

Leading man

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue



Christian Bale in *Out of the Furnace*.

In this year's holiday movie blitz, a live wire unites two very different films in the person of Christian Bale, who plays the lead in Scott Cooper's *Out of the Furnace* and in David O. Russell's *American Hustle*. Bale's physical presence weaves his two roles into a larger narrative about masculine anxieties and hopes.

In *Out of the Furnace* Bale plays Russell Baze, a modest, hardworking man in the Rust Belt of Pennsylvania. The movie is set in the very recent past (an early scene occurs on the eve of Obama's 2008 election), with the economic recession bristling below the surface. The steel mill where Russell works (and his father and his father's father before him) is about to close. His brother, Rodney (Casey Affleck), has served five tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and bears the scars of war on his body and mind. He has resorted to bare-knuckle boxing both for money and to find an outlet for his rage. Their father, with little access to health care, is dying slowly in their childhood home.

While the wars hang over the Baze men and references are made to overseas outsourcing and the bum economy, this is not a political movie. Baze's enemy is not the economic and political forces hemming him in. It's Harlan DeGroat (Woody Harrelson), a meth-dealing boxing impresario who rules a backwoods underground in the mountains of New Jersey. The choice to pit Baze against a specific bad guy reduces the movie somewhat; we've seen this story in various guises many times before. But it also gives the film a steady focus: it is unabashedly about white

working-class men and the now dying honor of their stoicism.

In *American Hustle*, Bale plays Irving Rosenfeld, a man who exudes excess rather than lean resistance. But like Baze, Rosenfeld is a man struggling to define himself—in this case, amid ever-shifting con games. A slicker, faster paced and overall more satisfying film, *American Hustle* is loosely based on the 1978 Abscam FBI investigation—the so-called Arab scam—that convicted many U.S. politicians on bribery and corruption charges. Aided by his mistress and partner in crime, Sydney Prosser (played by an exhilarating Amy Adams), Rosenfeld finds himself at the heart of an FBI sting.

Pressed beyond his modest ambitions as a small-time crook, Rosenfeld wrangles with federal agents, U.S. senators and gambling mafia. Add to this an unstable wife and jealous mistress, both of whom might be playing him so as not to get played, and Irv's failing heart and elaborate comb-over can barely keep up. As cons within cons press loyalties on every side, the film is less about political corruption than the deep longing of its characters to find a piece of solid ground, something they can stake a life on.

Bale has played expansive roles before (as in *The Machinist* and *The Fighter*), but most moviegoers know him as Batman in Christopher Nolan's franchise that ruled the box office during its three-film run (2005 to 2012). Nolan and Bale's vision of Batman reflected our heroic longings in the early days of the war on terror—and then, by 2012, our weary exhaustion with the corruption of that war: Batman was the suffering hero who did what was necessary to keep Gotham safe, even at great personal and psychic cost.

In the current postrecession malaise, tortured heroics seem out of place. This is not a world that can be made right by the theatrics of a brooding savior. Both Baze and Rosenfeld are flawed men in hard places, trying to figure out what it means to survive. They realize how narrow their choices are and how much controlled by external forces.

Baze straightens his spine and earnestly reaches for older models of self-assertion, in the mode of Clint Eastwood and Paul Newman. Rosenfeld swaggers and preens and hedges his bets. It is very easy to glorify the former and pretty hard to recommend the latter as an emblem of moral character. In the end, however, Rosenfeld finds solid ground and acts out of vulnerability and compromise. Baze, steadfast and unyielding, is bereft of everything he's ever loved. Bale makes both

characters highly sympathetic, and both figures offer options for “being a man” without the easy resolution of a caped crusader.