

Broken Arrow

Delmer Daves 1950

Jeff Chandler as Cochise stands as an equal to James Stewart as frontiersman Tom Jeffords, so although we would have preferred a native American actor as the Apache chief, at least the character is given respect and is developed as fully as the white arbiter who seeks peace between the two warring sides. Chandler is excellent, and was nominated for best supporting actor in that year's Oscars. Unlike most previous westerns, in which the native Americans are at best a backdrop to the plot, Cochise, and his cross cultural relationship with Jeffords, is central. Cochise is astonished to find that Jeffords is atypical of whites and countervail to his experience of them. Jeffords' efforts to secure peace hinge on developing an understanding of the Apache culture, something which he begins by learning their language. Inevitably his fellows see him as an "Indian lover"

Tom Jeffords arranges for the mail to get through yet at the same time a military detachment is wiped out (defeated by Cochise in a tactically brilliant series of manoeuvres). Jeffords explains to an incensed crowd in the saloon that this is consistent because Cochise had given his word that he will allow the mail to pass. An impassioned observer, clearly raised on Hollywood westerns, yells at Jeffords: "No Indian is a man of honour".

In response to a question from an Apache leader General Oliver Howard asserts "If a white kills an Indian on your territory we will hang him". Cochise's incredulous, ironic response "That is something for Cochise to see" results in cackles of laughter from the Apaches.

Debra Paget is delightful as Morning Star, so too is her mutual infatuation, courtship and marriage with Jeffords. This serves a very useful function in challenging the prejudices of the audience. To those who carp about Paget not being native American I would not only point out that this was 1950, but also that half a century later *Dances with Wolves* uses the device of making Kevin Costner's loved one a captured white woman (*Stands with a Fist*) to avoid an interracial screen romance.

The film, and hence its director Delmar Daves and scriptwriter Albert Maltz, is to be applauded in presenting "good" and "bad" native Americans and Whites rather than using the former as a stereotypical faceless force of evil as do many westerns produced either before or afterwards. However, as Edward Buscombe points out in his BFI Screen Guide "100 Westerns" (2006) the definition of good and bad Indians is based on whether or not they accept Assimilation and its bedfellow acculturation, which undermines the film's liberal stance.

Critics of Broken Arrow like Frank Manchel ("Cultural Confusion" in Hollywood's Indian, Rollins & O'Connor (eds), 1998) like to find fault rather than seeking out true worth. Since the film uses the device of presenting itself as a true account of what happened Manchel takes exception to perceived historical inaccuracies. Certainly the complete fabrication of events relating to Geronimo just to use his well known name outside its historical context is reprehensible, but is not sufficient to condemn the film as a whole. Neither is the misrepresentation of reservation life, cinema audiences would hardly be swelled by a realistic portrayal of this. It is not just reservation life that is sanitized, the whole portrayal of life in the west is sanitized in westerns as a whole. Manchel's misunderstanding of history and its relation to art forms is complete. He does not have sufficient knowledge of historical "facts": he seems to suggest that the 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek was relevant to the Apache when it was not, and that the Apache relied on the buffalo when they were pushed off the plains by the Comanche, following on from the Spanish. More seriously his understanding of methodology leads him to condemn the film for his History is preoccupied with "facts" rather than values. Even worse, he seems to think that films reflect their subject matter rather than being a reflection of the social mores of the times they are made.

Manchel dismisses the film's possible merits as it being "well intentioned", that "in 1950 people (sic) did not know any better", and that it was "a significant step forward compared to what had happened earlier." But Manchel is merely creating a straw man. We are told that the film is a "justification for the disastrous termination policies that Congress pursued in the 1950s whereby federal responsibility for Indian lands, treaties and individuals was ended". That the policies were disastrous is undoubted. That Broken Arrow is culpable is highly likely, since it was contemporaneous.(*). However, this does not reduce its effectiveness or quality in presenting a set of values which were part of a movement towards breaking new ground for the western, albeit in a rather treacherous and simplistic way. Nevertheless this does not rid the film of either its charm or merit.

Broken Arrow instills humanity in its native American characters. As Manchel states "It portrayed Indian/white relations in the old West not as they were, but as euro Americans wanted them to be. "Exactly. And it did so very well, just as many westerns have done so since and before. It was no more or less historically accurate than Dances with Wolves, Little Big Man or Geronimo, an American Legend. But in a number of ways its values shine through.

History itself cannot set out what Indian/white relations were, nor should it purport to, so why should a film, an art form, be criticized on this ground? History can only reconstruct what happened from the sources selected from those available. Films reflect the times in which they are made. In this film humanity shines out like a beacon. Idealistic yes, historically accurate no. A fine film, I think so.

(*) Since writing this I have read Edward Buscombe's excellent book "'Injuns!' Native Americans in the Movies"(2006). He argues cogently that Broken Arrow is not actually in favour of 'termination' since it actually argues for reservations: "It mounts powerful arguments in favour of the reservation system as a humane solution to the 'Indian Problem'."(p109)

<http://www.nativeamerican.co.uk/brokenarrow.html>