

## Closing Choices in *Hostiles*: Stepping onto a Moving Train

The purpose of this essay is to make sense of a feeling experienced during a particular film moment. This makes it an evaluation in film aesthetics as described by Andrew Klevan: ‘The assessment, based on close examination, of the merits (or demerits) of the form that something takes’ (2018: 1). I will suggest there is value in the scrutiny of this moment (even though others won’t have experienced an identical sensation) in accordance with Immanuel Kant’s concept of ‘subjective universality’ ([1790] 1953: 51) that while judgements of taste are subjective they carry an imperative to attest universal merit. At stake is the aesthetic merit of this film moment, and it will be championed through a close analysis of its formal constitution and genre variation. This makes it an example of genre criticism in the manner discussed by Douglas Pye: ‘To identify and analyse tendencies within the tradition and to consider the variations developed by particular films’ (1996a: 10-11). Ultimately, through these frameworks, I will add to our appreciations by suggesting that this moment is both a melodrama about the relationship between nationhood and manhood and a metatextual meditation on the western genre it belongs to, achieved through aesthetic means.

The movie in question is *Hostiles* (Scott Cooper, 2017) and the moment is its final shot. To understand this moment, we

must account for the scene it sits within and make reference to earlier moments that are relevant to its affect – the cumulative parts that make up the sum. The thematic dramaturgy of the scene can be helpfully summarised as a question borne out of philosophical scepticism: how does one make sense of the irreconcilable complexity of historical experience? This question operates threefold in the movie: characters struggling with the consequences of violence within the diegesis; metacinematically as the film negotiates the legacy of the western genre it belongs to; and symbolically as the film seeks to narrativise and reckon with real-world violence and exploitation on which the modern nation-state is established. These thematic questions are expressed in a melodramatic mode aptly summarised as ‘A combination of suffering, pathos, and a particular form of suspense’ (Deleyto [2011] 2012: 229). This melodrama works to exploit the faculties of the film medium and communicate the ineffable tension between subjective fantasy, or appearances (which is tied to the verisimilitude of value systems and metanarratives) and the world as it is, or the things-in-themselves (which are objects and realities independent of observation). In the context of the western, in which there is ‘inevitable confusion of history and myth’ (Maltby 1996: 37), this gap is widened further, the scepticism made stronger, and the moment in question functions as a ‘working out’ of these antinomies through an aesthetic experience.

The scene opens to the screeching whistle of a moving train and the engulfing sight of steam billowing from its smokestack. This clamorous introduction signals a transition between frontier life and the new industrial society. But it feels more like a schism, for we have not yet seen a train throughout *Hostiles*’ duration and its sudden presence feels incongruous and invasive. Tearing through the landscape fought over between white settlers and indigenous peoples, this cantankerous symbol of settler power makes it unambiguous who has won the American Indian Wars, especially as the railway reshapes sacred Cheyenne land. Steam trains have been used to represent settler conquest as early as the lithographs of Frances F. Palmer in the 1860s, and we can see examples in cinema, albeit with a more ambivalent perspective, in westerns such as *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1953),

*Man of the West* (Anthony Mann, 1958), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1968) and *The Lone Ranger* (Gore Verbinski, 2013), in which the railway has an alien and invasive reputation. The symbolic use of the train in *Hostiles*’ case, then, isn’t particularly innovative. Rather it is a generic trope of the western, part of the generic verisimilitude which *Hostiles* embraces throughout in order to dramatise the socio-logical transformation taking place in wider society, which is deeply relevant to the characters’ situation – as we shall see.

We have reached the point in the narrative in which the central conflict has been resolved but the fate of the surviving characters remains uncertain. The scene that plays out is the emotional apotheosis of the movie. Captain Joseph Blocker (Christian Bale), a long-serving US soldier circa 1892, is the last man standing from a military convoy ordered to escort the imprisoned Yellow Hawk (Wes Studi), a dying Cheyenne chief and old adversary, and his family across the American wilderness to their original tribal land in Montana. This mission is orchestrated as a public relations gesture from President Harrison, which Blocker, at the beginning of the story, is forced to accept despite the racist hatred he harbours towards the dwindling Native populace – which he has been instrumental in reducing through conquest and genocide. Therefore, the mission that makes up the bulk of the movie is, from the outset, framed in storytelling terms – a manufactured publicity stunt for the press. Blocker is forced to partake in a narrative construction he has no authorship over and yet, as a soldier in a chain of command, must forcibly, albeit reluctantly, manifest in the world. Only it is a new narrative of hollow reconciliation between Natives and Whites that contradicts the one ingrained within him through years of violent conquest, which he has justified through racist dehumanisation and a desire to avenge fallen comrades. The imperative to force subjective fantasy onto the world – from individuals and wider socio-political forces – is part of the film’s examination of the tensions and contradictions that arise when said fantasies clash with the reality of the world, such as the cost of sanctioned violence, the fraught relationship between myth and reality, and the moral imperative to reckon with history. The scene and the moment which is the

concern of this essay is the film's aesthetic negotiation of these tensions, a melodrama of Blocker's moral scepticism.

Surviving alongside Blocker are the young Little Bear (Xavier Horsechief), the last descendent of Yellow Hawk, and the white settler Rosalee Quaid (Rosamund Pike), who accompanied Blocker's entourage on the journey to Montana after her family were massacred by Comanche raiders. By the end point of the movie, Blocker and Rosalee have developed a deep emotional bond and together the three form a quasi-familial unit. We find them all on the station platform facing each other but silent. There is only the noise and bustle of modern life while no character speaks for 16 seconds, which is a considerable amount of time. It's important to emphasise this pause of silence as it is a trait endemic to the film's rendering of human relations. As we see in the scene, and have witnessed throughout the film, communication between characters is typified by prolonged hesitation, pregnant pauses, sheepishness, and a general inability to express thoughts and feelings. We know the characters have experienced, or inflicted, horrific violence and have been defined by such violence, but this is rarely, or willingly, discussed – disproportionately to its influence. Interactions are reliant upon social organisation and punctilious decorum to function smoothly; impersonal etiquette protects social engagement from deeper, unseemly realities of experience; to be articulate and expressive of this reality becomes inseparable from indiscreet faux pas. Blocker, Rosalee, and Little Bear have undertaken a tremendous journey together, but Rosalee can only muster a bashful 'Well ... I suppose this is it', as she anxiously rubs Little Bear's back. Following Rosalee's line, the film cuts to Blocker's reaction in a medium close-up. He performs a slight correction in his posture, like a soldier at attention, followed by a gentle nod of acceptance. He remains stoic, resorting to military instinct to deal with any emotional intrusion that their departure may have on him. The audience, however, has already been given privileged access to Blocker's private emotional outbursts. In this way, the film accentuates the distinction between interiority and exteriority, constructing melodrama in the persistent tension between the two. Christian Bale ably performs performance throughout the film, whether it be as a strong and unrepentant military leader or a deferential

gentleman dictated by gendered decorum. It is a fine example of what Andrew Klevan describes as '[a]ppreciating the performer's capacities for revealing and *withholding* aspects of the character's sensibility' (2005: 9). Although Blocker conveys exceptional moments of intense emotion (he weeps twice in the film), it's clear that he struggles, or is unwilling, to reckon with his inner life, and discourages others from doing the same, insisting to soldiers who suffer from 'the melancholia' that it 'doesn't exist'. We are left to decipher Blocker's interior world through Bale's highly modulated performance, which communicates through subtle gestures, cadence of voice, and ambiguous facial expressions. We are never wholly clear about what his thoughts, experiences, or feelings are only that they are deeply buried and seldom expressed – a vision of monosyllabic neurosis.

Blocker is, for sure, a type that we recognise: a morally dubious protagonist and a figure of masculine self-command in the tradition of the kind of western chiefly associated with the work of Anthony Mann, late John Ford and later Revisionist westerns from Sam Peckinpah and Clint Eastwood. The consequence of violence is a perennial theme amongst these works, and it is this tradition that *Hostiles* consciously plays up to, for it makes direct allusions to them. For example,

during an exchange earlier in the film, one soldier remarks to his colleague, 'I've killed everything that's walked or crawled.' To the genre-literate, this will recall the ruminations of William Munny (Clint Eastwood) in *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992), who remarks in a dramatic showdown, almost verbatim, 'I've killed just about everything that walks or crawled at one time or another.' We see further evidence of citation within the scene itself: the characters are waiting at the platform in the city of Butte, Montana. Of all the towns that exist within the area of Great Bear Wilderness ('Valley of the Bears') where Yellow Hawk and his family are buried in the final act, this location is very likely chosen in homage to its association with Monument Valley and the picturesque butte formations that were made iconic by John Ford in multiple westerns. This thought is given more credence in the knowledge that Ford is very much on the film's mind. Blocker is characterised in a very similar fashion to Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) of *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956); Edwards and Blocker are both military-men on perilous journeys combating Comanche antagonists, motivated by explicit racist hatred, and well-versed in indigenous cultures to the extent that they speak local languages – a case of learning in order to destroy. Also, in the exact moment we see the name



Butte, Montana



of Butte on screen, the framing and lighting looks inspired by the iconic closing shot of *The Searchers*, which makes a firm interior / exterior distinction through high contrast lighting choice. (This is a recurring choice of composition and lighting within the film; a strikingly similar shot occurs during the raid on Rosalee's home, too.)



There is nothing particularly meritorious about homage, nor in the lifting of dialogue from other movies. It could, in fact, be seen as a cheap or opportunistic citation. Yet, in light of the way the film is interested in storytelling as a theme of study, it reveals the film's metatextual ambition. I have already referred to narrative construction at the level of a character's subjectivity and wider society, but it's also the case that *Hostiles* is unembarrassed to make oftentimes quite obvious quotations and embrace type for the purpose of highlighting the fact that it too exists within a construction of fantasy – the iconic movie western, a genre which does not easily align with historical reality, in the same way that Blocker's experience of the world does not always align with his personal fantasy

of righteous action. It's worth reminding ourselves that the mission of the movie only exists for storytelling reasons, both in the sense that it is a movie with a story to tell and, diegetically, as a newspaper story motivated by political forces, which is to say the manifestation of ideology – itself a way to make sense of the world in a narrative fashion. In this way, Blocker's subjective figuring out is mirrored in the film's figuring out in relation to its genre. *Hostiles* strives for verism and seeks to offer an aesthetically 'realistic' reckoning of history through its depiction of psychological turmoil and violence. At the same time, it often contradicts these principles by alluding to the mythology to which it belongs for the purpose of distanciation. The relationship between fantasy and reality then is, according to the film, intensely fraught and heavily intermingled. This exacerbates the dilemma of scepticism for the characters, but also for us in the audience.

My assertion that the film dramatises the tensions and contradictions between interior and exterior is reflected in



performance but also in the scene's costume choices. Along with seeing a train for the first time, we see Blocker, Rosalee and Little Bear in attire that isn't survivalist, agrarian, or militaristic. They all now wear the markedly tight, restrictive clothes of reputable citizens. Blocker's hat has changed from the Stetson designed by John B. Stetson Company, which is the durable and waterproof (as evidenced in the film) hat of the pioneering West, to the semi-formal homburg, sometimes mistaken for a bowler hat. Popularised in the 1890s, the felt homburg signifies fashionable modernity and European-style refinement, with little exposure to the elements implied. Little Bear, too, no longer dons the clothes of a Cheyenne, but that of a European child, as if assimilated into white

culture and its family unit with Rosalee as the maternal figure. Europeanisation is striking in the scene and, like the train, signifies a new hegemony. But while the frontier thesis entailed the Europeanisation of the land, it was also the process by which Europeans became Americans. For better or worse, they're all Americans now. Fully aware of Blocker's capacity to act in a barbaric manner and Rosalee and Little Bear's inarticulate suffering from their familial losses, the 'civilised' attire feels contrapuntal to the bloody violence and earthly viscera we've become acquainted with through the film. The affect of this is ironic, or close to parody; we are encouraged to see the society that they now belong to as made of surface imitations, the genteel garments little more than a performative or repressive disavowal of a sinister and troubling past. Indeed, the fitting looks particularly restrictive for all involved, even choking. Bale's moustache, also, completely conceals his upper-lip – a reference to 'stiff upper lip' stoicism, as well as an acknowledgement of said stoicism's futility against the burden of History. We cannot see Blocker's lip tremble and yet we *know* he suffers.

These costume choices invite the audience to make a link between the repressive and taciturn psychology of the individual and the suprapersonal level of society, which is the fruitful domain of melodrama as expressed through mise-en-scène. According to David Lusted, 'A central trope of melodrama is the dramatic connection between social and psychic repression, leading to an excess of misery in the central protagonist and matched by emotional tension in the audience' (1996: 65). *Hostiles* builds on this melodramatic tradition by linking codes of masculinity with nation-building projects generally – nation-building as a masculine endeavour, and a manifestation of seemingly irresolvable contradictions, or even psychosis. Blocker is a nation-builder who reads the literature of fellow nation-builders; in quiet moments we have seen him reading Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (58-48 BC), which concerns Caesar's campaigns against Germanic and Celtic tribes. But, as with Caesar himself – a military general fighting for a Republic on its outermost outskirts – Blocker is expanding a civilisation that would later betray him. His suspicion about the legitimacy of the conquest narrative – known as Manifest Destiny – is sown almost as soon as he gets



the order to escort and protect Yellow Hawk, which contradicts his previous imperative to wage war against the Native population and which now, in his mind, offends the sacrifice of soldiers who fought and died. This is tantamount to the realisation of metanarrative as relative to power, politics and ideology, and not higher, more estimable values. For example, Blocker is a Christian, and we know he is educated as he reads Caesar in Latin, which insinuates he's an idealist and a soldier for such reasons. Therefore, the journey up until the final scene has been one of gradual narrative re-formation within Blocker's now-sceptical psyche. His apostasy is manifest in the penultimate scene which depicts Blocker defending the right for Yellow Hawk and his family to be buried on land that has become privately owned by white settlers. In other words, confronted with the unambiguous hypocrisy and ignobility of ownership on stolen land, Blocker ends up defying property rights, which is the staple of the new American society he has, ironically, helped to build. The collapse of one's subjective metanarrative does not, as a corollary principle, mean the emergence of another; so with the war won and his subjective metanarrative in tatters – particularly as he develops respect for Yellow Hawk over the course of the journey ('A part of me dies with you,' Blocker tells him) – who does Blocker become?

This is the dramatic crux of the final scene and we find this existential question imbued in his response to Rosalee's deterministic statement that 'this is it'. After a characteristic pause, he says to Rosalee: 'Came sooner than I thought.' This line, on the surface, appears to be little more than polite small talk as they wait for the train to depart. In light of the theme of change that is highly prevalent in the scene, and aware that Blocker's sense of meaningful narrative has been tossed adrift by the tide of history, when he declares that time has come, quicker than anticipated, Blocker is signalling his now-tenuous position in society, and resigning himself to obsolescence. What was once only an ideal has come into reality, only the fabled City Upon the Hill does not seem to have justified the carnage and warfare inflicted and suffered, and whatever idealism Blocker had leaves a bitter aftertaste when faced with the reality. Had Blocker maintained his brooding concentration towards Rosalee when speaking this line such an interpretation may not be justified; yet, upon

delivering the line, Bale averts his wounded gaze away from Rosalee and looks towards the train's intended direction – which is East, towards Chicago. By looking away, it becomes less of a gesture to be read as something directed at *her*, but something directed at the world. Needless to say by going East we are not going West. Ian Cameron remarks: 'If there is a single feature that characterises westerns, it is setting, and even this has to be defined negatively: the setting is not the East' (1996: 7). As such, on one level the train is quite literally scheduled to depart from the western itself and the generic paradigms of conflict and tension that constitute it, and which Blocker suffers from. Pye has written a helpful summary of these tensions, which concern 'The hero's inbetween position [...] a battle between the pulls of isolation and separateness and of relationship and community, a conflict which can have no definitive resolution' (1996a: 14). While this theme is observable in many westerns, it can take different forms. Most relevant here are films such as *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946) and *The Searchers*, where the man of violence has no place in the social edifice he works to build, or defends, and so wanders back into the wilderness come the resolution. As Steve Neale puts it, 'Memories of the films within a corpus constitute one of the bases of generic expectation' ([1990] 2012: 189). Blocker is regulated by generic expectation in such a manner, damned to be trapped within the western paradigm just like he was damned to manifest a newspaper story. He is a prisoner of fantasy, left only to look towards the possibility of relief – which is exactly what he does when delivering his line and gazing eastward. We've witnessed Blocker's lack of agency as someone who enforces the will of his superiors, and his statement of finitude expresses this despondent and regretful fact. And, yet, at the same time, he appears to accept his redundant fate as the appropriate, or inevitable, course of action, or inaction.

Following Blocker's remark, the film cuts back to Rosalee, who begins to tear up at the prospect of departure, likely aware of Blocker's essentially expendable existence, before composing herself to tell him, with conviction, 'You're a fine man, Joe Blocker.' Whether Blocker is indeed a fine man is highly questionable, in light of his actions. But Rosalee says it as if, by way of masculine codes, this is what he needs to hear most

before she leaves him. Blocker nods again, seemingly automatic as before, offering no words of response and we're not sure if he believes it or not. Following another silent pause, Rosalee offers more words that are, on the surface, polite sentiments of gratitude: 'We can't thank you enough.' This expression of gratitude reinforces the feeling that Blocker, as a working man enacting orders, has essentially done his job. Throughout this exchange the words themselves are unmoving and unspectacular, but the scene is pregnant with a complex intensity due to performances that communicate internal turmoil – Bale's clenched jaw and Pike's conflicting expressions, for example. What precisely anyone is feeling at this moment is unclear, but the obvious banality of the words spoken fails to match the intensity of feeling that the characters are experiencing. In other words, there is a striking disconnect between what is said and what is not; the deliberate literalness and politesse of the dialogue only emphasises the absence of real outpouring and the things left unsaid. The framing contributes to this intensity; the camera is positioned in close-up, signifying a depth of feeling that is never explicitly articulated. It's as if the camera is examining the faces for a breach in the facade, a meaningful detail that may offer insight into the unknowable interior world, a case of what Andrew Klevan describes as 'The actors' and the camera's behaviour [being] mutually considerate; each trusts the other to enhance understanding and to relieve them of the sole burden of making themselves known' (2005: 14).



Blocker then turns his attention to Little Bear and a soft piano key is heard from the soundtrack, which brings about a slight tonal shift. Blocker's reserve gives way to a level of parental tenderness. He takes off his hat and kneels down before Little Bear and offers him the Caesar book, declaring,

'It's now your time to put this to use.' This is an odd gift and a strange thing to say to Little Bear; what exactly is he to learn from this book? This seems to contradict the impression of remorse or guilt that we are led to believe Blocker now feels about his imperial function in history. The fact that Blocker then refers to Caesar as 'one of the bravest men I've ever read' is confusing in this sense, but it isn't insignificant that he gives it to the only other male as it reveals Blocker's fantasy of masculine honour and a desire to pass something on in a fashion that makes Little Bear a quasi-son figure. While Blocker has found a semblance of bitter understanding in the self-aware acknowledgement of his historical role as a pawn in larger historio-political currents, by gifting the book it's as if Blocker has come to realise the extent to which he has failed to live up to the mythical reputation of 'Great Men' such as Caesar. By giving Little Bear the book, Blocker is expressing the wish for a future braver, freer and more just than his own, and regret over his inability to live up to his ideal of moral manhood and a just nation-state, which is the consequence of fantasy disrupted by the world.

Blocker's failure in this regard functions similarly to what Pye refers to as 'the collapse of fantasy' in the films of Anthony Mann, which depict '[p]risoners of masculinity coded in hopelessly contradictory ways' (1996b, 173) – men who come to learn that ideal manhood is seemingly impossible in a world of unsettling contradiction. This collapse is discombobulating but not wholly negative, an ambivalence discernible in the subtle detail on Blocker's face as he imparts the gift – pensive reflection, ashamed downward glances, and wrinkles of displeasure around the eyes borne of a painful thought, noticeable between insincere, avuncular smiles directed at Little Bear. The final scene of *Hostiles* fits neatly into what Deborah Thomas refers to as a melodrama of "Becoming a man" which draws on male-centred fantasies of augmentation and diminishment within the domestic space and on a flight into violence elsewhere' (2000: 26). The film is acutely aware of this masculine melodrama and refers to it with the feminine / domestic / communal aspect represented by Rosalee and Little Bear on one side of the staging – a family unit, of sorts – and Blocker on the other, showing little intention of coming along as he questions his masculine role. This

moment serves to dramatise the ambivalence associated with the collapse of Blocker's masculine fantasy, symbolically tied to the nation-state ideal.<sup>1</sup>

By now, the soundtrack composed by Max Richter is functioning to add a fitting solemnity and rumination to the scene. It is a soft, melancholy score made up of string instruments, including violin and cello, percussion via piano, and a unique acoustic instrument called the yaybahar, which gives off a haunting and plaintive impression quite appropriate to Blocker's feelings. 'Whatever may come, I want the best for you,' Rosalee says. Again, after a pause, Blocker nods, offering little by way of reciprocation. In reluctance to terminate the exchange, it is as if Rosalee is attempting to wait out the fatalistic verisimilitude of the genre she belongs to, perhaps harbouring a chimerical hope for Blocker to come too, even if he's resigned to his fate. Rosalee seems unsure how to end the farewell as she attempts to get the words out, but in her communicative failure resorts to grabbing Little Bear and hurrying onto the train. Turning to face him one last time, Rosalee looks towards Blocker and forces a smile even as a tear simultaneously descends her cheek. Here is a moment that, through the performance of the actor, clearly visualises the tension between something unsaid and the visibly



expressed. The scene as a whole revels in a melodramatic tension between the feeling that something needs to be said, a revelation or confession of some kind that may bring closure, and the film's consistent rejection of sentimentality. Rosalee doesn't have anything particularly eloquent to say, and Blocker certainly does not (his name is suggestive of verbal inarticulacy), although the occasion seems to demand it. Yet it never comes and tension is felt. Rosalee swiftly turns into the carriage and we cut to a long shot of Blocker now alone in the crowd, the emotional intensity somewhat released. As Blocker puts his homburg back on, accepting of his fate, he turns and walks away as Rosalee and Little Bear watch him leave from their train seat. The train whistles, indicating finality and the tenor of the moment is of resignation, melancholy and suffering typical of the kind of western ending it self-consciously identifies with.

At this point *Hostiles* could conclude and roll credits. But what happens next I suggest to be the moment of primary aesthetic achievement, in light of the sophisticated and rewarding manner in which it usurps a specific expectation. As the train begins to depart in what could be a satisfactory final shot, the film cuts *back* to Blocker. He is walking away but then stops, pauses, and turns around to watch the train depart. The



orchestral soundtrack, previously subtle, quiet and restrained, increases in volume as the camera glides towards him. Here, we are witnessing what amounts to defiance of expectation. Rather than depart into the horizon, and in contrast to the specific kind of western to which it has alluded, Blocker changes his mind and walks back towards the train – quite literally turning his back on the mythology. Now we see that the explicitness of the aforementioned citations, particularly

that of *The Searchers*, has established a *false* impression of reverence, which gives its sudden genre-defying direction a factor of surprise. Indeed, a genre-savvy audience could regard this with incredulity and experience the displeasure that Roger Scruton calls ‘a spasm of recoil’ (1999: 386), which is the risk of unconventional gestures. However, I regard the defiance to be rewarding due to a number of shrewd formal decisions that effectively dramatise the interior process of Blocker’s decision-making. For one, we tolerate the variation because it cunningly maintains its established sense of character. Blocker’s expression when deciding to disregard deterministic resignation remains as unmoving and inexpressive as usual. He stands statue-like, merely looking. His surface is unchanged. Yet, we know the shift is occurring *within* him due to the movement of the camera in partnership with the swelling music. It is important that the music swells; by slowly building the music, the character shift feels like the result of a stifled, recrudescing energy – the eventual expression, and unburdening, of his agonising scepticism as musical denouement. The gliding camera, also, moves closer and closer towards Blocker. We have experienced close-ups, but the tracking motion sets it apart. It is the only time this mobile formal move has been executed in the movie, and the sense



that, alongside the music, it implies an end-point – a teleology of sorts – dramatises the feeling of something being arrived *at*. We are not told what to think, or feel, but we are invited to think, or feel, *something*. In this way, it’s a rebirth of affect within Blocker, of sentiment otherwise buried, and an anthropocentric gesture that signifies a dawning of consciousness and an affirmation of agency from a man previously trapped in a chain of command and the sweep of history. More so, the

shallow focus isolates Blocker from the background which he was destined to go towards and the camera ponders his face. No longer simply the product of his environment, which is the fate of animals, in this moment he is making a *decision* – which is unique to human consciousness, as well as a type of revolt as he salvages what vestige of agency he can. Again, it’s impossible to know his exact thoughts, but we are made fully aware that something meaningful and significant is taking place inside of him, some inexplicable shift.

This moment of emancipation on Blocker’s part works in tandem with the film’s grasp at individuation as a cultural object. While *Hostiles* exists firmly in a genre, and has been referring to genre conventions, now the film is making itself known as an individual within the historical group by showing itself to be ‘alive to creative variation’ (Klevan 2018: 149). It asserts its claim through formal flourishes that are markedly different to its hitherto style, in a way that recalls Pye’s assessment of the dance scene in *My Darling Clementine*: ‘The episode tends to unbalance the film structurally by being so markedly different from what has gone before. Yet it is partly the reduction of the narrative interest that gives the passage its particular force’ ([1975] 2012: 246). It is precisely the same in this case; the scene’s formal

excesses risk tipping into mawkishness or pedagogic obviousness, particularly when, in the next and final shot as Blocker walks towards the departing train, slow-motion is employed, which is a distinctly formalist move that brings attention to itself. Yet, I suggest the shot is successful *because* of its emotive excesses, which appear declamatory but remain enigmatic and complex. The emotional ambiguity of this closing shot maintains an agreeable aesthetic balance while also functioning as a breaking-out from the rest of the film. Credit can go to Bale’s physical performance; he retains balance by *casually* striding to catch the moving train. By walking slowly, and not running or jogging, it does not betray his characterisation, there is no sense of bathos, nor does it sabotage the movie’s established verisimilitude. This movement is consistent with the film’s emotionally restrained world in which characters do not gesticulate in any expressive manner, even as the action and form are highly expressive. It reflects Blocker’s subjective experience when making a seminal decision and it is quite conceivable that the character would do this and in this manner – but no other manner, and fittingly so.

The act of stepping onto the moving train is, because of these factors, performed with a felicitous solemnity that respects the significance of the divergence while, at the same time,





showing resolve in its decision – and Blocker in his. Blocker's last-second hitch onto the back is performed gracefully, and it's timed perfectly so that Bale need not run or bestir himself ungracefully. But despite his grace, it's as if he is a stowaway who shouldn't be going – a refugee from a fatalistic genre tradition. One cannot underestimate the logistical effort involved in this shot; with Blocker moving towards the train, and the train going into the distance, there is also the movement of the camera, which glides horizontally as the pro-filmic objects move vertically. This is highly complex choreography, which dramatises and, simultaneously, consolidates, both Blocker's and the film's tandem claim to individuality through an excess freedom of movement. Crucially, the slow-motion, which could otherwise imply emotionality or excitement in partnership with the movement, works here to *subdue* the moving parts, becoming ceremonial and contemplative – a continuation of Blocker's disposition and a moderation of the complex parts. The action that we see would, in real-time, make up less than a few seconds. Through slow-motion, it is extended for the exercise of sensibility and contemplation of the action. Nor does Blocker immediately open the door. Instead, he pauses in reflection. All of this encourages us to accept the dramatic apex as believable, meaningful, apposite and important.

At the level of soundtrack, where newly animated music could otherwise be intrusive, the relative austerity that the film has erstwhile adhered to allows it to function as a sudden expression of repressed sentiment which is cathartic and earned. Its audible prominence works against the pattern established, which is a calculated strategy for expressing emotional self-actualisation unique to this moment. Yes, the music is now loud, and therefore risks seeming declamatory, but it's not, without interpretation, entirely clear *why* it is loud,



and what the music is intended to signify exactly other than something broadly significant, the ambiguity of which incites interpretative engagement. Furthermore, while the music is loud the shot is diegetically silent. The only comparable use of such joint formal devices occurs when Blocker learns of his unwanted mission to escort Yellow Hawk. In response, he rages and howls at the world in a desert lightning storm. This highly dramatic scene is likewise moderated by the use of diegetic silence – the howl is seen, not heard, as if the world is deaf to his agony – and the score is pronounced. However, jump-cuts and a hand-held camera are employed to indicate the fracture and rage of the character, which contrasts to the final shot that uses a smooth, unbroken long take. As Blocker steps onto the moving train, the camera glides elegantly into a position of symmetrical order and pleasing harmony. So while there is a meaningful pattern between the two scenes, in the exceptional use of diegetic silence and prominent use of soundtrack, there is also meaningful divergence in how the camera is used and the scene edited. In other words, the pattern encourages us to see the aspects of meaningful divergence: compared to the earlier scene's depiction of despair, the result of Blocker being forced to confront his subjective fantasy (by protecting a man he has desired to destroy), the final shot expresses a



falling-into-place, a teleological sense of something coming together, and a perceptual realignment which equates to an emotional closure of the narrative – a hopeful and centred, if uncertain and wounded, future is contrasted to the pains and trauma of the past. Where once Blocker was howling in rage against the desert sky that symbolises the cruel tensions of the genre he is subject to, now he is escaping those confines – freeing himself from the expectation to suffer, which is to reject a notion of masculine fantasy tied to his individual psychology, the nation-state he helped build, and the genre which mythologises that nation state.

It is, then, very significant that the camera mimics the sensation of floating; as it moves across space it feels light and mobile, and quite literally suspends itself into an impossible position in the air, in the middle of the tracks, as the train departs. This camera motion and framing, in tandem with a unified tableau, I regard as a visual dramatisation of epoché – the notion, from ancient scepticism, that one can refrain from drawing a conclusion for or against anything as the decisive step for the attainment of ataraxy – serenity and relief. This, I suggest, is the source of the moment's catharsis – it conveys, through aesthetic means, an attainment of epoché. Blocker, if only for a moment, suspends judgement about himself and

the world, thereby alleviating himself from the repressive tensions and contradictions that constitute his experience and the genre he belongs to. By stepping onto the train, Blocker is rejecting the subjective narrative he has hitherto known and accepted the possibilities inherent to unknowing and divergence. Quite literally his decision is impromptu and without forethought or planning; he doesn't know what awaits him in Chicago; if it is a semblance of family life, which is implied in his reunion with Rosalee and Little Bear, the emotional and practical realities of this future remain unclear also (crucially, we do not see the reunion itself).

The ending is almost certainly intended to be a metatextual rejoinder to the ending of *The Searchers*, in which Ethan Edwards does not enter the domestic realm and instead returns to the wilderness – perhaps the most iconic of all western endings. *Hostiles* diverges meaningfully in the sense that it has consciously and deliberately teed up an identical – identifiably so – emotional drama: a *type* of ending, as it were. But, in this instance, contrary to an expectation it has itself established, the protagonist joins society and the domestic sphere. In other words, the door shuts on Edwards but opens for Blocker. This is symbolic of Blocker's integration, both psychic and social, which are, as we have seen, intimately tied in melodrama and expressed by such stylistic means. Therefore, Blocker is not damned to wander the desert which symbolises his inner pain, as Edwards is, and is allowed to escape the contradictions endemic to the genre, no longer '[s]tranded in some sense by historical change, whose assertions of identity are increasingly undermined' (Pye 1996a: 20). There is, then, a moral anti-dogmatism that retains and respects the unknowability of experience while, at the same time, expressing through melodrama a feeling of productive reconfiguration which is self-effacing and not obtrusive or obvious. It asserts itself with formal panache but without insistence, done within the confines of genre expectation while defying them in interesting ways that lead to imaginative engagement.

Blocker's quiet rebellion is a rebellion against an emotional expectation of a specific kind and a cathartic rebellion against fantasy that constitutes a pernicious tension between subjectivity and the world. Rather than formulate a new fantasy

to impose upon the world, Blocker takes his scepticism to the logical conclusion of epoché – which is to say he moves *beyond* fantasy, *beyond* genre. This is why it's important, on a reflexive level, that Blocker *leaves* the west. Through reference to genre, performance, camera, costume, pattern, prominence and soundtrack, we can see that the aesthetic encounter of this moment corresponds to a rational ambition – it sensuously embodies an attainment of transcendental perspective in the central character, dramatises the way in which history and fantasy are inextricably and painfully bound, and offers an affecting emotional contour to our generic expectation. The final shot, in these ways, is expressive of what cannot easily be said, which is its accomplishment as a melodrama and the source of its merit. It is, in other words, an aesthetic reprieve from the antinomies endemic to the experience of the world.

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**1** It should be said that all of this, unfortunately, leaves little room for the Cheyenne characters' interiority, who, much to the film's discredit, are underwritten and mostly passive in their function. However, the full implications of this sits outside the remit of this essay.