

## **Reflections on Mortality: The Imagery of Mirrors in Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino***

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Before taking up full time employment in Higher Education, Christa worked in a variety of roles within theatre, community arts and education. She gained her BA in English Language and Literature from Oxford, her MA in Cultural and Textual Studies from Sunderland, where she also completed her PHD: *Women and Guns in the Post-War Hollywood Western*. Her principal research interests are narrative and representation in film and television with an emphasis on gender. She also researches media education, and employability in the media industries.

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## **Abstract:**

Like much of Clint Eastwood's late work, *Gran Torino* is a film that directly addresses themes and images of old age. It is also a film about mortality. This article will discuss the imagery of mirrors and reflections in the film and way they are used symbolically and structurally to highlight and explore issues of aging, entropy and death. Drawing on Kathleen Woodward's notion of a mirror stage of old age it will argue that Walt moves from rejection of the aging self to a form of acceptance, albeit one that uses the heroic persona to effectively bypass natural mortality.

**Keywords:** action star; aging; mortality; mirror stage; Clint Eastwood

*"Every third thought shall be my grave" – Prospero, The Tempest Act 5, Scene 1*

## **Introduction**

Some fifty minutes into Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*, Walt (Eastwood) stands glowering at himself in a bathroom mirror, while muttering bitter words of self-loathing. He has just coughed up blood. This is the image of an old man coming, quite literally, face to face with his own mortality.

It's an unexpected predicament in which to find an action star, even one who has been aging visibly on our screens for the past thirty years. It sits oddly with a star persona predicated on toughness. The action hero, in his native genres, is constantly under threat of destruction by his enemies, constantly beset by extreme peril of one sort or another. Paradoxically, however, his fundamental mortality is effectively side-lined by these same threats. If he can overcome these clear and present dangers (and he almost always can) he will survive. Indeed his ability to emerge triumphant from experiences that would have killed a normal man is one of the key

characteristics of the action hero, evidence of his super-human strength, agility – and occasionally intelligence<sup>1</sup>. The existential threat which Eastwood/ Walt faces, however, comes not from external agents or a hostile physical environment, but from within his own aging body. Faced with the inevitability of mortality the action star has no special powers; like Prospero, casting aside his supernatural ‘charms’ in the final act of *The Tempest*, he must accept the prospect of his own decline and death. He must, in other words, accept his own humanity. In *Gran Torino*, this moment in front of the bathroom mirror is a turning point for a hero who does exactly that, allowing himself to re-join the human race.

*Gran Torino* is a film that begins with one funeral and ends with another. It is a film much preoccupied by death. But this is not the spectacularly violent version of death that titillates the action movie audience, watching from the safety of an escapist bubble: the kind of death that exists only in the improbable diegesis of the genre. This is the spectre that hangs over old age and its diseases. It is the inevitable manifestation of mortality; the unavoidable outcome of entropy. This is the kind of death that exists in the real world and in the real lives of the audience – particularly in the real lives of fans and critics who have followed Clint Eastwood since his days as Dirty Harry, Blondie or the Man with No Name.

### ***Genre Trouble***

There is a fundamental contradiction between the attributes of old age and those of action cinema – a contradiction that has to do with the nature and limits of viewing pleasure. A resolutely escapist genre, action cinema depends perhaps more than any other on the construct of the hero as flattering alter ego – an idealised self with apparently unlimited

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed Eastwood’s best known roles include heroes with powers that appear close to, if not actually, supernatural - particularly in *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider* two films which, incidentally, are reprised in the plot and ambience of *Gran Torino*.]

agency. The beautiful, perfectible body – what Chris Holmund refers to as the ‘impossible body’- is a key component of the spectacle on offer. The action hero embodies a captivating axis of identity and desire, that sutures the audience into a story world and narrative so effectively, we will take the most outrageous plot twists and the most implausible physical feats in our stride and commit to the ‘ride’. The action star persona plays an important part in fostering this commitment. Character development is not a priority in most action-driven narratives, which often rely on the star to bring an inter-textual dimension to what might otherwise present as a rather flat characterisation. Thus the action star both within the action text and independently of it, comes to combine in their overdetermined body both the object of desire and the subjective point of identification for the cinema audience. Above all, action cinema is predicated on physical prowess (albeit sometimes technically enhanced), whereas old age is characterised by declining physical powers. The aging action star thus risks becoming a contradiction in terms. The aging star body risks becoming the site of un-pleasure, failing to either simulate agency or stimulate desire in a satisfactory manner.

Where the marquee personnel of the action cinema remain bankable box-office draws into their advancing years, the industry employs a number of strategies to assimilate them. A few have the range to simply reinvent themselves and switch generic affiliations<sup>2</sup> but many continue to reprise and/ or reference their established persona. Some, such as Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis, continue to perform heroic physical acts, and to attract youthful love interest that belie their years, often under cover of a self-deprecating comic tone. Others move from the role of protagonist to that of patriarch, embodying a ‘retro’ reference point in franchise sequels, for example Harrison Ford in *Star War: Episode VII* and *Blade Runner 2049*, or Arnold Schwarzenegger in the later *Terminator* films. In contrast, Clint Eastwood’s late career has marked him out from his fellow action stars in a number of ways. He has

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<sup>2</sup> For example Russell Crowe, who has always alternated action leads with character roles.

remained the central protagonist of his films, but has not sought to hide his age<sup>3</sup> – indeed he is on record as saying he has never had plastic surgery (Phillippa Gates 177). Old age and physical decline, meanwhile, are thematically and visually central to his films from *Unforgiven* onwards. Gates has suggested that, since the 1990s the star’s “aged face and body [have been] presented as a spectacle for the audience to behold; in doing so, his body’s physical vulnerability is offered to, and read by, audiences as an emotional one” (169). For Gates this is part of a “big switch” (170) toward playing a different kind of character in a different kind of film – and indeed, the 1990s saw Eastwood makes a gradual move away from action-led genres. Nevertheless, he continues to carry his action-hero persona with him as an explicit point of reference, utilising it as part of his characterisation and/ or backstory. He has also used later work to self-consciously revisit, and deconstruct, both his back-catalogue and his own star persona.<sup>4</sup> This distinctive approach has been made possible in part by the fact that Eastwood has been directing most of his own films since the 1980s, but also by his particular brand of action hero. Eastwood was never ‘beefcake’. His victories were always dependent more on cunning than on physical strength, allowing him to take on overwhelming odds with impunity. Kathleen Murphy describes Eastwood’s *Man with No Name* as “a masculine presence predicated on the strictest conservation of energy and emotion” (17), while Chris Holmund remarks on how even the relatively youthful Eastwood of the earlier films is often characterised as the “all-knowing and all-powerful patriarch” (149). Thus his particular variety of heroism translates well into later years. In his signature roles, moreover, he always presented the audience with a rather difficult point of identification: the heroic qualities of characters like Dirty Harry and the Spaghetti Western

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<sup>3</sup> Born in 1930, Eastwood is some fifteen years senior to Ford, Stallone and Schwarzenegger, and twenty five years older than Willis

<sup>4</sup> *Unforgiven* (1992) has frequently been discussed as a deconstruction of the Western. However several of the films that follow, particularly those directed by Eastwood, have similar tendencies.

leads were nothing if not relative for, as Drucilla Cornell has remarked, in Eastwood films “the qualities of a good man are not taken for granted” (203). Both the star and his fans, therefore, come well prepared for the challenges to identification posed by a succession of protagonists who are, fundamentally, grumpy old men. It could be argued that Eastwood’s generic affiliation with the Western, moreover, is in itself a factor easing his transition into playing the aging hero. Notwithstanding its quasi-historical reference points, it is a genre that has always had a timeless quality and one that appreciates a certain world-weariness in its iconic heroes. Notwithstanding the range of action roles in which the younger Eastwood appeared, from police drama to war film, it was the Western that honed his star persona, as well as his understated directing style – a genre that, however violent, tends to retain something of the elegiac, privileging a contemplative tone over the noise and pace of the urban action film.

### ***Gran Torino***

*Gran Torino* is imbued with the elegiac tone of the Western. The urban setting, and presence of street gangs has led a number of critics to view it in relation to the *Dirty Harry* films<sup>5</sup>, however the plot is essentially a modern take on that of *Pale Rider*<sup>6</sup>. The film tells the story of Walt, an old man who has recently lost his wife and who lacks any real bond with his adult sons. The once respectable, white working class neighbourhood where he lives has gradually been populated by Hmong immigrant families, to whom he resentfully refers as ‘gooks’. His hostile attitude toward them is fuelled as much by a profound sense of alienation as it is by simple racism, and the film charts his transformation through his developing relationship with

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<sup>5</sup> See Corliss (63), Torres (66) and Kurashige

<sup>6</sup> Itself a re-working of *High Plains Drifter*

the family next door. Having more or less accidentally rescued the teenage daughter Sue (Ahney Her) from one street gang and the teenage son Thao (Bee Vang) from another Walt becomes their self-appointed protector<sup>7</sup>. He also takes it upon himself to train Thao in the skills and attitudes that he (Walt) considers essential if he is to become the 'man of the house' the family needs. Meanwhile Thao is continually harassed by a Hmong gang who want to recruit him, and Walt's attempts to warn them off backfire horribly when they re-assert their stranglehold on the community by shooting up the family house and raping Sue. Unlike the Preacher in *Pale Rider*, Walt is not able to prevent the assault on the girl: like the Preacher, however, Walt is able to engineer a showdown that keeps the younger man at a safe distance. By saving Thao from becoming either a victim or a perpetrator of gang culture he is able to end the cycle of violence, but only at the expense of his own life; for Walt, unlike the mysterious heroes of the so-called 'supernatural Westerns' this film references, is ineluctably mortal. Also unlike his mysterious predecessors, Walt has an explicit (rather than an implied) personal backstory: he has two secrets, both of which are critical in motivating his actions in the film. The first is that during the Korean War he shot a defenceless young Korean boy, and that the emotionally crippling guilt he feels is only exacerbated by the fact that he won a medal for his 'heroism' on that occasion. The second is that he is dying of a fatal lung disease. Through his self-sacrifice he is able to expiate his guilt on account of the former while avoiding the inevitable consequences of the latter.

The film has inspired a wide range of critical responses, in both the popular press and the academy. Some address concerns about the representation of the Hmong as racialized other in the service of the aggrandisement of the white male hero (Chivers; Schein and Thoj), others challenge the appropriation of the modern immigrant experience in the service of the

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<sup>7</sup> The film thus reprises a theme that seems to run through all Eastwood's late films: that of the bad father who seeks to make amends either through re-establishing a relationship with his actual children or by forming a familial bond with substitute 'children'.

ideology of the American Dream (Kinney). A number address the themes of redemption from a range of perspectives (Modleski; Redding; Machuco; Roche and Hösle), while others focus on the interplay of age and masculinity (Torres; Dargis; Hornaday). This article, while touching on a number of these, will focus specifically on the theme of mortality and how it is expressed through the imagery of mirrors, reflections and doubles within the film.

### **The Mirror Stage of Old Age**

The mirror has played an important part in how we understand cinema, as well as being a powerful narrative device within film texts. Christian Metz first used Lacan's so called 'mirror stage' as a metaphor for the act of watching cinema, and to explain something of its powerful attraction and visual pleasures. Lacan observes the fascination for the toddler of his [sic] own image and hypothesises that this characterises a key developmental stage, during which the child acquires an awareness of self and enters into 'the imaginary' – a prerequisite for the acquisition of language. The toddler has an incomplete sense of his own physical boundaries and abilities, of 'self' as opposed to 'other'. He also has imperfect control of his physical actions. His image in the mirror, by contrast is whole, complete and distinct from other objects. It constitutes for him an image of perfection – an idealised self, albeit an illusion. For Metz, an audience's relationship to the image on the cinema screen is analogous. Although clearly the viewer is aware that the image is not of himself, nevertheless he can identify with the image of the protagonist as an idealised self, signifying the unattainable completeness for which the viewer yearns. Feminist film theorists, following Laura Mulvey's lead, have both problematized and exploited the Lacanian construct to unpack ideas of identity and gender, addressing in particular the representation of women on screen and the experience of female audiences. On-screen mirrors have been interpreted both



in terms of masochistic over-identification with the object of the gaze (suggesting an abject lack of subjectivity/ agency in the figure of the woman) and in terms of narcissism (expressing the conflation/ coexistence of identification & desire). They are also associated with unstable identity (particularly as used in *film noir* and melodrama), the mirror image standing as a metaphor for the masquerade, or (when shattered or cracked) for the fractured self. In every reading, however, they complicate the relationship between the character, the viewer and the gaze.<sup>8</sup> In *Aging and its Discontents*, Kathleen Woodward, notes that “the image of the mirror dominates western literary representations of the aged body” (62). She recounts a number of scenes from Proust’s *The Past Recaptured* in which Marcel encounters people he has not seen for some time and is shocked to discover that they have become old. He satirises them with a vindictiveness that is symptomatic of his own fear of aging, and resolves to keep his distance from these diseased old bodies. Eventually, however, he is forced to look in a mirror and to acknowledge that he too is old. Woodward also relates a tale of Freud catching his own reflection in a window and mistaking it for that of an old man....which, of course, it is. For Woodward this rejection of the aging body is culturally determined, and closely associated with the social marginalisation of the elderly in modern Western society:

Given the western obsession with the body of youth, we can understand the "horror" of the mirror image of the "decrepit" body as having been produced as the inverse of the pleasures of the mirror image of the body of Narcissus. (62)

Woodward hypothesises a mirror stage of old age, which inverts Lacan’s mirror stage of infancy.<sup>9</sup> While the child is delighted with his image, the elderly person rejects it. While the

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<sup>8</sup> The significance of mirrors in *film noir* generally is explored by Place and Peterson in their 1974 article on the genre.

<sup>9</sup> Holmlund (145) attributes the original idea to Charlotte Herfray in *La Vieillesse: Une interprétation psychanalytique*, Desclée de Brouwer, EPI, 1988

first reflection offers a promise of wholeness to the child, who's bodily experience is as yet uncoordinated and undifferentiated, the second reflection belies the aging subject's internal sense of wholeness, "uncannily prefiguring the disintegration and nursling dependence of advanced age" (67). While the first engenders identification, reinforcing a developing sense of self, the second engenders alienation, creating a cognitive chasm between the aging body in the mirror and a self which is not perceived as old. This mirror stage of old age, for Woodward, is marked by the uncanny<sup>10</sup> because it forces the subject to acknowledge that which has been repressed (the familiar yet frightening spectre of our own old age), and because the reflection is a form of *doppelgänger*, a figure associated, in most western traditions, with imminent death.

### ***The Screen-as-Mirror***

While Woodward has developed her hypothesis with reference to literary representations, the cinematic applications are clear. Given film's special relationship with mirrors, the notion of a reverse mirror stage can usefully be deployed to explore both the construct of screen-as-mirror, and representations of reflections, doubles and mirrors on screen. For the aging action star the function of the screen-as-mirror is problematic, threatening to replace visual pleasure with displeasure and destabilising the axis of identification and desire on which the success of action hero is predicated. The notion of viewer pleasure predicated on identification has been problematized in many ways, for example by Murray Smith, who finds notes that it "describes only one possible relationship between character and spectator" (39).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless the relatively simple narrative strategies of the traditional action genres are calibrated to produce the hero as an idealised proxy for the viewing subject. These films,

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<sup>10</sup> Referencing Freud's 1919 essay on *The Uncanny*.

<sup>11</sup> Smith argues for a more nuanced 'structure of sympathy' in the relationship between spectator and text (34).

more than any others, flatter their audiences with eternally young mirror images, expressing a degree of agency that sits comfortably with the internalised self-image of the viewing subject: the physical beauty and prowess of the action hero is combined to produce a spectacle that offers both scopophilic and narcissistic pleasures. The aging action star, within this dynamic, risks appearing before us like the portrait of Dorian Grey, revealing an unpalatable, disavowed reality.

*Gran Torino* not only puts the ageing body on screen without mercy, it challenges audience empathy through presenting us with an initially unlikable character whose diminishing powers are repeatedly thrown into stark relief. Nevertheless, we are inveigled into aligning ourselves with the grumpy old protagonist by a narrative that intrigues and, on the whole, flatters the viewer with unexpected reversals, surprising loyalties and a satisfying tale of redemption. A key factor, at least for the mature audience, whom Eastwood seeks to address (Gentry and Eastwood), is the reprise of the heroic persona and of the associated set pieces recognisable from the Eastwood back-catalogue. Richard Combs has noted how, as a director, Eastwood exploits his own on-screen persona, such that all his more recent roles are explicitly “preceded by all the men with no name, high plains drifters, and pale riders.”(30). Here, as elsewhere, familiar tropes are reworked with a touch of irony: the economy with dialogue and laconic sneer of earlier Eastwood heroes becomes an actual wordless snarl in the early scenes of *Gran Torino*, while the ubiquitous cigar becomes a cigarette – a cigarette that is explicitly killing the smoker. The armed defence of the Western homestead is replayed on Walt’s pocket-sized lawn, while the steely, understated way in which Walt calls the bluff of the street gang tormenting Sue is reminiscent of a succession of such scenes in films from the Spaghetti Westerns to the *Dirty Harry* cycle. The audience is effectively watching two Eastwoods: the old man<sup>12</sup> and the younger action star whose phantom hovers

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<sup>12</sup> Eastwood was almost 80 when he made the film

behind him. The sense of a lived history inscribed on the face and body of the aging star may produce the most powerful affect associated with Eastwood's performance as Walt, but it is underpinned by the memories of past 'lives'. From the perspective of a star-struck audience the screen in this instance might be best conceived of as a two-way mirror: from one angle they see themselves reflected, along with an elegiac rendering of the America Dream - from another they see through it the refracted images of Clint Eastwood's iconic roles.

Tania Modleski, in her article on Eastwood's "Male Weepies" has remarked on the degree to which "reviewers and critics of Eastwood films continually slide between talking about Eastwood characters and Eastwood the man" (137) unable, it seems, to clearly demarcate the line between the two. She further remarks on the degree of over-investment in the star by his admirers. Sceptical of the narratives of redemption in Eastwood's late films, which in her view do more to perpetuate white male privilege than to seriously challenge its hold on culture through narratives of heroism and virility, Modleski dubs Eastwood a 'melancholic', in the Freudian sense of one who internalises a lost object, both identifying with and disavowing it. She finds the same quality in much of the critical writing about his late films. Clearly conceiving of the screen as a metaphysical, if not a physical, mirror she speculates:

Is Clint Eastwood thinking about the tomb these days? Certainly many critics seem to have it on their minds when they look into his face. The various characters played by Eastwood in his late years may be melancholic, but it seems that for many critics Eastwood as an aging figure approaching death is also the object of their melancholy.

(146)

For these critics, it would appear, Eastwood's image functions as something of a *memento mori*, an image of loss (both his and theirs), but one on which, like Proust's conflicted hero, they choose to dwell nevertheless in search of truth and, perhaps, reassurance.

### *Mirrors and Mirror-Images on Screen*

Walt's relationship with his own mortality, in *Gran Torino*, is tracked through the imagery of mirrors, and through the wider use of mirror images in the film. Of the five key scenes that focus on Walt's reflection in an actual mirror, three are concerned with the spectre of the failing body, while two represent, simultaneously, the acceptance of mortality and a kind of triumph over it with the return of the narcissistic projection of a coherent self. What might be termed 'incidental' reflections, meanwhile, ensure that the figure of the aging hero is constantly shadowed by his *doppelgänger*, the harbinger of death, as well as highlighting the narrative of substitution whereby the old man must eventually cede his place in the symbolic order to the young heir. Themes of recognition, misrecognition and rejection are also played out in response to the two other elderly characters with whom Walt must engage in the course of the film.

The grandmother of the Hmong family next door is placed in explicit symmetry with Walt. We first encounter Grandma (Chee Thao) after Walt's wife's funeral: she comes out to sit on her front porch, while Walt mows his lawn. He mutters to her under his breath, to the effect that she should go home; she speaks to him (in Hmong) with equal hostility, wondering why he doesn't leave the neighbourhood, like the other white people. He spits; she spits. Later scenes show them on their respective porches, glowering at each other. Even when Walt becomes the self-appointed protector of her grandchildren, Grandma makes no secret of her suspicion and dislike, and he avoids engaging with her. Toward the end of the film, however, he entrusts her with the care of his beloved dog as he sets off for to what he knows will be his death. It seems he finally recognises his kinship with his fellow elder, acknowledges their shared humanity, only at the moment when he makes peace with his own mortality.

The second Hmong elder Walt encounters is the shaman whom he meets when Sue invites him to a family celebration on what, it turns out, is Walt's own birthday. Made uncomfortable by the old man's stare, he regards him with marked antipathy, but when Sue explains that the shaman is interested in him and would like to 'read' him, he seems mollified and concedes, a little flattered. The 'reading' itself, however, makes him uncomfortable with its uncanny accuracy: the sage tells him that people do not respect him, even see him – that he has no happiness, no peace, because of a mistake he made that has not been resolved. Deeply affected, Walt gets up and walks away: it is at this point he starts to cough blood and heads up to the bathroom. Again an encounter with another old person brings Walt face to face with his own mortality and simultaneously with his own discontent and self-loathing. This encounter signals a turning point in the narrative, setting him on a path toward reconciliation – with his mortality and with himself.

It is following this encounter with an old man who is 'other' than himself, and simultaneously with the old man he has become, as reflected in the shamans 'reading', that Walt first looks in a physical mirror. As he stands at the bathroom sink, regarding his scowling image, his disgust at the blood is as nothing compared with his disgust at himself. He washes his face and tells his reflection that he has more in common with the 'gooks' than with his own family: it is an expression of the alienation he feels – yet it also points toward a more positive realisation. The common ground he will find with his new 'family' will prove his salvation. Walt turns away from the mirror to leave, then turns back to tell himself 'Happy Birthday'; although the line is delivered with bitter irony, it will in fact prove to be so. The Walt who returns downstairs seems to have left his racist, misanthropic bitterness with his *doppelgänger* in the bathroom. He starts to enjoy the company of his fellow human beings – in particular he starts to enjoy the food: failure to enjoy food was highlighted in the shaman's 'reading' as a marker of his despair and self-loathing. He takes delight in the young people,

chatting to Youa (Choua Kue) and handing out dating advice to Thao, which will prove to be the start of their quasi father-son relationship. He also makes himself useful, fixing an unstable washing machine – a precursor to his new role as the family’s protector. When Youa ask him what he does, he replies, with some pride, “I fix things”. This reassertion of identity will also prove to be a succinct plot summary, for ‘fixing things’ is largely what Walt does for the rest of the film - effectively ‘fixing’ himself along the way. It is also in a very literal sense a key part of the new identity he will bequeath to Thao, who’s training in the art of DIY begins shortly afterwards.

The two subsequent mirror scenes directly relate to his illness. Although this is never explicitly stated the viewer is in no doubt that the disease is terminal, and it is Walt’s reactions in these two scenes that communicate this. The second mirror scene finds Walt once again in the bathroom spitting up blood, when Thao rings his doorbell to report for duty, Walt looks at himself in something between anger and disgust, rejecting his failing body; answering the door he snaps at Thao - mainly because he’s there but also, perhaps, because he’s young. As the boy leaves, crestfallen, Walt immediately regrets his tone and makes as if to call him back - but he cannot articulate his feelings and retreats into his usual snarl as he shuts the door. The expression is clearly directed not at Thao, however, but at himself.

The next sequence sees Walt at the doctor’s surgery, immediately followed by another mirror scene during which Walt attempts to tell his son about his diagnosis. This third mirror scene is of particular interest in the light of Woodward’s suggestion that the aging subject may fail to identify with the mirror image. The opening shot is of a wedding photo, showing the young Walt with his beloved wife. A pan up to the dressing table mirror behind the photograph reveals the old Walt, before cutting to the test results lying on the bed. This

juxtaposition makes explicit the notions of misrecognition and unstable identity. The younger image represents the 'real' Walt, the version of himself with whom the character identifies. But this also the young man who did terrible things in Korea – deeds that have haunted the older Walt, preventing him from bonding with his sons and embittering him as the shaman revealed. Walt's phone call to his son is spectacularly unsuccessful – in part due to their chronic inability to communicate, and in part to the inherent difficulty of the subject matter. Walt, understandably, struggles to name, and thus accept, a sentence of death by disintegration; indeed he will never share it with another human being. In contrast to the previous angry encounters with his mirror image, this sequence has a mournful, melancholy tone. Walt's solitary phone call is compared with his preoccupied son's busy life at the other end of the line, emphasising the lack of physical co-presence as well as the rift in their relationship. Walt has only himself to commune with, entirely alone in the face of his approaching fate. In all three of these mirror scenes the mirror image is associated with entropy and mortality, with physical decline in old age. All three scenes are characterised by alienation from and rejection of the aging self.

The premonitions of mortality that inform these three scenes are reinforced by incidental reflections in the mise-en-scene of the film. Walt's favourite spot is the front porch of his house, from where he can survey his small domain, his neighbours, his young protégé and any incoming threat in the form of the Hmong gang members. The porch is backed by a large, un-curtained picture window, as a result of which Walt's reflection is a frequent presence, like the shadowy *doppelgänger* of tradition. This presence is particularly marked in the scenes where Walt is training Thao to 'fix things'. Under the older man's watchful eye, Thao becomes increasingly proficient and physically resilient, taking on tasks that are now too demanding for Walt's declining powers – and stepping into the role of the idealised



homesteader, as he tidies up the neighbourhood. In effect, Walt is preparing his young successor to take his place, - all the while unwittingly haunted by the presence of his own retreating ghost.

Another incidental reflection is used to emphasise this narrative of substitution, in the scene where Walt goes to request Thao's help in moving an old freezer which has proved too heavy for him to manage alone. Arriving at his neighbour's house, Walt is reflected in the glass of the front door; when Thao comes to answer, his image is superimposed on that of the older man, and then replaces it altogether as the door opens. The scene that follows explicitly compares the two men, emphasising their physical disparities. Walt wants to take most of the weight in the task of dragging the machine up the cellar steps, with Thao just providing a bit of extra muscle, but Thao insists on reversing their positions, making explicit reference to Walt's age as he takes a far more assertive tone than he has done previously: "No, you listen old man. I came here because you needed help..." Having successfully got the machine up and out of the house, they pause to rest and each, wincing, rubs his strained back. This functions as a further reflection, reinforcing the sense of the parallel experience that will allow Thao to become Walt's spiritual heir. Indeed it is soon after this scene that Walt begins his programme of teaching Thao to "be a man". The construct of Thao as Walt's heir apparent both ameliorates and exacerbates the narrative of mortality. On the one hand, on a mythic level, passing the torch (in this case of the immigrant working class experience and the American Dream) on to a youthful acolyte enables Walt to overcome the threat of death as erasure. Thao will become a man modelled on Walt and will be a good custodian for his

Gran Torino<sup>13</sup>. On the other hand, Thao's growing physical strength throws into relief the decline in Walt's; his youth highlights Walt's age.

A newly optimistic tone informs the final two mirror scenes, which form part of a sequence in which Walt prepares for his 'showdown' with the Hmong gangsters, and for its aftermath: his funeral. Walt's attitude to his reflection, and to his own mortality is quite different from before – if deeply paradoxical. He seems at once to make his peace with the idea of death, and, with a return to narcissism, to rebel against the spectre of old age. It is clear throughout that Walt is approaching his journey's end. We recognise the routine of the cowboy getting spruced up in anticipation of his final shoot-out: the sequence begins with Walt taking a bath, and enjoying a cigarette while doing so, in a one-off contravention of his wife's rules on smoking indoors. We do not know, at this stage, exactly what he has in mind for the Hmong gang, but we know he will take them on single-handed and that the odds are against him surviving the encounter.

The fourth mirror scene takes place in the barber's shop. The opening shot is of the back of Walt's head; his face reflected out of focus in the mirror. The focus shifts to his reflection, as he asks his friend the barber for a "straight shave" – a luxury, we learn, he has never experienced before. He spins to face the camera, holding up twenty dollars which, he jokes dryly, are "just in case you hit my jugular". Between the black humour and the unaccustomed luxury there is something of the convicts 'last request' about this scene.

Walt's quiet smile as he turns back to face the mirror suggests a man at peace with himself – a very different image to that we encountered in the first mirror scene. There is no alienation from or rejection of the image here, but a something more akin to narcissism – a relationship with an idealised self, which can coexist with mortality as long as the latter is firmly linked to

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<sup>13</sup> A more fitting heir than Walt's own sons, with their white-collar jobs and foreign-made cars.

heroism and agency. The barber has commented in a previous scene that Walt should get his hair cut more often, the clear implication being that Walt has been letting himself go, so the association here with restored self-esteem accompanying a new sense of purpose is explicit.

The sequence continues in a similar vein, with a cut from Walt's reflection in the barber's mirror to a shot of his fragmented body in a tailor's shop. The be-suited body is only partially shown as the tailor works on adjusting the fabric. The camera pans round and climbs until Walt's head is in shot, but in semi-profile from behind: his front view is seen only in the mirror. In fact it is seen in an array of three mirrors, one an angled reflection of a reflection, while Walt remarks (echoing the previous scene) that he has never been fitted for a suit before. Here we are presented with a fractured self even at the moment of narcissism. The scene once again evokes Woodward's construct of a second mirror phase, but not, on this occasion, through alienation from or rejection of the mirror image; instead it is the reflection's failure to reinforce the concept of a coherent self that challenges our hero's reassertion of wholeness, presaging the end.

During this sequence Walt is mentally preparing for death – but he is also preparing to 'go out with a bang'. By embracing a heroic exit he plans to, effectively, beat death - or at least to beat the prospect of an abject, protracted death from disease. His self-sacrifice will not only save his soul, as an act of atonement, it will also save him from the inexorable entropy of old age. Physically, what he is actually preparing for here is an afterlife of sorts. He wants to look his best for his funeral – his final public appearance. In his imagination he is skipping from the set-up for his imminent 'suicide by gang', past the moment of death itself, to the moment after. There is something of a bid for immortality here. By finding meaning in his final act, by dying *for* something in the best heroic tradition, Walt gets to triumph over the

void of nothingness that otherwise looms for an individual who, unlike his wife, does not believe in a shared eternity.

## Conclusion

Walt's legacy, and Eastwood's presence, continue to dominate the closing scenes of the film as voices from beyond the graves — both intra-diegetically, through the reading of Walt's decidedly performative will, and extra-diegetically, through the song "Gran Torino", performed by Eastwood, that plays over the credits as Thao drives along the promenade in the eponymous car. Nevertheless it is the unequivocal mortality of Eastwood's character that distinguishes the film and makes Walt one of the most engaging of the actor's recent roles. Mortality, after all, is a defining characteristic of humanity — it is what separates us from the gods, ancient and modern, including the superhuman action heroes of our screens. In referencing his cinematic past, Eastwood not only appropriates the qualities of his iconic roles to inform Walt's characterisation, he also highlights the disparity between their apparent indestructibility and Walt's frail humanity.

The final showdown, in which Walt, unarmed, fools the gang members into shooting him down in cold blood in front of witnesses, is laden with imagery. Walt's use of his army lighter as a prop (symbolising perhaps the compromised heroism of his youth), and his dead body, laying in the form of a crucifixion, have been much discussed<sup>14</sup>. However the scene also references the exploits of the young Clint Eastwood, the trickster hero whose unexpected moves always got the better of stronger, more numerous enemies — and always with the minimum expenditure of energy. It is a fitting finale<sup>15</sup> for an elderly hero, and for one so

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<sup>14</sup> See Hornaday; Roche and Hösle

<sup>15</sup> As well as being Walt's finale, this scene was initially heralded as Eastwood's (not least by himself: see Jamieson), however he went on to star in *Trouble with the Curve*, directed by Robert Lorenz, and *The Mule*,

closely aligned with the ghosts of heroes past. This latter-day manifestation of the iconic action star has chosen to repudiate violence, but not action. He has chosen death-by-action over death-by-entropy, reasserting his agency even as he finally surrenders it. It is a narrative of hope, whatever one's response to the religious imagery, because Walt has found meaning in his death and thus in his life. Given Woodward's characterisation of the reverse mirror stage as a cultural phenomenon, a reaction to the devaluing of the aging subject, the rediscovery of meaning is critical. It is the return of meaning that informs the change of tone from rejection and alienation to acceptance and positive identification charted through Walt's reflected images (literal and otherwise) over the course of the film. It is this too that provides reassurance to those melancholy critics and fans, peering with trepidation into the opaque mirror of the cinema screen.

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