

# BROKEN ARROW [1996]

by

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Two pilots, Vic Deakins (John Travolta) and Riley Hale (Christian Slater), fly a mission over Utah to test the local radar defenses. Deakins commandeers the airplane, ejects Hale, releases the two nuclear weapons, and bails out himself. He and his criminal cohorts recover the weapons and hold them for ransom. Hale, meanwhile, has met park ranger Terri Carmichael (Samantha Mathis) and goes in pursuit of the bombs and Deakins. Through a series of violent encounters, Hale takes the bombs into a deep mine. There, while attempting to disarm them, he actually activates one. It explodes, but Hale and Carmichael escape through an underground river. Carmichael follows Deakins while Hale goes for help. After a final encounter, Deakins is killed, and the remaining bomb safely recovered. All this is punctuated with exploding helicopters, gunfire, fighting, jumping from airplanes, crashing trucks, trains, and so on. (Rated R)

With action from exploding helicopters and Stealth bombers crashing to fist fighting, *Broken Arrow* is obviously an action-adventure film intended for toy-enamored little boys of all ages. It is the type of film in which guns are chosen for how photogenic the muzzle flashes are. On this score, *Broken Arrow* fulfills all our expectations . . . and probably more. It is a very exciting, and apparently mindless film. Yet there is more. And for that “more” to be hidden behind such a pedestrian facade is, to me, remarkable.

It is only recently that our national shores have been violated by “evil foreign elements” bent on destroying our way of life. Rather than the corporate villains so popular in the seventies, in the eighty’s evil was less profit motivated and more ideological. From the out-and-out paranoid *Invasion U.S.A.* [1985] with its Communist invasion to the international terrorist threat (German, Italian, Oriental) of *Die Hard* [1988], it was clear that America was no longer safely isolated from world issues. With the decade between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the Soviet Union, this scenario slowly became a weaker and weaker source of story lines. *True Lies* [1994] is probably the last serious contribution to the foreign terrorist genre we are likely to see for a while.

While the bombing in Oklahoma City was both detestable and tragic, it has – and I predict will – serve Hollywood well. The foreign terrorist text seems to be mutating into a domestic terrorist text – and *Broken Arrow* is a prime example. But there is more to this film than its role as a weathervane indicating an ideological sea change in Hollywood.

First, there is the Hong Kong director, John Woo. Under his tutelage, *Broken Arrow* is not a great movie, but it is great movie making. He uses violence like a series of

grace notes that raise us above the banal dialogue badly delivered. (While Travolta is all strut and posturing, Christian Slater is definitely not up to the job.) Typically, the editing and camera movement are all oriented toward action. In older films, people are moved around the camera frame, but not here.

Second, there is the psychology of action that is, in my opinion, far better done in *Broken Arrow* than most other action films. Many films have an Ego/Shadow relationship between the hero and the villain. This is, of course, not unique to films – most good story telling uses psychic, internal relationships as external indicators of character relations. Typically, the hero is the Ego, and the villain possesses some characteristic that forces the hero to confront his own flaws and thereby mature psychologically. A typical example is in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* [1958], in which hero Scotty suffers from acrophobia and the villain, his Shadow figure, forces him to face and overcome not only the vertigo but the deep-seated reasons for his affliction.

In most action films, especially recent ones, this relationship is skewed. Be it *Die Hard* [1988] or *Dirty Harry* [1971], the hero may not be perfect, but certainly the villain is far beneath him. The villains are psychotic, on the verge of drooling on screen, while the heroes are . . . heroic. When we watch these films, there is no question who we identify with. Woo's films, however, turn a rather different corner.

One of the characteristics of most of Woo's films, both those made in Hong Kong and those made here, is the almost perfect relationship between the hero and the villain. Psychologically, *Broken Arrow* is interesting because of this. In *Broken Arrow*, for instance, both the hero and the villain, Deakins and Hale, are good looking (played respectively by heartthrob John Travolta and heartthrob Christian Slater), both are accomplished in their professions, both are equally intelligent. So, what then distinguishes the hero from the villain? And the corollary question, put in psychological terms, is actually far more fascinating: What distinguishes the ego from its shadow?

Most of the psychological action of *Broken Arrow* is directed at answering this question. For instance, the film opens with a boxing match. It turns out to be a friendly one, but one laced with deep differences. Deakins, an expert at boxing tactics, is tutoring Hale on how to predict his moves, "watch my shoulders, not my hands." I interpret this, being the opening, as the psychic key to the film. After all, it is not bad advice when dealing with the Shadow: don't concentrate solely on those aspects that are attacking us, but rather take our signals for reaction and protection from those forces deeper in the psyche, forces that drive the Shadow's attacks.

Were this all, *Broken Arrow* would be little different from many other action films. The villain Deakins is a manifestation of Hero Hale's Shadow, and by dealing with the Shadow, the Hero cures his disease. What is unique about *Broken Arrow* is that the reverse also obtains: Hale becomes a manifestation of Deakins' Shadow! Hale is the innocence that Deakins has lost; Hale is the stability that Deakins lacks; Hale is the idealism that Deakins has forfeit.

They are well matched, Deakins and Hale, in many ways. Each is mature in his own way, and yet each has flaws in that maturity. And each is aware of both the flaws and the strengths in the other – but not in themselves. And as we get deeper into the personalities, we realize that their mutual flaws may be projections. Deakins, for instance, has been passed up for a promotion and has therefore lost faith in the system he has sworn (as a member of the military) to uphold, and this is what gets him into trouble. Hale's faith in the system is blind and unquestioning, and that is what gets *him* into trouble. We see, in addition, how their personalities have extended into the past, before the film began: Deakins smokes, a very unfashionable habit today, especially in movies. Worse, he smokes with a careful flair and a metered pleasure that seems almost ritualistic; he seems to be fully in control and completely above nicotine addiction, quite the opposite of the compulsive, over-wrought, chain-smoking and fully addicted Deakon (an interesting name-sake parallel) of *Waterworld* [1995].

On the other hand, Hale is very slow on the uptake. He seems out of touch with reality. Perhaps his pleasure in flying is really a flight into fantasy (as it more obviously is for Deakins, whose flights are into delusions of power and glory). Hale has been boxing Deakins for almost a decade and has never won – yet, compulsively, he keeps at it. Worse yet, Deakins has been teaching Hale the finer points (and quite honestly, too), and yet he never seems able to catch on. Boxing is only the most obvious area in which the two men interact. In some cases, it is Hale that instructs Deakins, in others it is vice versa. This situation describes well the relation between the two men for the first half of the film: each man has flaws, and each has strengths, but not in the same places. The two seem to fit together like two interlocking pieces of a jig saw puzzle.

The psychology here is fascinating. If we see either man as the Ego, the other becomes the Shadow. Each tries vainly to communicate with the other. Each tries to tell the other of his needs, but to no avail. There seems to be a psychic barrier which prevents communication in either direction between the Shadow and the Ego. We know that, without this communication, no psychic growth is possible. For growth, the barrier must be broken. How, then, is this to be done? *Broken Arrow* proposes what at first seems to be a truly absurd answer: the atom bomb.

After one of the two stolen weapons explodes, the men's roles change radically. Since by then we clearly know that Hale is the hero and Deakins is the villain, we see far more change in Hale, though Deakins, too, changes. In fact, his sudden respect for Hale is striking. But Hale has had respect for Deakins all along, perhaps too much naive respect, perhaps bordering on hero worship. All that is now gone. He can look at his former partner from a perspective that eliminates the previously blind, jaundiced eye. To use the boxing metaphor that opens the film, he is now capable of looking at his opponent's shoulder rather than his hands and thereby is able to predict his moves. Obviously, communication has opened up between the Ego and the Shadow and the Ego has now gained the ability to “read” the Shadow before it can do its damage. (It is interesting that at first the outside world suspects *Hale* of being the criminal – such was the damage wrought by the Shadow.) It is this new-found ability that brings the story to successful conclusion with a victory of Hale over Deakins, with the acceptance and perhaps

integration of the Shadow by the Ego. Since the bomb is the turning point in this process, let us take a closer look.

First, the bomb explodes underground (in some really neat special effects). I am sure that many who have explored the inner world and confronted the Shadow could easily describe the experience as a bomb going off deep in the subterranean recesses of the psyche. But we must add to this the metaphoric meanings of the bomb. A distant cousin to Zeus' lightning bolts in connecting the heavenly and the earthly, the atomic bomb is the fire of the sun produced here on earth. Thus, it has characteristics of the symbolic solar. And in *Broken Arrow*, this solar fire threatens the populations of cities in much the same way Icarus is burned by coming too close to the sun. On a more personal scale, the bomb is ensconced in a cave, the solar element is dangerously confined to the underground of the unconscious. Perhaps this is what Hale needs to come to terms with his Deakins/Shadow – an explosive outburst of the solar masculine deep within his unconscious.

Another of the feelings that still hovers about nuclear weaponry (despite détente and the lack of serious nuclear adversaries) is that it will bring about the end of the world and the beginning of a new one. Thus, all the “post-apocalyptic” science fiction films from *The Day After* [1983] to *The Last Man on Earth* [1964] to *The Time Machine* [1960] to *The Omega Man* [1971] to *Terminator* [1984]. If we downplay the destruction aspect of these scenarios, we can see that typically a new, though usually far less desirable, world is formed. In this way, the bomb becomes a birth symbol.

Thus, the second aspect of the nuclear explosion in *Broken Arrow* is the birth of a newly structured Ego in the hero. This birth is almost literal! To escape the ticking bomb, Hale and Carmichael dive into an underground river that runs even deeper than the copper mine in which they are trapped. (In Latin, the word for copper is related to Cypress, the island where Venus was born from the billowing waves.) They are expelled from a small opening to the surface almost as the bomb explodes. A birth image *par excellence*. Thus, hero Hale is reborn (simultaneously with the feminine – more on that shortly) into a state in which he is aware of the Shadow and can now go on and pursue Deakins and the remaining bomb.

The female character, Terri Carmichael, in *Broken Arrow* is just as unusual as the psychology of the film. She can hold her own in an action-adventure film. She takes as many risks as the male lead; she saves his ass as many times as she herself is rescued. They do not fall in love and have sex in the middle of the film! They do not even exchange names until the very last scene, which is concluded by a respectful handshake. The birth of this type of cool, competent, and self-possessed female action hero is as earth shaking as the nuclear explosion. Perhaps we have here, born of copper and nuclear energy, a new Venus, one for the twenty-first century.

To further cement the Ego/Shadow relation between the two main male characters of the film, we need only look at their names. The most obvious association with Hale is Nathan Hale, (1755-76) who went down in history saying “I only regret that I have had

but one life to lose for my country” as he was executed by the British on September 22, 1776. While he may be a hero of the American Revolution, he was an American spy sent into the British army to gather information. He was a bad guy; he is a hero because he was *our* bad guy. Given this background we can understand why the military jumps to the conclusion that it is Hale who stole the nukes. A similar reversal (or Ego/Shadow interchange) applies to Deakins. A “deacon” is a middle level Church official, usually below a priest. This is certainly Deakins’ rank in the military and his bone of contention – not being promoted. However, the derivation of “deacon” is also interesting. The word comes from the Greek *dia+konos* which means “to be active in service.” While the “spy” of Hale is his shadow, the service to the church is Deakins’ shadow. Each man’s last name is chosen to illustrate not his Ego, but his Shadow! (Their initials, however, are more in line with their personalities: V.D. as a particularly onerous disease and R.H. as a blood factor.) *Broken Arrow* is not a film of Hero as Ego, as are almost all action/adventure film, but a film that dares look deeper and darker, into the Shadow as Hero.

*Broken Arrow*. Directed by John Woo. Written by Graham Yost. Distributed by 20th Century Fox. 1996.