

Hostiles: A US soldier accompanies a Native American chief home in 1892 ...

... and homelessness in Seattle in *The Road to Nickelsville*

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Hostiles

Hostiles, written and directed by Scott Cooper, based on a story by Donald E. Stewart; *The Road to Nickelsville*, a documentary by Derek Armstrong McNeill

“The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic and a killer. It has never yet melted.” -D.H. Lawrence

The lead character in Scott Cooper’s new film *Hostiles*, a movie set during the ruthless suppression of the Native American population in the US in the latter part of the 19th century, seems to have been specifically crafted in the spirit of Lawrence’s false and ahistorical aphorism.

The terse film, sparing on dialogue, centers on the figure of Capt. Joseph Blocker (Christian Bale), a US soldier, and his transformation from single-minded “Indian-hater” into a more tolerant being.

The story, on which the screenplay is based, was authored by the late Donald E. Stewart (1930-99), best known for co-writing the screenplay for *Missing*, directed by Costa-Gavras, inspired by the true story of American journalist Charles Horman. The latter disappeared in the bloody aftermath of the US-backed Chilean military coup of September 1973.

Hostiles opens in 1892 in Fort Berringer, New Mexico, as the mass destruction of the Native Americans is winding down. Blocker—whose emotionally corseted condition matches his name—is charged by his commanding officer with escorting a dying Cheyenne chief, Yellow Hawk (Wes Studi), back to his tribal lands.

Pathologically hostile towards Native Americans, Blocker initially refuses. However, threatened with a court-martial, he is forced to accept the command. Blocker knows the Native languages, as well as the territory between New Mexico and Montana. And, perhaps so the scriptwriters can impress the ghost of D. H. Lawrence, he reads Julius Caesar in the original Latin.

Soon after leaving the fort, Blocker has his men brutally place the Indians, Yellow Hawk and his family, in chains. Along the route, he picks up another “hostile,” Rosalee Quaid (Rosamund Pike), whose family has been murdered by a Comanche war group. Convinced by Yellow Hawk that the cavalry faces danger from the “hostile” Comanches, Blocker unchains his charges. A Comanche

attack does take place, leaving many casualties, but, more importantly, breaking down barriers between Blocker, Rosalee and their Cheyenne companions.

However, the most savage “hostiles” turn out to be, first, a group of white fur traders who abduct some of the women, and then a quartet of white ranchers, hell-bent on preventing the now-deceased Yellow Hawk from being buried in his ancestral land.

Hostiles does not concern itself with a trivial subject nor does it adopt a light-minded approach. This timeframe in American history is obviously a critical and bloody one. Furthermore, the “Western” as a genre has a long pedigree in American filmmaking, as Cooper himself acknowledges: “When you’re shooting those landscapes and dealing in themes that John Ford and Anthony Mann and Howard Hawks certainly mined, there’s no doubt people will compare you to them.”

The international cast was clearly committed, including supporting performers, such as Adam Beach, Peter Mullan, Scott Wilson, Timothée Chalamet, Ben Foster and others. Cinematographer Masanobu Takayanagi captures the rugged beauty of the varying landscapes through which Blocker and his party pass on their 1,500 mile trek.

One sequence stands out in particular—when Minnie McCowan (New Zealand actress Robyn Malcolm), the wife of Mullan’s Lt. Col. Ross McCowan, bitterly points out: “Those folks in the Indian Bureau ought to come out here and spend a few weeks at Fort Winslow or on a reservation. The sickness, the starvation, the conditions those poor souls have to live under is nothing short of inhumane. Come out here, they’d understand. ... They’re human beings. They deserve to be treated as such. And need I mention they were here first? ... That they’re dispossessed at our hand—and have received nothing.”

Unfortunately, such moments are rare, and for the most part, the script is fairly pedestrian.

Cooper has a history of quasi-serious efforts (*Out of the Furnace*, *Black Mass*, *Crazy Heart*) that tend to skim the surface of important issues, including historical ones.

This is the case too with *Hostiles*, a relatively formulaic film, containing a potential that’s never realized. Its structure is annoyingly symmetrical, with all of its elements, personalities and episodes funneled into the final, predictable image of the thematically critical “family unit” consisting of former Native

American-haters and a Native American child.

In an interview with moviemaker.com, director Cooper asserts that he wanted “to speak to what’s happening in America today, in terms of race. The racial divide in our country is widening. We’re living in polarized times, and I wanted to speak to this notion that we need to better understand one another and to reconcile. I think America needs to heal.”

This a provocative claim at odds with American reality. The great divide in the US is the social one, between the wealthy and the working population of all backgrounds. Far from that gap “healing,” it is widening and setting the stage for great class battles.

Despite everything, it is still astonishing that the upper middle class in Hollywood and elsewhere is largely oblivious to social inequality, a fact staring the filmmakers in the face. But they are resolutely oriented in a different direction—toward race and gender. The staggering reality that three individuals are wealthier than the poorest half of the American population hardly intrudes on the consciousness of this milieu, barricaded from the harsh conditions of the vast majority.

The analogy Cooper makes between the decimation of the indigenous population in the 19th century and presumably the “racialist” attitudes or policies of present-day “white America” is deeply false and disoriented.

The persecution of the Native Americans by the US authorities was not driven by racism, although racist ideology came into play as justification and legitimization. It was a clash between two antagonistic and irreconcilable types of socioeconomic organization: the American ruling class was obliged to uproot all non-capitalist and pre-capitalist forces, including the Native American tribes, in its drive to subjugate the continent and make way for modern industrial capitalism. Cooper hints at the process himself with the film’s final image of a huge locomotive fiercely wheezing in the middle of the barren “wilderness.”

The director’s reference to the Westerns of John Ford, Anthony Mann and Howard Hawks is also misleading, even leaving aside the degree to which American filmmakers were forced into the parable genre in the late 1940s and early 1950s because the McCarthyite atmosphere made shooting hard-hitting contemporary dramas problematic.

Taking the Western genre at face value—on the one hand, a figure like Ford was vulnerable to the conceptions and prejudices of his time, including a definite view of the struggle with the Native American population and the ultimate triumph of American civilization and democracy. Within those distinct limitations, however, he made profoundly honest and sensitive works. As the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder once told an interviewer, he admired the American directors who told “naïve stories” and worked “from the idea that the USA is the land of freedom and justice.”

In any event, a great deal of water has flowed under the bridge since the late 1940s and early 1950s. Given the decayed, toxic state of American capitalism, looking at its history straight in the face, and not “naïvely,” ought be a central occupation of today’s artists.

The Road to Nickelsville

Several residents of a homeless encampment in Seattle, known as “Nickelsville,” are interviewed in the 44-minute documentary, *The Road to Nickelsville*, directed by Derek Armstrong McNeill.

Nickelsville (named derisively for Seattle’s then mayor Greg Nickels in 2008) was cleared out by police in March 2016. The film, released in 2017, is now available online.

Some of the comments in the documentary are striking and true.

Colin, an engineer: “I know from my own experience, having had a middle class lifestyle, people are strung out. They’re living from paycheck to paycheck. What would I say to people who think it couldn’t happen to them? It comes suddenly.”

Desiree: “If I had to say anything to the neighborhood about Nickelsville, I would tell them that we are all the same. We do have our struggles, but we’re a small community trying to make it by.”

At one point, the city’s mayor declares: “We are involved in a homeless crisis the likes of which we have never seen since the Great Depression.”

Unfortunately, the movie limits itself sharply. It provides very little social or historical context for its treatment of Seattle’s homeless epidemic. National homelessness figures compiled by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development show that with an estimated count of 11,643 in 2017, King County, in which Seattle is located, trails behind only Los Angeles County and New York City in overall homeless population. That number includes people living in shelters and other facilities, as well as outdoors.

King County also ranks third in the number of *unsheltered* homeless—people living in vehicles, tents and on local streets. The 5,485 unsheltered people counted in the county in 2017 represented a 21 percent increase over the previous year’s tally. And as of July 2018, there were 12 formal homeless encampments around Puget Sound.

What smacks one in the face while watching the documentary is the absence of any reference to the fact that two of America’s three wealthiest individuals make their home in the Seattle area and that, generally, the region is infested with billionaires and multi-millionaires. In other words, the city embodies in the starkest fashion the acute social polarization in America, something apparently too troubling to be dealt with by the filmmakers.



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