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Riding East: Western myths, nostalgia, and the crossing of generic boundaries in Hidalgo (2004)

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Riding East – nostalgia, irony and the demythologization of the Western in *Hidalgo* (2004)

Abstract

During the first decade of the new millennium, a number of epic films appeared in quick succession exploring broadly speaking a clash of cultures through mythic-historic narratives. Although the 2004 film *Hidalgo* (dir. Joe Johnston) was overshadowed by some of the more successful works at the time, this paper argues that it makes a distinct contribution to the field through a nostalgic-ironic reframing of traditional Western genre tropes. Linking Western and Eastern myths about equestrian nomadic culture, the film follows in the footsteps of nineteenth century orientalist art and critically re-evaluates the very origins of the Western as a cinematic genre. Balancing nostalgia with ironic critique, *Hidalgo* confronts and subverts some of the most iconic tropes of the Western, and consequently raises a number of interesting broader questions about our engagement with the past and the American ideal of a melting pot.

Hidalgo (2004) is a blend of Western and Adventure epic that portrays the journey of run-down Western rider Frank T. Hopkins (Viggo Mortensen) and his mustang Hidalgo who participate in a spectacular race across the Arabian Desert. Yet it is also a journey of self-discovery that highlights contemporary concerns about identity, ethnicity and class as it reshapes traditional patterns of the Western. The film appeared in a period in which a number of blockbuster epics explored what we might call a 'clash of cultures', especially the conflict between Western and non-Western ideals. For example, Ridley Scott's *Alexander* (dir. 2004)

featured amongst other things the eastward conquest of the ancient Macedonian king, while Wolfgang Peterson's *Troy* (2004) showed the conflict between the nation-states of Greece and the Eastern people of Troy. The 2004 version of *King Arthur* (dir. Antoine Fuqua) reframes the legendary knight as a Roman centurion battling the barbaric hordes of Saxon invaders to protect an emerging British nation, and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), Ridley Scott once again, offers a fictionalised account of the twelfth century crusades, in which the Christians are evicted from Jerusalem by Sultan Saladin. These examples also underline the tendency of contemporary epics to represent "a transnational orientation and an appeal to cross-cultural structures of belonging and identification," as Robert Burgoyne has argued.[1] He further notes that it is these cross-cultural structures that encourage "us to look at epics differently, to read them against the grain, to consider them in terms of a post-national project focusing on broad stories of affiliation and community across ethnic, religious and geographic boundaries."[2] This article aims to offer such a *reading against the grain* of *Hidalgo*, exploring the ways in which the film boldly and self-consciously plays with the symbols and stereotypes evident in traditional Westerns.

On that basis, the approach of this article is threefold. Firstly it aims to identify the ways in which *Hidalgo* draws on older art forms such as nineteenth century orientalist paintings and adventure novels to recreate a nostalgic idea of nomadic equestrian culture, both East and West; secondly it explores how the film both draws on and critically challenges aspects of the Western genre that emerge from these traditions, and finally it looks at how traditional genre conflicts (e.g. between Native American and white settler and between the Westerner and the Easterner) are reinterpreted through the characters and reflect wider concerns about identity and the individual's role as part of the community. In this context, the article will also highlight the ways in which *Hidalgo* reflects a number of key elements associated with contemporary epics,

such as "the multi-ethnic community, the nomadic passage across boundaries […] and the unknown or anonymous hero," noted by Burgoyne.[3]

Hidalgo, History and Hollywood

Reputedly based on a true story,[4] the film is set in late nineteenth century USA, when the Western conquest draws near the end. At the start of the film we encounter long-distance rider Frank T. Hopkins working as an army scout. While delivering a message he witnesses the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre of Lakota people by the United States Army. This event leaves Hopkins traumatised – a disillusioned drunk burdened by his own feelings of guilt. This feeling of guilt is grounded in a deeply personal conflict as Hopkins is the son of a Lakota mother and a white army scout. While to the outside world he epitomises the image of the white cowboy coming to accept the hidden, Native American part of his identity becomes the key feature of his journey of redemption and self-discovery throughout the film. Shortly after the sequence at Wounded Knee, we encounter Hopkins working as a show rider for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, where he is challenged by an Arabian sheikh to join a long-distance race through the Arabian Desert, after the sheikh has taken umbrage at the claim that Hopkins' horse Hidalgo is the world's best long-distance race-horse. On his way to the Middle East he also encounters the British Lady Devonport, who has her own horse and rider join the race in order to gain breeding rights for the sheikh's Arabian horses. For Hopkins, the perilous journey through the desert becomes a new frontier experience at a time when the American frontier increasingly becomes a nostalgic fantasy. As Geoff King has argued, the *idea* of the frontier is not necessarily limited to American westward expansion. Frontier mythologies appear in cinema in a variety of forms, drawing on the fact that the underlying concepts of the myth and its origin in the Western "are

sufficiently well entrenched in American culture to provide a repository that can be drawn upon in many different ways".[5] As such, the film's shifting of the 'frontier' from west to east offers an extension of frontier mythology, but also carries with it some of the traditional challenges of the original myth. As I will explore in more detail below, the setting of the film at the end of American westward expansion also indicates a cultural shift, one of which Hopkins is a victim and which fuels his sense of lack of purpose.

Hidalgo had modest international success,[6] but while generally popular with audiences, it was largely dismissed by critics,[7] in most cases bemoaning either the film's historical inaccuracies[8] or its apparent reinforcement of stereotypes[9]. The critics that dismissed the film often focused on reading the film in the context of contemporary US politics in the Middle East, arguing that the film, amongst other things, reinforces orientalist stereotypes, describing it as an instance of "'benevolent supremacy,' with the American hero appropriately besting what turns out to be an anachronistic British presence in order to take its place in the region",[10] or even dismissing it as "a piece of privately funded pro-American propaganda."[11] Here, *Hidalgo* is in line with other epics of the time, such as *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) or *Troy* (2004), which were similarly interpreted in the light of recent military interventions in the Middle East [12]. However, this reading of the film is problematic for several reasons. For example, as Buscombe emphasised, approaches to the Western that aim to link all of its developments to socio-cultural influences at the time of their making "run the risk of short-circuiting a system of representation whose genesis actually pre-dates the cinema and whose determinations and effectivity are therefore more extensive than such analyses propose."[13] Moreover, critics who dismiss the film as mere propaganda misunderstand the film on two levels. Firstly, they more broadly overestimate the extent to which mainstream cinema deliberately develops a 'propagandist'

agenda and underestimate the audience's ability to critically reflect on story. As King notes, "the reassertion of mythic narratives [in mainstream cinema] can be understood without need to resort to any kind of conspiracy theory assuming the conscious or organized activity of those with material interests in the viability of the myth".[14] In addition, "post-structuralist analyses have taught us that so-called 'resistive' narratives and ideological agendas that muddy the clear waters of the myth can, more often than not, be found in most Westerns," as Carter has pointed out.[15] Secondly, these critics also overlook the extent to which the film intersperses the idealised, nostalgic vision with a sense of irony, thus setting "elements of a conventional popular genre in an altered context, thereby making us perceive these traditional forms and images in a new way."[16] Rather than simply casting the American hero as a modernising force in a backward and nostalgic East, as writers like Kollin have argued, the film offers a significant level of ambiguity when it comes to the portrayals of both Western and Eastern societies and especially with regard to the apparent hero. And although films are of course always influenced by their socio-cultural and political environment, the focus on universal ideas rather than one particular political context enables audiences across the globe to interpret the film in light of their own experiences. As Monica Cyrino has noted with regard to contemporary epics more generally, they "seek to reach the widest possible international audiences" and are therefore "crafting their narrative strategies to engage with and promote broad cross-cultural and even universal structures of identification."[17]

Correspondingly, the more positive reviews of *Hidalgo* often emphasised the universal aspects of the film, such as the success of the underdog, compassionate friendship and heroic perseverance. For example, eminent film critic Roger Ebert struck a more complimentary note when describing *Hidalgo* as "the kind of movie Hollywood has almost become too jaundiced to

make anymore. Bold, exuberant and swashbuckling, it has the purity and simplicity of something Douglas Fairbanks or Errol Flynn might have bounded through."[18] This sense of nostalgia expressed here sits well with the film's own romanticising of Western iconography, such as the mustang, the Colt pistol and the cowboy himself. Yet, as I will outline below, this nostalgia is of a postmodern kind, one that "does indeed recall the past, but always with the kind of ironic double vision that acknowledges the final impossibility of indulging in nostalgia, even as it consciously evokes nostalgia's affective power."[19]

Nostalgia – Looking back in awe

The fact that the film though not purely a Western heavily draws on the iconography of the genre already seems to predispose it for a nostalgic look at the past, given that the Western has been described as "one of the most nostalgic of all film genres," given that one of its "central plot element[s]… involves escape, with the hero retreating from an overly developed and modernized world to the wild, untamed, and celebrated *premodern* landscapes of the American West."[20]

In order to better understand the ways in which *Hidalgo* draws on nostalgic ideas of the American West, especially the figure of the cowboy, it is worth looking briefly at the origins of the genre in nineteenth century art, following Buscombe's suggestion to read the genre in a wider context. For instance, several writers have noted the origins of the cowboy myth in the paintings of American frontier artists, notably Frederic Remington.[21] Moreover, Buscombe directly links cinematic representations to Remington (and others), arguing that "'The West,' in the form in which we now have it, was essentially a nineteenth-century invention, and we cannot write the history of the cinema's treatment of the subject without taking this into account."[22] The mythic

idea of the cowboy and his horse as representatives of a vanishing culture pervades the film throughout. Early on in the film, when his Wild West Show colleagues put together the money for Hopkins to join the race, Annie Oakley (Elizabeth Berridge) tellingly notes: “We're betting on the last American cowboy!” Moreover, the focus on the romantic ideal of the cowboy and his faithful horse also enables the film to draw another parallel popular in nineteenth century art, namely the connection between the horse culture of the Wild West and Arabia. As I will discuss in more detail later, the character of Hopkins, represents two aspects of Western horse culture painted by Remington, the cowboy and the Native American, and during the course of the film the emphasis will shift from the former to the latter. While Remington primarily focussed on Western scenes, other orientalist painters of the time emulated Remington’s style with explicitly Eastern subjects. Gina MacDermot, Managing Director of the Mathaf Gallery, London’s foremost art gallery on orientalist art, notes in a recent interview, that “the subject matter that most easily crosses cultural boundaries is the Arabian horse”.[23] The magazine article further states that “the Arabian horse became a nostalgic symbol to a Western world rapidly being eclipsed by the Industrial Revolution” and reflected a “yearning for a simpler past” that was also reflected in other Romantic movements of the time, as well as the paintings by Remington, whose “cowboy extravaganzas had much in common with Orientalist depictions of Bedouin scenes.”[24] Several of the paintings discussed in the article could be compared almost directly to scenes in the film, for example Georges Washington’s *The Falconers* (date unknown), which as the name suggest features men on horseback hunting with falcons, an image represented in the film by Sakr (Adoni Maropis) one of the competitors in the race; or Jean-Léon Gérôme’s painting *Rider and Dying Horse in the Desert* (1872), which could almost be considered as

concept art for a scene towards the end of the film in which Hopkins comforts his collapsed horse in the middle of the desert.

As noted, the latter part of *Hidalgo* especially highlights the similarities between Native American and Bedouin nomadic cultures, a connection that also underlines the notion of the *nomadic passage* described earlier as one of the key features of contemporary epics. Yet, there are more explicit comparisons between the two cultures in the film. For example, when the sheikh's daughter Jazira (Zuleika Robinson) tells Hopkins about her father's love for Wild West stories, she says that "in this Wild West, there are nomads also. The red people. Like the Bedu, they are a horse culture. Have you seen their vanishing kind?" Hopkins answers by revealing "I am their kind". This is repeated later in the film when Hopkins' nemesis Prince Bin Al Reeh (Saïd Taghmaoui) scoffs at him, "You will not defeat me. I am born of a great tribe, People of the Horse", to which Hopkins replies "So am I". At this point he further reinforces the connection to his Native American roots by removing his saddle before mounting his horse, the unsaddled rider having long been an indicator for Native American horsemanship in traditional Western iconography. Yet, like the myth of the cowboy, this image is also a construct as "the mounted warrior of the plains – the ubiquitous and romantic symbol of native America – was in fact not an aboriginal character at all but one borne from [a] collision of cultures".[25] And although the film explicitly links the idea of the nomad to the Native American tribes, it can similarly be applied to Hopkins as the 'last American cowboy', a mythic character on a journey through an untamed landscape towards an indefinite goal.

Consequently, *Hidalgo* indulges in the images of faithful horses and skilful riders, imbuing them with a nostalgia that emphasizes their status as part of an idealised and mythologized past. As Linda Hutcheon highlights, the past remembered in a nostalgic light "is

rarely the past as actually experienced, … it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire, making it as much about our attitudes to the present as the past.[26] Numerous scholars of the Western have emphasised the status of the Western as a myth rather than as a fictionalised representation of any historical American West. For example, Will Wright describes the Western as "the transformation of a historical period into a mythical realm",[27] while John White claims that the genre is "a fantasy purporting to contain some truth with relevance for the contemporary world."[28] Moreover, scholars such as Bandy and Stoehr have outlined how Western filmmakers "blended mythmaking with a manufactured sense of authenticity" in order to "arrive at larger moral truths."[29] These statements further reinforce the idea that question of historical accuracy have less relevancy for the film than more universal ideas such as perseverance, courage and hope, which have always been broader moral themes evident in the Western.

Moreover, in his analysis of classic American film genres, Cawelti shows how the Western (like others) has been transformed over time, and a significant element of this transformation has been the "cultivation of nostalgia" and "the use of traditional generic structures as a means of demythologization".[30] As a Western-Adventure epic, *Hidalgo* has already adapted a number of traditional genre tropes to create a hybrid form, but it also draws attention to the origins of the Western genre through a cultivation of nostalgia in Calwelti's sense. Apart from the suggested connection to nineteenth century paintings, the film also references adventure novels and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show as the foundational art forms of the Western. As Buscombe notes "painting, together with popular fiction and commercial spectacles such as the Wild West Show provided for the cinema an ample repertoire of stock types and narrative situations". [31] Whereas the links to paintings are more implicit, both the Wild West Show, which I will discuss in the next section, and popular fiction are referenced explicitly

in the film. For example, Sheikh Riyadh (Omar Sharif) childlike fascination with cowboy culture largely stems from his readings of so-called dime novels. Incidentally, the casting of Omar Sharif as the sheikh can itself be regarded as a nostalgic nod towards his role in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), one of those 'bold, exuberant and swashbuckling' old Hollywood movies mentioned earlier by Roger Ebert. For Kollin, the sheikh's fascination with the stories and Hopkins, especially his Colt pistol, "functions as an orientalist cliché, an age-old expression of the West's alleged superiority and power over the East."[32] She cites Egyptian critic Emad El-Din Aysha who decries the film's apparent "satirizing of all things non-American."[33] Although Kollin acknowledges that the film's portrayal of the West is more complicated than it looks at first sight, both authors overlook the degree to which the film also satirizes *all things American*. Rather than being the owner of superior technology, Hopkins and his Colt are romantic objects of curiosity for the sheikh, representing an almost extinct species - the subject of fiction rather than history, let alone the future. Nostalgia certainly prevails in the scenes in which the sheikh questions Hopkins about his life in the West and persuades him to wager his Colt, a reminder of the past, not a technology of the future. What we see in *Hidalgo* is the integration of Western tropes "into a realm of highly creative and self-conscious reverence"[34], as described by Bandy and Stoehr with regard to contemporary Westerns, while simultaneously evoking "a sense of warm reassurance by bringing before our mind's eye images from a time when things seemed more secure and full of promise and possibility,"[35] which is part of nostalgia's role in the generic transformation described by Cawelti. As indicated, throughout the film the nostalgic portrayal of the 'Old West' is regularly challenged through ironic commentary, making it the very postmodern form of nostalgia described by Hutcheon.

Colts and Clichés - Challenging the Myth

Apart from nostalgia, demythologization is one of the ways in which classic cinema genres are transformed over time, according to Cawelti. *Hidalgo* offers several instances that offer an explicit challenge to the myth, encouraging the audience to reflect on their own perceptions of the Western. The first instance can be found early in the film when the scene of the Wounded Knee Massacre is instantly juxtaposed with its re-enactment in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. We already hear the sound of the spectacle while the camera still lingers on Hopkins' distraught face witnessing the massacre. We then cut to a drunken Hopkins with smudged make-up watching the grotesque glorification and falsification of the same event. He can barely watch when the proud, elderly Chief Eagle Horn (Floyd 'Red Crow' Westerman) walks into the arena in order to be abused as the "wild hostile" in the show. As French notes, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show "has become in the western a symbol of the misrepresentation and degradation of the frontier experience," which is clearly evident here.[36] Consequently, this scene also challenges the audience to reflect on the bias inherent in historic representations more broadly, especially in the Western. According to Cawelti, contemporary genre transformations sometimes "deliberately [invoke] the basic characteristics of a traditional genre in order to bring its audience to see that genre as the embodiment of an inadequate and destructive myth."[37] For Hopkins, the show functions as a daily reinforcement of his trauma, just as it confronts audiences with the darker side of American westward expansion and the falsification of the period through contemporary art and fiction. When it is his turn to enter the arena, his colleague Annie Oakley reminds him, "remember, you're the good guy". This ironic reminder also suggests that it is no longer self-evident for the hero to be just that. Connoisseurs of the genre might also see parallels

here to John Ford's iconic *Fort Apache* (1948), which in its final scene shows how through "the romance of a Remington-style painting […] the myth of heroic leadership is re-endorsed with no small trace of irony after its exposure as fallacious" in the preceding events.[38]

Another instance of the film's ironic reframing of central themes of Western mythology is the idea of justice. French criticised *Hidalgo* for "simultaneously [expressing] disgust at the treatment of Native Americans on the frontier, and yet [demonstrating] Yankee know-how to their [Bedouin] hosts".[39] However, some of the scenes in which Hopkins demonstrates his 'Yankee know how' can also be read as a parody on traditional Western tropes that are at times morally deeply ambiguous. For example, in one scene the sheikh questions his aide Aziz about the latter's involvement in the abduction of his daughter. The sheikh appeals to Aziz's honour and decides to trust a man's word when Aziz denies any involvement, at which point Hopkins brutally intervenes, ties Aziz to his horse and puts his spurs on Aziz' throat until he gives in and confesses. Hopkins' laconic remark that this is "Western justice" leaves more than just a little negative aftertaste. Although he proves more effective in extracting a confession, the sheikh's appeal to honour and honesty arguably demonstrates higher moral values than Hopkins' brutality. According to Deleuze, modern cinema challenges the very idea of justice as it calls into question the structures of our system of judgement.[40] He further cites the "consciousness of clichés"[41] and a hero that is no longer heroic[42] as key elements of modern cinema, which are both elements that can be identified at least to some extent in *Hidalgo*.

Ultimately, the film both criticises the legacy of traditional Western narratives and revives their fascination and enchantment, addressing what Cawelti describes as the final stage of generic transformation, "the affirmation of myth for its own sake."[43] We can see this towards the end of the film, when Jazira asks Hopkins, who has just won the race: "Is it true, then? As in the

Western stories? The cowboy rides away into the setting of the sun. But not the same cowboy." And, of course, this is just what happens. In the end, Hopkins does not save the princess, but returns home to his community, freeing a herd of mustangs with his prize money. The idea of this final generic transformation is that the myth, although shown as flawed "is at least partially affirmed as a reflection of authentic human aspirations and needs,"[44] particularly our need for heroes.

At the start of the film, we get a brief glimpse of the charismatic hero of classic Westerns, when we first meet Hopkins celebrating in a saloon, but he soon turns into the disillusioned, broken and displaced hero of many revisionist Westerns. He has the opportunity to 'save the princess' in a sequence resembling the 'bold and exuberant' adventure films of old, when the sheikh's daughter Jazira is being kidnapped. Yet, the film once again plays with its own clichés, as although "Hopkins traces down her kidnappers and eventually restores her to her family, Jazira gets to turn the table on Hopkins in a postfeminist move where she 'rescues her rescuer' by helping Hopkins escape,"[45] as Kollin notes. *Hidalgo* offers a hero that is at times courageous, charming and clever, while simultaneously challenging his hero status, supporting French's notion that the contemporary Western "has come […] to challenge the very concept of heroism – not necessarily to destroy it, but to bring its traditional nature into question."[46] The hero of *Hidalgo* is not merely the lonely cowboy disappearing into the sunset to find hew adventures, nor is he a tragic hero that is ultimately doomed. Hopkins' heroism ultimately lies in accepting his own identity in order to make a positive contribution to his community.

Conflict, class and the unknown hero

Bandy and Stoehr have argued that the Western is "in many cases a story about a journey through landscape and reality toward the goal of self-knowledge."[47] One of the key aspects in this journey towards self-knowledge is closely related to the way in which *Hidalgo* appropriates another element of the traditional Western, namely the conflict between Native American and white settler, which is internalised in the character of Hopkins. Moreover, only due to the geographical shift from American West to Arab East and the confrontation with another culture is Hopkins finally able to accept both aspects of his identity. Schatz has argued that the Western follows an "*oppositional* narrative strategy", which shifts the focus from a "cause-and-effect plot [towards] the conflict itself and the opposed value systems it represents."[48] Similarly, for Deleuze, in classic American cinema more broadly the "action in itself is a duel of forces, a series of duels: duel with the milieu, with the others, with itself."[49] While it is possible to read the opposed value systems of the film simply in 'Yankee-versus-Arabs' terms as some critics have done, I want to highlight that the oppositions in *Hidalgo* are much more complex and intersected, creating a series of duels in Deleuze's sense and dynamics that are constantly shifting. For example, we have Lady and Major Davenport, whose representation of an outdated British aristocracy is in conflict with both American and Arab culture. However, both the Davenports and the Arabs have in common their disdain for Hopkins' uncultivated working-class character and his horse's mixed bloodline. Hopkins represents the internalising of the conflict between Native Americans and white settlers, but also between a nostalgic ideal of the past and a disillusioned view of the future. Sheikh Riyadh old-fashioned morals and values come in conflict with that of his ambitious and corrupt nephew and his daughter Jazira struggles with the conflict

between tradition and her own desires. As the scope of this paper does not allow me to explore all the different oppositions in the film, I will focus here on Hopkins' personal struggle with his own identity and explore the class conflicts expressed throughout the film as both are closely linked to the transformation of generic tropes noted earlier.

At the start of the film, when we see Hopkins delivering the fateful message to the Lakota camp at Wounded Knee, we get the first hint at Hopkins' mixed origins when a Lakota woman approaches him and says, in her native tongue, that she knew his mother. However, he ignores her and pretends not to understand, not yet willing to acknowledge this part of his identity. As discussed above, witnessing the subsequent massacre leaves Hopkins shattered and traumatised, illustrating what French describes with regard to a number of traditional Westerns, namely that "thematically, these movies are declarations in favour of the American melting pot; dramatically they are a recognition of the profound difficulties and personal tragedies involved in the process of assimilation".[50] Yet, *Hidalgo* also incorporates elements of more revisionist Westerns, beyond merely offering a 'broken' hero. By giving its hero a multicultural identity, the film (and the audience) is able to divide "its loyalties between whites and Native Americans as if to acknowledge the complexities of racial identity in contemporary multicultural U.S. society", as Kollin suggests.[51] Yet, while the audience might be able to divide its loyalties in such a way, Hopkins clearly struggles.

One of the key aspects outlined by Deleuze in relation to classic American cinema is that it embraces the two sides of the American Dream, "on the one hand the idea of a unanimist community …, melting pot and fusion of all minorities […] on the other hand the idea of a leader, that is, a man of this nation who knows how to respond to the challenges of the milieu."[52] We could argue that Hopkins is exactly such a leader, representing the 'fusion of minorities' as

well as being able to respond to the challenges of his environment. Yet, Hopkins' disillusionment with American society and his struggle with his own identity complicate the issue. When talking to Chief Eagle Horn before deciding to join the race, the latter emphasises the need for Hopkins to come to terms with his identity, saying that Hopkins "rides far from himself, and wishes not to look home. Until you do, you are neither white man nor Indian. You are lost." Here, the film explicitly outlines Hopkins' dilemma. Later, when Major Davenport learns that Hopkins is a cowboy, he blatantly asks if Hopkins has "ever killed any Red Indians", to which Hopkins acerbically replies "only one, a long time ago", clearly referring to himself, yet without revealing his background. Here, the film also relates to Burgoyne's notion of the *unknown hero* mentioned earlier. To some extent, the hero is unknown both to others and to himself. This idea of Hopkins as 'unknown' is demonstrated most clearly in the film through the parallels drawn between him and the sheikh's daughter Jazira. Like Hopkins, she is stuck between the customs and prejudices of her society and her own aspirations. In a significant scene, Hopkins challenges Jazira about her veil, to which she replies, "You don't know our world". Here, Jazira actively challenges Hopkins' ignorance towards her culture and prompts him to reflect on his own situation. Only when Hopkins witnesses Jazira's personal revelation by removing her veil and showing him her face, is he able to also reveal his own identity to her. Although Kollin is overall critical of the orientalist stereotypes presented in this scene, she also acknowledges that Jazira's "uncovering is presented as a feminist move toward liberation and freedom that also prompts Hopkins' own delayed racial self-reflection".[53] When she tells Hopkins that she "would only ever know [him] as a white man", Hopkins realises that his situation is not so different from hers and acknowledges that he has become "good at hiding [his] face, too". Yet, Jazira does more than just hold up a mirror to the hero's own situation. When Hopkins is tempted by Lady Davenport's

monetary offer to drop out of the race, Jazira challenges him by once again comparing their destinies, telling him that if he gives up, he "will prove them right, that blood is more important than will. You will continue your life hiding who God made you. Like me."

Although it is ultimately the challenge of the desert race and his near-death experience that prompts real change in Hopkins, Jazira's knowledge plays a significant part in his survival. In line with the original Western myth the redemptive power ultimately lies in struggling through an uncompromising environment. As King has argued, in frontier mythology, elemental "force is presented as both lethal danger and potential source of redemption, precisely the role played by the wilderness and its occupants in the classic American frontier tradition".[54] In *Hidalgo*, it is the lethal danger of the desert, the apparent loss of his horse and the resulting threat to his own life, which prompts Hopkins to recall his Native American ancestors and accept his identity.

The more obvious racial issues outlined in the film, often metaphorically through discussions about purebred versus mixed-blood horses, may overshadow the extent to which class conflicts play out in the film. Here, the film uses another pair of oppositions familiar from traditional Westerns, namely the Westerner versus *the Easterner*. This is indicated from the very start of the film. The first character to mock Hopkins and his horse is Preston Webb (C. Thomas Howell), a well-dressed US senator. Like the Easterners portrayed in many nineteenth-century caricatures,[55] Webb is clearly concerned about his image, wearing clothes rather too elegant and neat for a muddy cross-country race. This is further emphasised when we see him carefully shaving halfway through the race in the middle of the wilderness in order to "look good when crossing the finishing line". The Easterner represents the decadent aspects of metropolitan civilisation, often with clothing too neat or too flamboyant for the harsh conditions of the American West, in contrast to the working clothes worn by the Westerners. "The East", as

Wright argues, "is always associated with weakness, cowardice, selfishness, or arrogance."[56] Shortly after the encounter with Webb, we meet the sheikh's aide Aziz and another Arab nobleman as they visit the Wild West Show. These 'New Easterners', two well-dressed Arabs with regal manners, instantly stand out from the audience of scruffy looking working-class Americans that watch the spectacle. This contrast between Eastern decadence and Western heroism is maintained in *Hidalgo,* not just in these early scenes, but also later when this contrast is reiterated in the Middle East. Yet, it does not map onto a cowboy/Westerner Bedouins/Easterner in a straightforward manner, as in the Middle East, the opposition between the simple straight-talking Westerner and the more civilised, but corrupt Easterner, is first and foremost represented by the British Lady Davenport. For Kollin, "Lady Davenport serves as the feminized symbol of hypermodernity – the domestic, urbanized Other in the classic Western".[57] With her corseted clothes, fancy hats and elegant tea service she seems wholly out of place in the desert. Hopkins is constantly given to understand that he is not worthy to participate in the race, irrespective of his ethnic background. Both the Arabs and the British aristocrats object to Hopkins demeanour, unwashed appearance and lack of understanding of the 'rules of society'. In the end, the hero's victory is the success of the underdog as the working-class American cowboy triumphs over the elites – Arab, European, but also American as represented by Webb. Here, the film most clearly reinforces the myth of the American Dream, "where the individual is convinced he can do just about anything and is up to playing any role … where all nature ends and becomes art."[58]

As stated in the beginning, *Hidalgo* might be better understood when focussing on the ways in which it both challenges and reimagines traditional Western myths, embedding them in a

wider context of contemporary epic cinema. It is precisely the blending of various genre tropes and cultural contexts, its ironic nostalgia and its focus on universal themes such as resilience, compassion, courage and hope that makes it a contemporary myth. S. Brent Plate suggested that cinema not simply rehashes traditional myths, it has also created a strong set of myths of its own, and thus "has become a serious contender for creating the most prominent mythologies of the contemporary age."[59] The myth of the Western is clearly a prime example here. The cowboy riding into the sunset, the six-shooter and the lonely hero are but a few icons that have emerged from this mythic tradition. Yet, the genre also poses a number of challenges to contemporary sensibilities that more recent films need to find creative ways to address. While *Hidalgo* does indeed indulge in stereotypes and clichés, it does so creatively and self-consciously and as a consequence it offers us ample opportunities to challenge and reflect not just on its own story but the Western myth more broadly.

NOTES

[1] Robert Burgoyne, *The Epic Film in World Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 2011), 3.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Burgoyne, *The Epic Film in World Culture,* 82.
[4] The film company's claim that *Hidalgo* is based on a true story led to much criticism and dispute, for an indicative example see the discussion on the topic on the History News Network http://hnn.us/articles/3881.html.
[5] Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives. Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 12.
[6] According to annual figures from Box Office Mojo, the film took second place in the opening weekend charts in Spain, Germany, Italy, Argentina and Mexico, yet only ranking third in the USA. "Hidalgo", Box Office Mojo, accessed 31 August 2020, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl1633256961/.
[7] According to film review website Rotten Tomatoes, *Hidalgo* only received 45% positive ratings from professional critics, going down to only 33% if focussed on the top critics, in contrast to 65% of audience reviewers, who gave it a positive rating. "Hidalgo (2004)", Rotten Tomatoes, accessed 31 August 2020, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/hidalgo. Similarly, viewer comments on IMDB were much more positive, with 99 out of 339 reviews giving the film 4 or 5 star ratings, (an overall positive response of 171, based on the 'loved it' category), while only 19 reviewers gave the film 1 or 2 stars. "Hidalgo (2004)", IMDB, accessed 31 August 2020, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0317648/.
[8] For example: Andrew Gumbel, "Disney rides into trouble with story of cowboy who conquers the Middle East," *The Independent*, 10 March 2004. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/disney-rides-into-trouble-with-story-of-cowboy-who-conquers-the-middle-east-63662.html.
[9] For example, Haroldo A. Fontaine, "The Power of Film to Educate and Miseducate Pre-Service Teachers. A Phenomenological Analysis of *Hidalgo* and Cultural Representation of Muslims Post 9/11," *Multicultural Education* (Winter 2010): 37-43, Philip French, *Westerns,* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2005), 193, and Susan Kollin, "'Remember, you're the good guy:' *Hidalgo*, American Identity, and Histories of the Western,*" American Studies* 51:1/2, (Spring/Summer 2010), 5-25.
[10] Ibid., 21.
[11] Fontaine, "The Power of Film," 42.
[12] For example, Andrew Sarris, "Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*: The War on Terror's Bloody Past," *Observer*, 05 September 2005, https://observer.com/2005/05/ridley-scotts-kingdom-of-heaven-the-war-on-terrors-bloody-past/ and Edward Rothstein, "CONNECTIONS: To Homer, Iraq Would Be More of Same," *New York Times*, 5 June 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/05/movies/connections-to-homer-iraq-would-be-more-of-same.html.
[13] Buscombe, "Painting the Legend," 25.
[14] King, *Spectacular Narratives*, 10.
[15] Matthew Carter, *Myth of the Western. New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 81.
[16] John G. Cawelti, "*Chinatown* and generic Transformation in Recent American Films", in *Hollywood: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. II, ed. Thomas Schatz (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), 87.
[17] Monica Cyrino, "The reinvention of the epic," in *The Epic Film in World Culture*, ed. Robert Burgoyne (New York & London: Routledge, 2011), 27.
[18] Roger Ebert, "Hidalgo," *Chicago Sun Times*, 05 March 2004, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hidalgo-2004.
[19] Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern: A Dialogue," *Poligrafías*, 3 (1998-2000), 23.
[20] Kollin, "Remember, you're the good guy," 20
[21] For example, L. Logan, "The geographical imagination of Frederic Remington: the invention of the cowboy West," *Journal of Historical Geography,* 18, issue 1, (January 1992), 75-90; and Edwin R. Bingham, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederick Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 263-264.
[22] Edward Buscombe, "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western," *Cinema Journal,* 23, no. 4 (1984): 12-27, doi:10.2307/1225261.
[23] Lucien De Guise, "Orientalism's Equestrian Eye," *AramcoWorld*, January/February 2019, 14.

[24] ibid.
[25] Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faraquer, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 138.
[26] Hutcheon and Valdés, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," 20.
[27] Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society. A structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 6.
[28] John White, *Westerns* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2010), 36.
[29] Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 5.
[30] Cawelti, "*Chinatown* and generic Transformation," 88-89.
[31] Buscombe, "Painting the Legend," 21.
[32] Kollin, "Remember, you're the good guy," 20
[33] Emad el-Din Aysha, "Review of *Hidalgo*," *The Egyptian Gazette*, June 17, 2004, 8; cited in Kollin, "'Remember, you're the good guy:' *Hidalgo*, American Identity, and Histories of the Western,*" American Studies* 51:1/2, (Spring/Summer 2010), 5-25.
[34] Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride,* 8.
[35] Cawelti, "*Chinatown* and generic Transformation," 88.
[36] French, *Westerns,* 194.
[37] Cawelti, "*Chinatown* and generic Transformation," 89.
[38] Carter, *Myth of the Western*, 144
[39] French, *Westerns,* 193.
[40] See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), chapter 6
[41] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*. (London: Athlone Press, 1986), 214
[42] Ibid., 171.
[43] Cawelti, "*Chinatown* and generic Transformation," 91.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Kollin, "Remember, you're the good guy," 19.
[46] French, *Westerns*, 33.
[47] Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride,* 4.
[48] Schatz, "Film Genre and the Genre Film," 572.
[49] Deleuze, *Movement-Image*, 146
[50] French, *Westerns*, 53.
[51] Kollin "Remember, you're the good guy," 13.
[52] Deleuze, *Movement-Image*, 148.
[53] Kollin "Remember, you're the good guy," 18-19.
[54] King, *Spectacular Narratives*, 18.
[55] See for example Alex Andriesse, "Comic Gold The Easterner Goes West in Three Early American Comics," https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/comic-gold-the-easterner-goes-west-in-three-early-american-comics, accessed 07 September 2020
[56] Wright, *Sixguns and Society*, 57
[57] Kollin, "Remember, you're the good guy," 18.
[58] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science (*first published 1882). Transl. by Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.), 216. Although Nietzsche's writing predates the first appearance of the term 'American Dream', what he calls the 'American faith' reflects this concept very closely.
[59] S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film. Cinema and the Re-creation of the world*, (London and New York: Wallflower, 2008), 32.