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Auszug aus:

Clint Eastwood: Gran Torino – Analysing a film

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Clint Eastwood: *Gran Torino* – Analysing a film

by Linda Wolfand



Der Film *Gran Torino* entstand im Jahr 2008 unter der Regie von Clint Eastwood. Eastwood spielt darin auch die Hauptfigur Walt Kowalski, einen patriotischen, rassistischen und stolzen Kriegsveteranen und ehemaligen Ford-Arbeiter, der mit den aktuellen Entwicklungen in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft hadert. Der ganz Amerikas, den Walt in seinem geliebten 1972er *Gran Torino* repräsentiert sieht, ist im Verfall: seine Söhne bewachen Japantische Süds und seine Nachbarschaft wird zunehmend von der Asian Minceg community und kriminellen Gruppen übernommen. Als Walt beginnt, sich, seinen Besitz und seine Werte gegen die kriminellen Mächtschafften zu verteidigen, lernt er die benachteiligte Hongg' Familie und deren Kultur kennen und schütten und muss seine Vorurteile überwinden. Aufgrund der allgegenwärtigen Themen racism, prejudices und American society sowie Wals Charakterentwicklung eignet sich der Film für vielseitige Analysen im Englischunterricht und regt zu Diskussionen an.

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Clint Eastwood: *Gran Torino* – Analysing a film

by Linda Weiland



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Der Film *Gran Torino* entstand im Jahr 2008 unter der Regie von Clint Eastwood. Eastwood spielt darin auch die Hauptfigur Walt Kowalski, einen patriotischen, rassistischen und stolzen Kriegsveteranen und ehemaligen *Ford*-Arbeiter, der mit den aktuellen Entwicklungen in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft hadert. Der Glanz Amerikas, den Walt in seinem geliebten 1972er *Gran Torino* repräsentiert sieht, ist im Verfall; seine Söhne bevorzugen japanische SUVs und seine Nachbarschaft wird zunehmend von der *Asian Hmong community* und kriminellen Gruppen übernommen. Als Walt beginnt, sich, seinen Besitz und seine Werte gegen die kriminellen Machenschaften zu verteidigen, lernt er die benachbarte Hmong Familie und deren Kultur kennen und schätzen und muss seine Vorurteile überwinden. Aufgrund der allgegenwärtigen Themen *racism*, *prejudices* und *American society* sowie Walts Charakterentwicklung eignet sich der Film für vielschichtige Analysen im Englischunterricht und regt zu Diskussionen an.

Clint Eastwood: *Gran Torino* – Analysing a film

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Competences and skills:

The skills trained consistently throughout this unit are **viewing**, when students watch the film in segments, **reading**, when they research contextual information and **speaking**, when they share their results. As the film segments are accompanied by while-viewing questions, **note-taking** is also trained. While researching certain aspects of the context independently, students also train their **research skills**. **Film analysis** as a complex skill is practised when students “close-watch” and analyse short segments of the film.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

A Analysis	C Comment	CH Characterisation
CT Creative task	D Discussion/debate	F Working with a film
G Group work	LVC Listening/viewing comprehension	
M Mind map/visualising	P Working with a picture/cartoon	
PR Presentation	R Research	S Summary
T Working with a text	VI Working with a video	W Writing

Topic	Material	Methods/Skills
1: Before the film	M1	CH, G, P, PR, R, T
2: The opening scene	M2	CH, F, LVC, S
3: Viewing segment I	M3–M6	A, CH, F, LVC, M, P, PR, R, T
4: Viewing segment II	M7–M8	A, CH, D, F, LVC, M, PR, R, T
5: Viewing segment III	M9–M10	A, CH, CT, D, F, LVC, M, P, R, T
6: Viewing segment IV	M11	A, C, F, LVC, P
7: The ending	M12	A, C, D, F, LVC, P, R, T
8: After the film	M13	A, C, D, P, T, VI, W

Clint Eastwood: *Gran Torino* – Analysing a film

Facts

Gran Torino was filmed and released in 2008. The film immediately received positive criticism for Eastwood's performance and directing – and for being the first mainstream American film to portray the Hmong community, their culture and their role in American history. The film's protagonist Walt Kowalski – a Korean War veteran and recent widower – is a typical Eastwood character: he embodies toughness and self-sufficiency, masculinity and strength, American glory and patriotism, though not necessarily in a positive way: "He's still living in the 50s", we hear one of his sons say about him. Throughout the film, Walt has to acknowledge that his conservative ideas of American glory and values are consistently disappearing in 21st century America. He frowns at his grandchildren's way of dressing and behaving, and at his sons' Japanese import cars and materialist lifestyle. He also frowns at his neighbourhood being "taken over" by Hmong Americans, which – in his eyes – leads to its decay and downfall. The symbol of Walt's character and personality is his 1972 *Gran Torino*, which he himself helped to manufacture and bought "right off the belt". Walt's behaviour towards his Hmong neighbours is rude and condescending. At the beginning of the film, he is an inapproachable, racist neighbour, who keeps his property an impeccable enclave among the rather run-down Hmong houses. When a criminal Hmong gang starts attacking the neighbours, he protects his property, causes the gang to (temporarily) give up, accidentally rescues the neighbouring family's son Tao and becomes a hero figure in the Hmong community. As the neighbours repay him with friendliness and hospitality, he has no choice but becoming more involved with them which results in a character change: he learns that traditional Hmong culture resonates with him and, in many ways, represents the very values that he misses in American society. Tao becomes more of a son to him than his own sons have ever been. The *Gran Torino* serves as a symbol of these revelations: when Walt finally offers Tao to borrow his treasured car, his character development from a rude and racist neighbour to a mentor, friend and father-figure becomes obvious. When the Hmong gang returns spreading terror and fear in the neighbourhood, Walt, in a dramatic act, frees the Hmong community once and for ever.

The narrative structure of *Gran Torino* and Walt's character development are complex and well-designed. Earlier scenes in the film allude to later scenes; Walt's connections with his sons or church are mirrored in his getting to know his Hmong neighbours and their culture. His bond with Tao stands in contrast to his relationship with his children and grandchildren, and Tao's Asian version of masculinity directly comments on Eastwood's American masculinity. These parallels and complexities make *Gran Torino* a great text for the foreign language classroom and allow for "textual exploitations" on different levels. Being a typical Eastwood film, *Gran Torino* also features a now problematic form of masculinity, problem-solving and patriotism. Walt's racist slurs that the film uses to create entertainment and laughter as well as Walt's role as the "white saviour" of the Hmong community are additional topics that need to be analysed critically.

Notes on the material

Before students watch *Gran Torino*, they research Clint Eastwood, his prototypical "Eastwood character" and the standard role that made him one of the most famous actors in American film history (**topic 1**). They also work with the film's poster and come up with expectations they have about *Gran Torino*. It is advisable to collect these expectations and use them in the post-viewing phase (topic 8) in order to reflect on the plot. **Topics 2–7** employ the film as their main source. Students watch the film in segments. Viewing/note-taking tasks followed by the discussion of students' findings accompany each segment. To allow for an in-depth analysis, screen shots and excerpts from the film script are used as additional material. The focus of the viewing tasks is on the narrative structure, Walt's character development and the growing relationship between Walt and Tao. Topics 3–5 include a task on contextualisation which leads students to understand the film's references to American history and society. Topics 3–5 also include a film analysis task, in which students rewatch a short segment and analyse it by using the "3Cs and 3Ss" scheme, which is introduced in M5. In **topic 8**, students receive post-viewing tasks which allow them to critically reflect on *Gran Torino*. They sum up their findings in their own film review or comment, which they can post on the *Rotten Tomatoes* website and, thus, participate in the critical conversation of the film.

Topic 1: Before the film

Worksheet – Before the film

M1

Clint Eastwood has often been referred to as “icon”, “legend” and “the man” of American cinema. He directed, produced and starred in *Gran Torino* – and he also wrote the soundtrack. Let’s find out more about the man behind the film.

Group work

1. Work in a group of four students. Distribute the subtopics 1–4 among the group members.
2. Do the tasks added to each subtopic and work with the sources provided. Decide on 5–8 aspects of your topic that you would like to share with the group members.
3. Meet in your group, share your findings, take notes and compile a portrait of Clint Eastwood. Search for an image of Clint Eastwood, print it out and add it to your portrait.
4. Look at the film poster of *Gran Torino*:
<https://raabe.click/en-grantorino-poster> [last access: 02/08/2022]. Describe it. What is your first impression of Eastwood’s character? What do you expect the film to be about?



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Subtopic 1: Clint Eastwood’s biography

<https://raabe.click/en-eastwood-minibio> [last access: 02/08/2022]



<https://raabe.click/en-eastwood-britannica-bio> [last access: 02/08/2022]



1. Find out why Clint Eastwood is considered a legend in American cinema. Note down some of his achievements.
2. A.O. Scott, a *New York Times* film critic interviewed in the video, describes how the “icon” Eastwood evolved in his first Western films and how it became his signature for the rest of his career. Describe and explain the features of this “icon”.



Subtopic 2: Clint Eastwood's films and character type

<https://raabe.click/en-rs-eastwood> [last access: 02/08/2022]



1. Eastwood is associated with a certain character type that he embodies in most of his films. Browse through the article and look at the images from Eastwood's films. What impression do you get from the characters he played? How would you describe "his" character type?



2. Choose images that represent your impressions best. Read the descriptions of the corresponding films. Add information to Clint Eastwood's character type.

Subtopic 3: Clint Eastwood and the Spaghetti Western

<https://raabe.click/en-spaghetti-western> [last access: 02/08/2022]



1. Explain the film genre "Spaghetti Western".



2. Outline the relationship between Clint Eastwood and the film genre "Spaghetti Western". Characterise the prototypical character Eastwood played in these films.

Subtopic 4: Clint Eastwood and American masculinity

<https://raabe.click/en-eastwood-masculinity> [last access: 02/08/2022]



1. The article depicts Eastwood as the saviour of American masculinity. List characteristics that make Eastwood the personification of American masculinity.



2. Explain his role with regard to masculinity.

Key: M1 Worksheet – Before the film

Group work

1.–3.: Character portrait Clint Eastwood:

Clint Eastwood's biography:

- Eastwood was born in 1930.
- After his military service (he was drafted for the Korean War and stationed in California), he moved to Los Angeles to become an actor.
- He became famous through the TV-show *Rawhide* (1959–65). *Rawhide* was a Western show that was a very popular genre in the 1960s.
- He became a film star through the so-called Spaghetti Westerns directed by Sergio Leone from 1964–1967.
- After that, the Western genre remained his preferred genre for some years. The type he created in these films was characterised by smoking small, dark cigars, squinting eyes and showcasing his “extraordinary face”. This character type is often referred to as an icon of American film and extended through the rest of his career.
- In 1967, he founded his own production company (*Mal Paso*) and from then on directed, produced and acted in his own films.
- From 1971 on, Eastwood starred in his signature role as the police inspector “Dirty Harry” in a series of five films.
- He has continued to direct, produce and act in films, many of which are now considered classics (such as *Unforgiven*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Gran Torino*). His last film *Richard Jewell* was released in 2019. His films have won a total of 13 Academy Awards.
- Clint Eastwood is now considered a timeless actor, producer and director and an iconic presence in American popular culture.

Clint Eastwood's films and character type:

- In the article, his character type is described as lean, blue-eyed, “shaggy haired with a rugged, creased and careworn face” and “a mischief-filled grin”.
- In the pictures, he is shown as tough, tanned, handsome and masculine.
- He seems to be associated with Westerns.
- He is often shown with guns.

Clint Eastwood and the Spaghetti Western:

- The Western can be considered an American genre, which was influenced by the American Western frontier. As a film genre, the Western was popular during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.
- Spaghetti Westerns are a subgenre of the Western.
- They are Western-style films shot in Europe and were often referred to as an Italian-style Western. Technically, they were “foreign films”, i. e. they were not shot in the USA.

- Spaghetti Westerns are often low-budget films. They typically featured anti-heroes as protagonists (with questionable and selfish morals), villains, violence and bloodshed, desert landscapes and shanty towns. They subverted the standard plot of the traditional Western, which featured identifiable heroes and villains, circled around black and white morality and resulted in happy endings.
- Spaghetti Westerns gained worldwide popularity in the 1960s. The most famous director was Sergio Leone. Many of them are considered classics today, such as *A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.
- These three films also led to the breakthrough of the Spaghetti Western. Clint Eastwood starred in all of them as “the Man with No Name” – a drifter who comes into town to fight off some “bad guys” in pursuit of money. Thus, Eastwood is often regarded as the prototypical lead of the Spaghetti Western.

Clint Eastwood and American masculinity:

- The article describes him as “the epitome” and “patron saint” of American masculinity.
 - A survey run by the magazine *Esquire* has shown that men between 20 and 50 consider Eastwood the “coolest man in the country”.
 - According to the article, Eastwood can be considered as a stable figure on the American screen whereas other actors have gone through different trends and sometimes even crises (e. g. Woody Allen) that led to constant shifts in what they embodied (many turned to self-parody to cover aging, for example) → Eastwood thus represents endurance.
 - He also represents restraint: according to the author, he stands for modesty, self-control and understatement rather than macho behaviour.
 - The article claims that Eastwood and his films stand for men who struggle and eventually master their “dark sides” (such as bloodlust, lust, alcohol or racism). Thus, he embodies a certain (model) moral vision and discipline.
 - He also stands for a positive attitude towards aging and proves that “you can be awesome when you’re (old)”, i. e. open-minded, active, present, and creative. He celebrated his greater achievements (such as *Million Dollar Baby* and *Gran Torino*) at an advanced age.
 - Throughout his life, he has stayed outside the celebrity industry and, as a result, held control over his own life. He thus remains “his own man” and with that, a model to others.
4. Look at the film poster of “*Gran Torino*”. Describe it. What is your first impression of Eastwood’s character? What do you expect the film to be about?

Individual results. Possible answers:

- The poster features Eastwood holding a gun. He’s looking at the camera with a very serious, possibly angry look on his face. → (gun) violence, aggression, fights, bloodshed

- In the background there is a car. → possibly a getaway car, crime
- The poster is black and white, and very dark. → probably not a feelgood-film or a comedy, probably serious/dark issues
- Only Clint Eastwood is partly lit. The words that stand out are *Gran Torino* and Clint Eastwood. → Eastwood obviously plays a major role in the film.

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