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Apaches and Comanches on Screen

Kenneth E. Hall

A generally accurate appraisal of Western films might claim that Indians as hostiles are grouped into one undifferentiated mass. Popular hostile groups include the Sioux (without much differentiation between tribes or bands, the Apaches, and the Comanches). Today we will examine the images of Apache and Comanche groups as presented in several Western films. In some cases, these groups are shown with specific, historically identifiable leaders such as Cochise, Geronimo, or Quanah Parker. The changing images of such leaders help to illustrate the more general attitudes displayed in film towards Apaches and Comanches. In broad outlines, the Apaches are often shown as accomplished and feared guerrilla fighters, while the Comanches are displayed as expert horsemen and strategists, although both groups are depicted as ruthless and cruel warriors. Such broad-brush portrayals of course present a skewed image of the two groups, ignoring the many noncombatants in each as well as the historical friction between the two "nations." The narratives also feature several examples of captivity motifs, although in some intriguing instances the usual pattern of white captured by native and rescued or assimilated is subjected to variation or even reversal.

A useful starting point for discussing Apache portrayals is John Ford's *Fort Apache*, one of his "cavalry trilogy" films. The plot (based on "Massacre" by James Warner Bellah) actually recasts the Custer story, supplanting the Sioux with the Apache and thereby transferring the locale to Arizona Territory. The narrative usefully avoids the inaccurate cliché of warriors attacking a secure fort and instead places the threat to the fort well outside its walls, where a patrol is sent to intercept renegade Apaches led by Cochise in one of his more interesting film incarnations. Cochise is portrayed as a Spanish speaker (presumably because of his time in Mexico) who is interpreted for the Army soldiers by former Confederate and Mexican native Sgt. Beaufort (the always excellent Pedro Armendáriz). Cochise maintains his nobility but does not keep a lofty distance: he insists forcefully

that the venal and hypocritical Indian agent Meacham (Grant Withers) be turned out of his job, or there will be no peace. As in the case of numerous films about the Apaches, the leader comes to an understanding with the soldiers, which is later abrogated by the whites, although in this instance the whites fall into two groups, the conciliators who will fight only if necessary (represented by Wayne) and the more rigid war party led by Col. Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda). (In some cases the Indian foe also displays divisions, as in *Broken Arrow*; in some cases the whites are more unified, as are the Apaches in this instance.) When Thursday refuses to accept the terms offered by Cochise (that is, Meacham's dismissal), and in fact responds with the peremptory demand that the Apaches return to their reservation, open war breaks out, and Thursday leads a suicidal foray into their stronghold. The film emphasizes the military talent of the otherwise unschooled Apache leader, who shows up Thursday's pedantic West Point erudition as nothing but empty display. (Parallels to the final battle scene appear in later films from *Duel at Diablo* to *Braveheart*. A possible source for such battles, in which a technologically more advanced party is destroyed by a seemingly backward foe, would be the notorious and disastrous defeat of Publius Quintilius Varus at the hands of the Germans in the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest near present-day Osnabrück in A. D. 9 [Wells].⁵)

The Cochise of *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves, 1950) is a more polished, less hard-edged figure than the warrior of Ford's film. This now-famous screen interpretation not only helped to launch the career of actor Jeff Chandler, who portrayed Cochise with sensitivity and authority (despite of course his status as yet another Anglo actor playing an Indian) but also contributed to the later tendency towards humanizing the previously maligned Apache. (Even Ford's intriguing Cochise is shown as a figure of wildness and hard cruelty.) One of the

⁵ The battle "was one of the most devastating defeats suffered by the Roman army." It was not an isolated disaster but instead "ended Rome's designs on conquest farther east beyond the Rhine and resulted in the emperor Augustus's decision to expand and strengthen a series of military bases along the Rhine frontier As the bases grew, towns were established near them, many of which became major centers of medieval and modern Europe, including Bonn, Cologne, Mainz, and Strasbourg." The battlefield, at Kalkriese, was only rediscovered in 1987 (Wells 15-16).

first pro-Indian films from Hollywood, *Broken Arrow* is based on a novelist's treatment of the historical relationship between Cochise and frontier figure Tom Jeffords, who helped to facilitate a peace treaty with the Chiricahua leader. While considerably embellished - Cochise and Jeffords were not really the 'blood brothers' of the eponymous novel, nor did the romantic interest among the Apaches for Jeffords really exist (Sonnichsen, "Who Was Tom Jeffords?") - the film does criticize the intolerance of many whites and the indifference of others in post Civil War Arizona (clearly intended to parallel post-World War II America and white-black relations). The quietly handsome image of Cochise as incarnated by Jeff Chandler may not be far off the mark, although this is difficult to verify given the lack of any photographs of the Indian leader, so that one has to rely on contemporary verbal descriptions of the reportedly "tall" and fine-looking chief (Sweeney xiv-xv). The Chandler-Daves interpretation weighs in more than a little on the side of Cochise's judiciousness and generosity, certainly features of his character, although he was clearly a man of his time and context and thus quite capable of cruelty and other less praiseworthy conduct (see Sweeney xiii-xiv). In fact, the historical Cochise spent much of his career fighting the whites as revenge for their execution of some of his relatives during the infamous Bascom incident of 1861 (see Sweeney Ch. 8). Sweeney writes that after this murky conflict, "Cochise hated Americans with an abiding and impenetrable passion, perhaps more fanatically than any other Apache. It mattered little that only a few whites had actually wronged him; he hated them all" (Sweeney 166). Little of this vengefulness peeks through Chandler's restrained and quiet portrayal. In fact, Ford's portrait may actually be closer to historical veracity - but the Chandler interpretation has been more enduring and has in fact contributed to the softening in films of an even harder character, the famous Geronimo.

More even than Cochise, Geronimo has been a focus of popular culture, parallel on the charts to Sitting Bull of the Sioux. Unlike Cochise, he outlived the Wild West; and unlike Sitting Bull, he did not die violently. His persona has been the subject of mythification and distortion, as one of his biographers (Angie Debo) notes (Debo ix-x).

C. L. Sonnichsen, concentrating primarily on fiction but also touching on history and film, shows the extremes between which the image of Geronimo has wavered (Sonnichsen, "From Savage to Saint"). One of its additional dimensions is his reputed status as a medicine man with "power."



Some screen treatments of Geronimo refer to or highlight this legend. Geronimo only appears in cameo in *Fort Apache*, when he accompanies Cochise and other Apache leaders to the peace talk with the soldiers. Here, he is referred to as Geronimo or Jerome, and as a medicine man. No mention is made however of his Apache name Goyathlay, perhaps an implicit attempt to downplay the Apaches' culture in favor of Anglo and Hispanic content. One of the most important treatments of the Geronimo story is the entertaining though not fully accurate *Ger-*

onimo: The Making of an American Legend (Walter Hill, 1994), which does have the notable benefit of casting the fine actor Wes Studi, a Native American, in the title role - admittedly of a different tribe, the Cherokee. As the film's subtitle reveals, the narrative is concerned with the legendary status of Geronimo and not primarily with treating his story with complete historical fidelity. Nevertheless, Hill's film does include a solid underpinning of accurate detail, with the character list including the names of actual participants in the Geronimo story: Lt. Charles Gatewood, Capt. Britton Davis, Gen. George Crook, Gen. Nelson Miles, and Al Sieber. In his 1994 article on the film, historian Gerald Thompson details some of the inaccuracies in this handsome and entertaining Western, such as its apparent overstatement of the

friendship between Gatewood and Geronimo, its softening or idealizing of Geronimo's character, and its invention from whole cloth of an episode in Mexico concerning scalphunters (Thompson).⁶ From our perspective, the most important element here is the treatment of the Geronimo character.

Presentation of Native American characters in Westerns has often lined up either with the "noble savage" pole or with the "savage" pole. Mann's *Last of the Mohicans*, with its romantic Cooper source material, is a good example of this: Chingachgook and Uncas on one pole, Magua on the other. Most frequently in films before the 1940s, Hollywood presented the "savage" image (which, incidentally, bled over into wartime films with the Japanese as surrogates for Apaches or Comanches). Beginning with films like *Fort Apache* and even more so with *Broken Arrow*, the emphasis shifted towards the "noble savage" pole, but interestingly in *Broken Arrow* the "savage" part of the Cochise character was elided to the degree that he seemed rather more like a man of nobility who had received his own peculiar education - a Lord Greystoke figure, so to speak. This "articulate noble savage" tendency is even more pronounced in Hill's Geronimo film. Wes Studi's Geronimo speaks nearly flawless and even colloquial English; he is well acquainted with binoculars (by implication with white technology); and he seems quite familiar with military rank and regulations. Additionally, his skill set is rather difficult to credit: his marksmanship with a rifle approaches present-day Marine sniper quality. And, finally, the handsome, elegant Wes Studi is quite a lot more photogenic than the historical Geronimo, of whom, unlike Cochise, we have many photographs at different stages of his life. In fact, Studi resembles what we know of the historical Cochise more than he does Geronimo; nevertheless Studi turns in a fine performance as the idealized leader.

Although *Geronimo* deals chiefly with the conflict between Geronimo's band and the American Army, led by Gen. Crook and then by Gen. Nelson Miles, a subtext to the film is the problem of racial prejudice or of discrimination in various forms. In fact, the major invented part of the story, featuring Texan scalphunters pursuing Apaches for

⁶ The death of Al Sieber in the fight with the Texans is also pure invention. Sieber actually died years later in Globe, Arizona, in a mining accident (Thrapp 400-01).

bounty, serves more than the rest of the narrative to highlight this area of concern. Of course, the racial topic is common in Westerns with Indians, especially after World War II. *Broken Arrow* features a (fictional) interracial marriage between scout Tom Jeffords and an Apache girl, who is murdered by white racists. Films about Apaches which highlight the topic include *Hondo*, *Apache*, *Ulzana's Raid*, *Chato's Land*, and *Duel at Diablo*. Comanches and Kiowas appear in racially charged films such as (especially) *The Unforgiven*, *They Rode West*, *Two Rode Together*, and *The Last Wagon*. Some of these films feature mixed-race characters (*Hondo*, *Chato's Land*), while others concentrate on the plight of characters crossing racial or ethnic divides (*The Unforgiven*, *Duel at Diablo*, *The Last Wagon*).

Hondo and *Chato's Land* feature mixed-race protagonists. Far the better of the two films is *Hondo* (John Farrow, 1953), based on the Louis L'Amour novel. Hondo Lane (John Wayne, in one of his best performances) is a mixed-breed Apache/white who, the story gradually reveals, lived for some years among the Apaches, had an Apache wife (now dead), and is personally acquainted with Vittorio, historically one of the most important Chiricahua leaders. Hondo rides into a small ranch accompanied by his fierce dog, Sam, and befriends a woman, Angie Lowe (Geraldine Page), and her small boy. Hondo has worked as a scout for the army, and in that connection he goes to visit the local army commander. While he is away, Vittorio's band, which has a history of good relations with the family, comes to the ranch. Vittorio, impressed with the courage of the boy when he thinks his mother is being menaced, makes him his blood brother. Like *Broken Arrow*, *Hondo* is a pro-Indian narrative in which the only evil characters are those, mostly whites but in one case an Apache, who will not bridge the racial gap. Hondo's mixed status allows him to work in both worlds. The character of Vittorio is even more idealized than Cochise in *Broken Arrow* or Geronimo in the Hill film. He takes a direct interest in "parenting" the boy, and only after his death is Hondo able fully to assume these duties. The "bad" Apache Silva (Rodolfo Acosta), who is clearly a counterpart to Angie's vicious husband Ed (killed in self-defense by Hondo), kills Sam vengefully, but this plot device is necessary as Sam is a tie to Hondo's independent, lone wolf past. Silva

is also killed in the rather obligatory Apache attack on the army at the end of the film (which attack, by the way, mars somewhat the effectiveness of the film because of its cliched nature).

Chato's Land, with Charles Bronson as the "breed" Chato, is a pursuit story in which a posse, made up of misfits and racists, attacks Chato's family and becomes the target of his revenge. Director Michael Winner, who had worked with the always effective



Bronson on *Death Wish*, gives him little to do here other than run from his pursuers and then hunt them down, one by one. Still, the film does an efficient job of highlighting racism and cruelty on the part of some whites toward Indians, and it also criticizes those whites who stand by while others commit overtly racist acts. Chato's revenge spares none of the white men, even though some had not actively participated in the violence toward his family. The entire chain of events is in fact set in motion because of the racist taunting of Chato by a sheriff which ends in violence because the sheriff tries to kill Chato. The posse is formed to hunt down Chato for killing a man in self-defense who was culpable of picking a fight for reasons of prejudice. Additionally, the leader of the posse is a former Confederate officer, Capt. Whitmore (Palance); and although not much is made of the implications of this fact, the imputation of racism to Whitmore is still present.

Unlike the superficial *Chato's Land*, *The Unforgiven* is a meditative and dramatically cogent film, based on an Alan LeMay novel, about the effects of racial division on a family. Although some stresses within the family of Ben Zachary (Burt Lancaster) are subtly evident, the true difficulties are only gradually revealed. The chief means of revelation here is a proposed wedding between Rachel Zachary (Audrey

Hepburn) and Charlie Rawlins (Albert Salmi), which would join two seemingly incompatible families. A mysterious stranger in Confederate gray (Joseph Wiseman) appears ominously and hints at a terrible secret in the family history. Slowly and painfully the secret is revealed: after a massacre of Kiowas, Ben's now-dead father brought home an infant survivor, who was reared as Rachel. The surviving widow (Lillian Gish) has been driven nearly mad by the secrecy and implicit shame (from the racist perspective, of course). The family is further divided by the ferociously racist reaction of Cash Zachary (Audie Murphy). After a siege by the tribe, led by Rachel's Kiowa brother, in which the mother and the Kiowa brother die, the family is reconciled, and Ben will marry his adopted sister.

In a sense, *The Unforgiven* reverses the captivity narrative, with an Indian child being taken into a white family. A very different perspective on the captivity narrative is offered by the excellent Delmer Daves film *The Last Wagon*, which concerns a white boy raised by Comanches. As in *The Unforgiven*, the narrative begins with little revelation of the background of the seemingly criminal Comanche Todd (the late Richard Widmark, in one of the finest performances of his long career). He is being taken to prison by a vengeful sheriff who, we discover, wants him dead because he had killed some of his family--but as we soon discover, the killings were in self-defense. After a band of Indians attacks the camp of settlers who had given shelter to the sheriff and Todd, Todd becomes guide and mentor to the surviving settlers, who are all minors. His heroic efforts to guide them to safety are not without controversy, however. As is so often the case in films about racism, one of the whites refuses for a time to trust Todd, seeing him as a traitor to his race because of his experience as a "white Comanche."

The Apaches surrounding the little group must be avoided if they are to reach safety, and Todd helps them do this, albeit without complete success. Along the way Todd and some of his charges are menaced by two Apache advance scouts. This incident provides the opportunity for an unusual bit of dialogue about inter-tribal discord, a highlight not often accentuated in Hollywood films. Todd (as if he were a truly ethnic Comanche) taunts the Apaches with "Always it's

taken two Apache to kill one Comanche" (Daves, *The Last Wagon* Ch. 15). As a matter of historical fact the disparaging attitude displayed by Todd would reflect the domination of Comanches over Apaches during the formation of Comanchería. As the Comanches moved into Apache territories during the 18th century, they gradually pushed out or dominated the Apaches. The Comanches even sold some Apaches as slaves (see Hämäläinen 28–35). Thus Todd's taunt is not mere Hollywood embellishment; and it shows the Todd character as fully immersed in the Comanche world view.

The coda to the film resolves the question of Todd's legal status. The court is administered by General O. O. Howard (Carl Benton Reid), the one-armed Civil War veteran who became famous as "Bible-reading Howard." Although Howard seemed jinxed as a Civil War general - his men always seemed to stumble into failure despite his conscientious officering - his postwar career with Indian matters was very positive. Rather comically, Howard sentences Todd to the bonds of matrimony. This may seem a superficial Hollywood dodge; but as Michael Walker observes, Todd and his new family will live essentially as Indians, in "the Native American territory of the wilderness." The trial serves the purpose of reintegrating Todd into white law while not confining him within white society: "Todd, in effect, passes through the white man's law in order to be liberated, once more, as Indian" (Walker 141).

Widmark also played one of the leads in the late John Ford film *Two Rode Together*, which pairs Widmark with James Stewart as a rather unlikely soldier-sheriff team who are hired to try to rescue white captives under Comanche chief Quannah Parker's control. Far from being a Ford masterpiece, the film has pacing and coherence problems. Still, it does feature a typically strong turn by Stewart as a not very attractive lawman - he is decidedly mercenary and very cynical - and good support by Widmark as a soldier who finds that "the book" (regulations) does not work in all situations. Parker is played by Henry Brandon, who had played the more sinister Scar in Ford's great *The Searchers*. His Quannah Parker character is less substantial, a "parody" of Scar, as McBride observed (619). Brandon commented,

"They had all this buildup to this formidable Indian chief Quannah

Parker, this killer, this terrible son of a bitch. Jimmy Stewart and Richard Widmark ride up to my tent. Jimmy Stewart says something and I say, 'Lie.' I was very menacing. Ford gets me aside and says, 'No, I think he's amused by it.' That's better." (McBride 619)



Henry Brandon (born Heinrich von Kleinbach 1912 in Berlin) as Quanah Parker

One of the more interesting aspects of *Two Rode Together* is its willingness to leave hard moral choices on the table instead of smoothing them over as would many Hollywood products. At the settlers' camp, families waiting for news of their long-lost relatives implore the two to rescue them if possible. When the two searchers meet an older woman captive who speaks English and who identifies herself as the wife of one of the men in the settlers' camp, they offer to take her back; but she refuses to leave, saying that she has lived so long with the Comanches that it is better for her to stay with them. In another case, they meet a young woman who is clearly the missing daughter of a distraught couple in the settlers' camp. But she is so unhinged by her experiences that they decide to leave her with the Comanches. Her case echoes the unsettling scene from *The Searchers* when Ethan and Marty ask a rescued captive if she is Debbie but receive in response only fixedly crazed stares.

They do rescue two captives, one, a white youth who had been taken as a boy but who seems completely assimilated to Comanche ways; the other, the wife of a Comanche chief (Woody Strode) who

dies attacking McCabe and the wife. The boy turns out to be totally unredeemable from a white perspective, soon committing murder and being hanged. The woman, on the other hand, was an adult when captured and is from an aristocratic Mexican family. She



"Let's go home, Debbie!"

becomes the focus of significant prejudice among the whites, who refuse even to think of her as Mexican, dismissing her as subhuman because she had married a Comanche. McCabe (Stewart) and Elena (Linda Cristal) never really succeed in breaking through the wall of moral condemnation, particularly from the white women. She eventually leaves with McCabe for California, where they will settle into a new life.

A more sparse but cleaner narrative is the plot of *Duel at Diablo* (Ralph Nelson, 1966), which also concerns captivity rescue but adds a wrenching twist. Ellen Grange (Bibi Andersson, the renowned Swedish actress who had worked for years with Ingmar Bergman) is rescued from Apaches by Jess Remsberg, a tough scout (James Garner, excellent in a role very much against type). Or so things seem, until the storyline reveals that she had repeatedly tried to escape from white "captivity" back to the Apaches. The film neatly reverses expectations: instead of a white captive trying to escape from the Indians, this former captive wants to escape back to the Indians to avoid her abusive white husband Willard (Dennis Weaver). She has a son by one of the Apaches and would like to rejoin him. But the Apaches are no less unforgiving; when she is reunited with her son, she learns that the Indians will soon kill her. After a fierce fight with the Apaches in which the husband is captured and killed, Ellen is reunited with her son. Remsberg discovers that the man he was seeking for revenge was in fact the racist husband. Although the film probes the effects of pre-

judice within white society, it does not shrink from showing the Apaches' own defects.

Similarly, the Robert Aldrich film *Ulzana's Raid* examines white-Apache conflict, this time in the context of the pursuit of a party of raiding Apaches led by Ulzana. The Army sends a troop led by a young officer with the assistance of veteran scout McIntosh (Burt Lancaster). The scout relies on an Apache warrior as his own tracker, to the chagrin of the prejudiced officer, who doubts the Apache's loyalty. The Apache warrior places a high value on his personal loyalty to McIntosh, and he honors this throughout the film. The film details the astute tactics of Ulzana, who uses terrain and employs reserves to attack and envelop his foe. But Ulzana is finally vanquished, and he dies honorably at the hand of the Apache scout rather than surrender to the whites. McIntosh is fatally wounded and chooses to die alone rather than be moved in a futile attempt at medical treatment. His un-sentimental farewell to the scout, and his nearly comic insistence on smoking a rolled cigarette, steer the ending away from the mythicized, elegiac quality of the similar ending to *Ride the High Country* (Sam Peckinpah, 1962), in which aged gunfighter Steve Judd (Joel McCrea) dies facing the sunset after a wistful leave-taking of his old friend Gil Westrum (Randolph Scott).

Aldrich and Lancaster had also worked with an Apache theme in *Apache* (Robert Aldrich, 1954), the story of Chiricahua rebel Massai, who refused to surrender even under Geronimo's terms.⁷ He does give himself up briefly but then escapes and is taken in by a Cherokee (Morris Ankrum), who gives him some seed corn. He carries on a one-man war against the whites, eventually taking refuge in the mountains with his pregnant wife. Ultimately, perhaps implausibly, he is allowed to retreat to his small farm after a sharp fight with a contingent led by Al Sieber (John McIntire). Hartmut Lutz criticizes the ending: "a totally unbelievable happy ending in which the hero, Massai, turns into a peaceful farmer - in contrast to Aldrich's initial plans to

⁷ Robert Aldrich commented thus on the relationship between the two films and their two lead characters, both played by Lancaster: "Burt was playing [in *Ulzana*] an 1870 guy who had seen *Apache*. That was his frame of reference: he respected the Indians, because he knew more about them than the soldiers did" (qtd. in Williams 180).

have him die heroically in his struggle against corrupt white society" (Lutz 56).

Although the ending does reflect, as Tony Williams notes, the "compromise" reached between Aldrich and the producers (including Lancaster), it is certainly not a trite "happy ending" but rather evidence of the mixed moral status of Massai himself, as Williams argues: "His self-styled significance either as the last Apache warrior seeking his Last Stand or the presumed savior of his people becomes contradicted by his personal inadequacies as well as the prevailing historical forces dwarfing him into insignificance" (Williams 170–71). Those currents of history would soon lead to the disappearance of the frontier and of the Comanches' and the Apaches' way of life. Perhaps Hondo Lane had the last word on the changing times when he lamented the disappearance of the Apache lifestyle, remarking "Too bad. It's a good way" (Farrow Ch. 13).

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