Walt Kowalski A Christ-Figure? Christic Resonances in Gran Torino

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Abstract
This article explores some of the resonances that an audience with biblical and Christian sensibilities might experience through a viewing of Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008). The key criteria employed in Christ-figure research, that is, those criteria that constructively centre on the New Testament metanarrative of crucifixion and resurrection, are applied to *Gran Torino*. Other resonances, which may strike viewers familiar with additional aspects of the Gospels, are presented, including the concept of an honorable death and leadership struggles. This article concludes that the character Walt Kowalski in *Gran Torino* is a Christ-figure, who embodies Jesus’ self-sacrificial vision of life presented in such texts as John 10: 15 and 15: 13.

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Introduction

*Gran Torino* (2008) is an American drama film produced and directed by Clint Eastwood, who also assumes the role of lead actor. Right from the outset, it becomes abundantly clear that Eastwood is having fun with this film and its central character, Walt Kowalski. Credit must go to Eastwood, given that his penchant for fun does not undermine the serious nature of the plot. The majority of film reviewers draw attention to Kowalski’s troubled existence in a changing world. Conflict escalates after the death of Kowalski’s wife, particularly as Kowalski’s life becomes embroiled with the Hmong family living next door. At the surface level of plot, this is a story about a man and his struggles with himself and the world around him. At a deeper level, however, this is a profoundly religious story through which a viewer may, to use Robert Ellis’ expression, “stumble across the gospel travelling incognito.”

Many scholars have demonstrated successfully that ostensibly secular films can sustain a religious interpretation. The potential for audiences to tap into the religious nature of certain films, to perceive a sacred subtext, is due to the fact that “narratives have a dual nature, namely, an overt plot and a covert storyline of varying complexity that is comparable to the metaphorical or symbolic within literature.” For this reason, as Anton Kozlovic explains, “secular film can engage in religious storytelling without appearing ‘religious’.” While most reviewers of
Gran Torino focus largely on the overt plot, there are nevertheless faint perceptions among some film reviewers of what Michael Paul Gallagher would call “anonymous religiousness.” As one critic puts it: “Gran Torino turns out to be surprisingly funny, kind of sweet and consistently entertaining, moving at a relaxed but steady pace toward an ending that, in retrospect, seems pre-ordained. It's a myth-making act, that ending. Isn't that what classic movies are all about?”

The Christ-figure

The quest for the so called “Christ-figure” in non-religious films has been a popular enterprise for some time now. Some scholars have composed specific criteria in order to establish the existence of Christ-figures in film. A large proportion of these criteria constructively centre on the New Testament metanarrative of crucifixion and resurrection, including a cruciform pose, a willing sacrifice leading to redemption and a metaphorical resurrection, all of which are applied to Gran Torino in the present article. If, as Adele Reinhartz suggests, “Christ-figures can be identified … by particular actions that link them with Jesus, such as being crucified symbolically,” then Walt Kowalski comes very close to being a Christ-figure. Matthew McEver’s insight that “any good Christological film” will make “its hero a martyr” can also be applied to Gran Torino, given the protagonist’s manner of death in the closing stages of the film.
The identification of specific criteria ought not to exclude other resonances that an audience with a general biblical or Christian effective historical consciousness might experience through a viewing of a film. A viewer acquainted with the dynamics of honor and shame at work in the Gospel narratives might be more attentive to the concept of an honorable death in *Gran Torino*. In similar vein, an audience aware of the root causes of the plot’s conflict in each of the Gospels might perceive leadership struggles to be at play in *Gran Torino*. Setting up two texts or stories as dialogue partners allows for the awakening of new insights or the sharpening of old insights.

**Kowalski’s Death: Garden Setting, Final Prayer and Cruciform Pose**

Kozloviv identifies the cruciform pose as “an unmistakable visual emblem of their [characters’] Christic nature.” The cruciform pose is employed in one of the climactic scenes of *Gran Torino*, in which the escalating conflict between Kowalski and the Smokie’s Hmong gang reaches its ultimate resolution. Strategically positioned in the front garden of the gang’s residence, Kowalski enters into a confrontational encounter with the film’s chief antagonists. Both the night time garden setting and the final prayer mumbled by Kowalski in the face of inevitable death might lead an audience to recall the Gethsemane scene in the Gospel traditions ([Mk 14: 32-42; Mt 26: 36-46; Jn 18: 1-10](#)). However, this is not a prayer of anguish, and unlike the synoptic Jesus, Walt Kowalski does not
struggle with his impending death. From this perspective, the Christic resemblance is more closely associated with the composed Johannine Jesus. Similar to the disposition of Jesus in the parallel account in John’s Gospel (Jn 18:1-10), Kowalski is in complete control of the action and freely lays down his life.

The moment of Kowalski’s death in *Gran Torino* is both heart-wrenching and brutal. As the bullets rain on the protagonist’s chest, Walt, remaining momentarily in an upright position, begins to extend his hands. He then falls to the ground and the blood drains from his body. The overhead camera shot intensifies this character’s Christic status, as it displays Kowalski in a cruciform pose for a number of seconds. Furthermore, as his grip loosens, the viewer learns that he does not possess a gun and, subsequently, observes the blood flowing from his wrist into the palm of his right hand. This close-up shot of Kowalski’s bloody palm at the moment of expiration creates another parallel with Jesus’ crucifixion – “the mark of the nails in his hands” (Jn 20:25). This image not only brings Jesus’ crucifixion into view, but also the extra-biblical experience of the stigmata. Lloyd Baugh has shown that the stigmata is an identifiable feature for classifying saints in films as a Christ-figure: “In general, if the saint is a martyr, the Christ-image is clearer. In general, in the case of saints who receive the stigmata, the visual signs of the passion of Christ, their representation of Christ is more evident.”

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A Willing Sacrifice Leading To Redemption

The concept of a willing sacrifice leading to redemption or salvation is another strong indication that a silver screen character resembles Jesus, who willingly spilled his blood for humanity’s redemption. There is no doubt that Walt Kowalski sheds his blood, but the question remains as to whether or not his death is a sacrificial act which brings about some form of redemption. Interestingly, the original script as presented on the IMSDb provides the following description and interpretation of Kowalski’s death: “Walt falls dead. A ZIPPO lighter clutched in his hand. Walt never intended to kill anyone. Self-sacrifice.”

Undoubtedly, the director has accentuated the self-sacrificial nature of the protagonist’s death, given the depiction of Walt’s death as a human bloodbath.

In relation to the concept of a willing sacrifice, Kozloviv clarifies that “having assumed the mantle of Christhood, Christ-figures are frequently empowered to choose sacrifice out of their newfound knowledge, status, position, mission requirements.” This aspect of the Christ-figure is based on gospel passages that indicate Jesus’ willingness to offer his life as a ransom for many, such as the fourth evangelist’s metaphorical depiction of Jesus’ death in John 10:15 (“And I lay down my life for the sheep”) and John 15:13 (“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends”). A genuine
sacrificial act is carried out willingly on behalf of another, who benefits in some way from the sacrifice.

The claim that Walt Kowalski’s death is a willing sacrifice is justified by surveying the final hours of the protagonist’s life. Kowalski’s decision to offer his life is not an eleventh hour decision. Unquestionably, he knows the fate that awaits him. That his death is a free decision of the will is communicated by the manner in which Kowalski prepares for the ultimate confrontation in the garden. He mows the lawn one last time, smokes in the house for the first time and places his dog in the care of his Hmong neighbours. He buys a fitted suit and has a straight shave, luxuries to which he had not succumbed up to this point. He has a final confession with Father Janovich. Like Jesus in each of the Gospels, Walt has a last supper in the form of the most expensive liqueur in his local establishment. When giving Tao his Silver Star medal, he assesses that “There’s always a chance you won’t come back.” Walt’s willing and noble sacrifice is reminiscent of the Johannine Jesus: “I lay it down of my own accord” (Jn 10:28); “No one takes it from me” (Jn 10:18).

The self-sacrificial nature of Walt’s death is inextricably related to his role as savior or redeemer. Kozloviv notes that “Christ-figures are frequently crafted in either a saviour mode or a redeemer mode. . . . In essence, ‘saviour Christ-figures’ represent Jesus’ rescuing, liberating leading, transforming or saving
functions in the spirit of Mark 12:31: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’. In Boris Sagal’s The Omega Man (1971), Baugh identifies a Christ-figure in saviour mode: “In the conclusion … the blood of the hero is shed as the price for the freedom and the life of the people.” In a similar manner, Kowalski’s death is an embodiment of redemptive love of neighbour. There are many examples throughout Gran Torino of Walt’s disposition of love towards Sue and Tao, literally his neighbours. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this. About thirty minutes into the film, Walt saves Sue from probable danger at the hands of three neighborhood thugs. On another occasion in the film, Walt intervenes to save Tao from Smokie’s gang in the front garden of his Hmong neighbours. This is interpreted as a salvific act by the Hmong community, which brings gifts as a sign of appreciation. In an ensuing dialogue, Sue interprets Walt’s actions as salvific: “you saved Tao.”

The climax of this theme of salvation/redemption occurs when Walt gives his own life to save Tao. Walt had figured out long before his sacrificial death that Tao’s future was on the line. In one scene, as the gang drives by, Walt exclaims that “This kid doesn’t have a chance.” In the aftermath of the rape of Tao’s sister, Walt surmises that “Tao and Sue are never going to find peace in this world as long as that gang is around.” In the same scene, Father Janovich informs Walt that Tao is sitting outside and wants vengeance: “you know what he expects.” From
this moment on, Walt puts a master plan in place. As he prepares the artillery in
the presence of Tao, he tricks his young friend into believing that both of them
together would make things right. A second deception soon follows, and Tao
finds himself locked up in Walt’s basement, as Walt faces the antagonists alone.
Walt’s solo act gives life to Tao. If Tao and Walt had confronted the gang
together with all guns blazing, then the outcome would surely have been the death
of Tao or imprisonment for murder. Walt brings about ultimate resolution to the
escalating conflict between the gang and Tao by his willingness to perform this
redemptive act alone. There are certain resonances between this solo performance
and Jesus carrying the cross without the assistance of Simon of Cyrene in the
Gospel of John, given that Jesus alone effects the salvation of mankind. From this
perspective also, Walt Kowalski is a Christ-figure. As Kozloviv remarks in
relation to redeemer Christ-figures: “they leave improved people or situations
behind them in the spirit of John 15:13: ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a
man lay down his life for his friends’. ” 17

Conflicting Leadership Roles

Much of the conflict of Gran Torino’s plot arises due to two competing forms of
leadership or shepherding, to use a prominent biblical metaphor. This mirrors the
conflict between Jesus and the authorities in the Gospels. The death of Jesus in
the synoptic tradition, for example, is a consequence of Jesus’ challenge to both
the temple system and the leadership of the people. In relation to the latter, there are many instances in the Gospels where Jesus characterizes the nature of the authorities’ leadership in negative terms. Their leadership is not life-giving and does not bring wholeness, but rather leads to death and defilement. This is captured metaphorically by the Lukan Jesus’ pronouncement: “Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it” (Lk 11:44). Just as Jesus’ increasing conflict with the authorities in the Gospels results in his death, and can be seen to arise out of competing views about how the people should be guided, the relationship between Walt and Smokie’s gang operates according to a similar dynamic.

The gang’s initial interest in Tao, and the persistent badgering that follows, is motivated by the misguided notion that gang membership would provide the necessary protection from other ethnic gangs within the neighborhood and, concomitantly, lead to the betterment of Tao’s life. As Spider entices Tao to join the gang, he explains, “You just need someone to protect you man.” As the friendship between Walt and Tao develops, a viewer witnesses Walt assuming a shepherding role. Under the guidance of Walt, Tao develops as a human person, and begins to throw off the shackles of inhibition that have heretofore held him back. This relationship with Walt is certainly a life-giving experience for Tao, and
finds its ultimate expression in Walt’s sacrificial death, which finally frees Tao from the clutches of Smokie’s gang.

Honor and Shame: An Honorable Death

Another characteristic feature associated with the metanarrative of crucifixion and resurrection is the concept of honor and shame. Cultural and rhetorical approaches to the New Testament are fruitful interpretative lenses for a variety of New Testament pericopae, including the passion and resurrection narratives. In the Greco-Roman world crucifixion – the capital punishment of the Roman Empire – was the standard means of implementing the penalty of death for slaves, common criminals and the like, and, unquestionably, was conceived of as a shameful event (Heb 12:2). Characteristic features of crucifixion in the Greco-Roman world included, for example, being crucified naked and being mocked. Even though certain humiliating aspects of crucifixion are evident in the Gospel of John (e.g. Jn 19:23-24), they are more pronounced in the synoptic Gospels (e.g. Mk 15:27-32; Matt 27:38-43; Lk 23:35-36).

Jesus’ honor, however, is maintained in all four Gospels as various witnesses (including the reader/hearer) experience the Risen Lord. The resurrection narratives and, in particular, the empty tomb episode show that Jesus has conquered death by Roman crucifixion through the resurrection – God has
vindicated Jesus. From this perspective, the original hearers of the Gospels would have interpreted crucifixion in a counterintuitive way and, therefore, as a means through which Jesus’ honor is maintained. In relation to the fourth Gospel, Jerome Neyrey has successfully demonstrated that the fourth evangelist has crafted the passion narrative in a manner that elucidates and maintains Jesus’ honor. Two key elements find similar expression in the story of Walt Kowalski. Shame is turned into honor, given that (1) the Johannine Jesus freely chooses to lay down his life and (2) is in complete control of his own destiny. From this perspective, Walt Kowalski’s death is an honorable death.

Furthermore, the dynamic of honor and shame is at play in *Gran Torino* in another way. The concept of honor is deeply associated with Kowalski’s war feats and accolades. Although the ghosts of the Korean War haunt the protagonist, particularly the deaths of boys who were massacred at his hand, Walt has received a medal for his service. In an early scene, Walt’s grandson David finds the medal hidden away in the basement, along with some old war photos. A viewer is not exposed to the medal again until Walt passes it on to Tao before he goes to his death. When Tao arrives at the scene of Walt’s death, he is wearing the Silver Star medal around his neck. Kowalski’s medal of service is fitting for this occasion through which he gives up his life in the service of another. The concept of a noble and honorable death is brought to the fore for the perceptive viewer.
A Metaphorical Resurrection

A resurrection motif is another indicator of a character’s Christic resemblance. While it is apparent that Walt’s death “gives life” to Tao, there are other elements of *Gran Torino* that point toward a resurrection motif. As Baugh explains: “After his death, Jesus of Nazareth was recognized as the Christ in his Resurrection, and … a filmic Christ-figure is authentic when there is metaphorical representation of the Resurrection.”

Baugh presents an example of a subtle resurrection metaphor in Ermanno Olmi’s *The Tree of the Wooden Clogs* (1978), whereby the peasant Battisti “has risked and lost all to give his son a chance to go to school.”

Victory, hope for the future and, ultimately, resurrection occur when his boy keeps doing his homework following his father’s sacrifice. The resurrection metaphor in *Gran Torino* is just as subtle and comes in the guise of Kowalski’s 1972 vintage Gran Torino. In many ways, the Gran Torino is a metaphorical representation of the character of Walt Kowalski. Both are in pristine condition, as Walt keeps himself well-groomed and his property in order. Both represent a different time and generation. The Gran Torino, in mint condition, stands in stark contrast to the cars of the Hmong and Latino gangs.

The contrast between the Gran Torino and the gangs’ cars is inextricably related to the contrast between the horizons that both Walt and the Hmong gang paint for Tao, between two competing forms of mentoring or leadership. The last
scene of the film shows Tao driving the Gran Torino into the distance, with Walt’s dog in the passenger’s seat and a look of contentment on his face. Like Baugh’s illustration of the boy continuing to do his homework after his father’s sacrifice, victory, hope and resurrection are metaphorically represented in this final scene, in the form of Tao driving the vintage Gran Torino. Without Walt’s intervention and shepherding, one could imagine an alternative horizon for Tao – in the back seat of the Hmong gang’s car with a look of hostility on his face and a gun in his hand. Walt’s involvement in Tao’s life appears to have had a lasting effect. Inheritance of the Gran Torino car comes with a condition and caveat, as Walt tutors Tao one last time. Having issued a warning about Walt’s language, the lawyer reads Kowalski’s final words verbatim: “And I’d like to leave my 1972 Gran Torino to … my friend Tao Vang Lor … on the condition that you don’t choptop the roof like one of those beaners, don’t paint any idiotic flames on it like some white-trash hillbilly and don’t put a big gay spoiler on the rear-end like you see on all the other zipper heads’ cars. It just looks like hell. If you can refrain from doing any of that, it's yours.”

Concluding Remarks

A survey of some of the Christic resonances that a viewer may experience in Gran Torino allows for the conclusion that Walt Kowalski is a Christ-figure. Interestingly, a juxtaposition of the Kowalski character and the characterization of
Jesus in each of the Gospels points to a strong connection between Walt and the Johannine Jesus – the honorable death, the willingness to lay down life for one’s sheep, etc, all of which contribute to the high Christological fabric of the Gospel of John. The very human Walt Kowalski, with all his prejudices, relationship struggles, inner demons, etc, is a positive example of how someone so thoroughly human can converge with or appropriate in some way this high Christological aspect of Jesus’ character. At a minimum level this film may, to quote Larry Kreitzer, “provide a helpful doorway through which to enter the hermeneutical arena of NT studies.”

If one sifts through the Gospels, it is difficult to find characters that imitate Christ’s example and, therefore, embody the ultimate vision of life that he sets before his followers – “to lay down one’s life” (Jn 15: 13), to deny oneself by taking up one’s cross (Mk 8: 34). Other than Jesus’ embodiment of his own teaching through the crucifixion, a reader would be hard pressed to find an alternative context in which Jesus’ words about self-sacrifice are actualized by round, true to life characters. Marguerat and Bourquin explain that “the more the characters resemble real beings, i.e. the more their life coincides with that of the reader (whether real or imaginary), the more attractive these characters will be to the reader.” Similarly, Rhoad, Dewey and Michie suggest that a reader or hearer would “identify with a character by seeing oneself in the character.” While there
are glimmers of hope (particularly in the resurrection narratives) that the disciples of Jesus, who exhibit the failures and frailties of human existence, will eventually appropriate Jesus’ self-sacrificial vision of life, a reader is left with no more than fleeting glimpses of this, e.g. reference to Peter’s martyrdom in John 21: 18. St Paul understands the importance of Christic models for fuelling the Christian imagination, particularly those who, like himself, have come to transcend human weaknesses through Christic modelling: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Through the character of Walt Kowalski, who exhibits human shortcomings throughout *Gran Torino* and yet ends up laying down his life for another, an apparent gap in the Gospel narratives is potentially filled for a modern day audience – a round, true to life character (other than Jesus himself) who incarnates Jesus’ self-sacrificial vision of life.

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3 Ibid, 203.


It is worth recounting the moments leading up to Walt Kowalski’s death: Walt reaches inside his pocket and pulls out a cigarette. The gang members instantaneously react by drawing their weapons. The camera returns to Walt who utters, “Kind of jumpy, aren’t we?” Walt taunts them with a finger gun and proceeds to ask, “Anybody got a light?” He puts the cigarette in his mouth and in a composed manner responds to his own question, “No? Me, I’ve got a light.” Walt mumbles to himself, “Hail Mary, full of grace.” He reaches into his coat pocket, as if he is about to draw a gun. And the six Hmong gang members level their guns and fire at the same time.

Baugh, 211.


Ibid, 27.

Baugh, 209.


For further details about the typical process of crucifixion, see Jerome Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 412-414.

Some viewers might experience a resonance between the taunting of Walt by the Hmong gang prior to his death and those who derided Jesus in the synoptic Gospel.

Neyrey, 432-434.


25 David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, Mark As Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 103.