a retirement home? One look at his biceps and lean body, and his ability to hold his own against roving gangs, suggests that having him out of sight, out of mind, so to speak, would benefit his family more than him. If they don’t want to look after him, they can assuage their guilt by arranging for someone else to do so.

Later, when Thao’s sister Sue finds Walt on his porch, she asks what he’s had to eat. “Oh, I had a piece of cake, a little beef jerky,” Walt replies, reminding us of widowhood’s effect on men, who after decades of marriage no longer have wives to look after them. Finally, she lures her reluctant neighbor to her family’s barbecue with the promise of beer, and in one of the film’s funniest scenes, Walt basks in the female attention he receives from the Hmong.

Not only is Walt one of the few white people who remain in the neighborhood, his wife’s passing has left him bereft of close family ties.
women, who pile his plate high with food. “God, I’ve got more in common with these gooks than with my own spoiled, rotten family,” he later reflects.

At its core, *Gran Torino* is about the unlikely bond between two outsiders. Thao and Walt find themselves on the fringes of both their families and society. Thao doesn’t have a father and isn’t respected within his own family. His grandmother claims he’s not capable of assuming the role of “man of the house,” because he likes “women’s work” like gardening. Thao also faces the threat of being dragged into a life of violence and brutality from his cousin’s gang when he resists the pressure to join.

Walt is also alone. Not only is he part of a dwindling minority of white people who remain in the neighborhood after most have moved or died, but his wife’s passing has left him bereft of close family ties. And as an older man, he’s a loner in demographic terms—women live longer than men, and elderly women outnumber men by 3 to 2. While these numbers may seem advantageous for older guys looking for female companionship, interpreting the ratio this way obscures the problems these surviving men face—such as a disproportionate risk of suicide.

On the decimated streets, masculine struggle for control of these contested spaces pulses through nearly every scene. Young men (Asian, Latino, African-American) dominate through brute force, flashing ever-bigger guns to get their rivals to back down. Walt could skulk away if he liked, yet he thrusts himself into these confrontations, first defending Sue against harassing men and later sticking up for Thao when he’s bullied by his cousin’s gang.

But while Walt is privileged by race, he’s disadvantaged by age, and his adversaries seize on this. Staring down a loaded rifle, a Hmong gang member tells Walt, “Listen, old man, you don’t want to fuck with me ... Are you crazy?” And in a confrontation with a group of young black men, one tries to intimidate him: “What the fuck you lookin’ at, old man?” Walt responds, “Ever notice how you come across somebody once in a while that you shouldn’t have fucked with? That’s me.”

Thao presents Walt with the opportunity to pass on a lifetime of masculine knowledge. Others view Walt as useless or irrelevant. Thao helps Thao navigate the blue-collar American workplace so he can use his newly learned skills in a real job at a construction site. To prepare Thao, he brings him to the barber shop to show him “how guys talk,” and Walt and his buddy tutor their protégé on the finer points of macho culture. During the actual interview, Thao uses their tips to land his first job.

Meanwhile, Thao helps Walt find purpose. He presents Walt with the opportunity to teach him how to work with his hands and to pass on a lifetime of masculine knowledge. Others view Walt as useless or irrelevant. His own sons have jobs in sales and don’t value learning to fix things. Instead of appreciating him as a wellspring of knowledge, they see him as either a problem or as someone to get stuff from, whether it’s his car or his dead wife’s jewelry.

And Thao looks out for Walt. When Walt needs help moving a heavy freezer from his basement, Thao insists on taking—
The Plaza Principal throbs with the hip-hop sounds of a popular Mexican musical group on a Saturday night. Packed tightly, their adoring young fans wave their arms back and forth, chanting lyrics in an uncanny unison. Dressed entirely in sleek, body-hugging black, this polished ensemble features a female lead with a deep, soulful voice. An edgy, frenetic younger man with a shaved head and a goatee skips across the stage as he rips out rhymes that, somewhat incongruously to me, praise Jesus. The middle-aged keyboardist, a local tells us, is a famous Monterrey musician known for his former excesses with drugs and alcohol. With the joyful smile of a saved man, he holds down the rhythm section, sweating profusely in the hot evening air. My colleague and I dance, swept up in the irresistible buoyancy of the crowd and the slick musicality of these postmodern missionaries.

On one side of the Plaza Principal a newly remodeled, somewhat elegant hotel offers free WiFi, well-appointed valets, and remarkable tortilla soup. On another, recalling an earlier time, sits the iconic and dignified Cathedral of Guadalupe. It’s wedged between the Nike Factory Store and a first-run movie theater showing the latest Harry Potter film, dubbed into Spanish. Scattered elsewhere around the public square are teenaged lovers kissing, inebriated pan-handlers, clowns and street performers, and elote and licuados vendors working from their pushcarts with their children in tow.

Welcome to Reynosa, Tamaulipas, one of the many booming cities that have come to represent the urban frontier of the U.S.-Mexican border. As the social critic Mike Davis reminds us in his 2006 book Planet of Slums, these exploding “second-tier cities” of the