GERONIMO: AN AMERICAN LEGEND [1993]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

During the years 1885-1886, the U.S. Army waged a campaign against Native American Apache known as the Geronimo Campaign. On September 5, 1886, Geronimo (with thirty-four men, women, and children) surrendered to face imprisonment in Florida. This film follows the events of that campaign from several points of view: the morally doubtful Lieutenant Charles Gatewood (Jason Patric), who befriends Geronimo as a fellow outsider; the army's chief of scouts tracking Geronimo, Al Sieber (Robert Duvall), a man respectful of the Indian but allied with the army; 2nd Lieutenant Britton Davis (Matt Damon), fresh out of West Point and dealing with moral issues for the first time; and Brigadier General George Crook (Gene Hackman), who respects Geronimo as a military leader and attempts to afford him the honor he feels due that position. Geronimo (Wes Studi) does what he can to preserve his people and his culture but fails. Yet his resistance – 35 men against a combined Mexican and American army of over 8,000 – Is legendary.

Geronimo: An American Legend brings up several interesting questions that will be, I believe, important film issues for the rest of this decade. First, we must now seriously consider the apparent resurgence of a genre that was once declared dead – the Western. Second is *Geronimo's* revisionist, or at least corrective, attitude toward both its film predecessors and history as we have come to know it through the media.

First, why Westerns now? By America's bicentennial year, the most American of all film genre had been declared dead. The obituary was written not only by audience disinterest, but by many filmmakers themselves. For instance, its demise was celebrated by the brilliant master satirist Mel Brooks in *Blazing Saddles* [1974]. Brooks seems to be a very accurate thermometer of the body temperature of various genre: when his satires are accepted by the public, it is a clear death knell; when not, life persists. Witness his attempted premature burial of Alfred Hitchcock in *High Anxiety* [1977] and the space adventure story in *Spaceballs* [1987]. Both films bombed; both genre live. His more successful *Young Frankenstein* [1974] (careful how you pronounce that) signaled the death of the traditional monster genre to make room for the appearance of a new type of monster with the Slasher Films of the 1980's (in the same way that Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* [1967] made way for a new breed of blood suckers). By 1976, satires like *Blazing Saddles*, along with lackluster box office, clearly showed that

the day of the horse opera was dead. In the years that followed, occasional attempts were made to breathe new life into the old genre, but how could one take the sprawling and ambitious *Silverado* [1985] seriously when accompanied the same year by a satire like *Rustler's Rhapsody* [1985]? So, why did Westerns die and why have they revived today?

The Western's demise had less to do with the genre itself and more with the interaction of its myth structure with the prevailing political winds. If we look closely at the politics of the era, this becomes clear. We must remember that despite all physical appearances to the contrary – cowboys, Indians, and all the trappings of the late 19th Century western frontier – these films are about the era in which they are made. For instance, *Stagecoach* is about the pre-World War II moral conflicts of 1939; and *Shane* [1953], *High Noon* [1952], and *The Searcher* [1956] are all about the role of the lone man pitted against a society that demands conformity; and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is about a 1962 America that is beginning to question the role of "macho" in their authority figures. In fact, we must always look to contemporary life to understand any historical film.

But Westerns are more than just a reflection of the time in which they were made. It is not that simple. One of the characteristics of a complex myth is that it is a combination of a reflection of contemporary reality and a wishful thinking for what we would like to have happened in the past (and thus reinforces the historicity of various contemporary values and morals) and what we want to be happening in the present (to give a historical justification for our contemporary ideas and motivations). In the case of the Western, this triple-layered myth structure is clearly seen in its most common psychological characteristic: a nostalgia for a past that never existed. *Geronimo* certainly exhibits all three aspects of the Western genre myth structure: a reflection of contemporary society, a rewriting the past as we have come to learn it, and a synthesized justification of today's values.

Obviously, I cannot inspect all aspects of the Western myth as it is being reborn into the late 20th century in this short essay. Therefore, I will look at two of the most important aspects that caused the Western's demise and resurrection which seem to apply well to *Geronimo*. Two of the components in the myth-complex we call the Western that contributed to its decade-and-a-half hibernation were its representation of the forces of good and evil, and the role of officialdom in the battle between these forces.

In the Western, good and evil are clearly distinguishable. In the most simplistic manifestations of the myth, we joke about the white and the black hats. More serious are the transmutations of hat color into skin color: red skins versus white skins. Even in our most recent "revisionist" Westerns, like *Unforgiven* [1992], where almost every screen character is fraught with ambiguity, our own feelings of right and wrong are still primarily intact. Whores no longer have hearts of gold, but hearts filled with murderous revenge; life-long killers take their kids to San Francisco and open successful dry-goods businesses. While the characters in *Unforgiven* take our assumptions about the players in the traditional Western myth and turn them upside down, little is done to question *our*

sense of what is good and evil. Most Westerns leave this undisturbed – so, too, *Geronimo.*

This clear-cut distinction between good and evil made the Western's mythology irrelevant by the mid-70's. The prevailing political winds were blowing our nation toward the conservative side of the political spectrum. Our official entry into that land to the right of center was signaled by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. In that political paradise, good and evil could clearly be distinguished – witness the highly successful "law-and-order" political campaign and the subsequent non-complex definition of the "evil empire." If our needs are fulfilled in real life, myths that replicate these needs become redundant. Any myth we can act out, hibernates.

The second mythic aspect of the Western that we must consider is the role of the government in the conflict between good and evil. Ironically, while the Conservative Decade promoted government-sponsored law and order, it was in reality the Individual who became the focus of this ideology. It was the "individual" who became identified with the position of victim, while at the same time, it was left to individual "heroes" to rectify these situations. The Reagan-Bush administrations were known by their supporters for their accomplishments in foreign policy and equally maligned by their detractors for lack of concern about domestic policy. While trade deals and nuclear treaties were being signed, headline-grabbing drug dealers and white-collar stock swindlers demonstrated to all that the ideals of Capitalism and individualism can be perverted in the same way as any other altruistic ideology. Equally headline-grabbing were gun-toting individualists. While these were usually psychotic killers of children on school yards or fast-food diners, they were idealized by films into vigilantes – individuals who did the government's work because the government was absent from the scenes of the crimes. This is the second reason that, in the 1980s, the Western became redundant.

The Western pits the individual against evil – and leaves the government out of the battle. When the cavalry comes to save the day, as in *Stagecoach*, the work of the hero has already been done. The hero can be a sheriff, and thus a representative of officialdom, but he is first and foremost an individual. Similarly in the 1980s, the public perception was that organized government could not help on the home front and that only an individual could. By contrast, Western individualism was very popular in the 1950s when public conformity was the status quo. Just as in the case of a clear distinction between right and wrong, the appearance of the individual (good or bad) as an important player in real life made this aspect of the Western myth redundant.

So, why are Westerns back? *Dances with Wolves* [1992], *Last of the Mohicans* [1993], *The Unforgiven*, *Posse* [1992], *Geronimo: An American Legend*, *Wyatt Earp* [1994], and *Tombstone* [1994], and their once and future acceptance by the public (almost 10 Academy Awards amongst the first three), seem to signal a clear resurgence of the Western onto the silver screen. What caused their hibernation also caused their awakening – the prevailing political climate of our country.

The election of Bill Clinton was a beacon of political change – I'm sure this is no surprise to anyone. However, the implications for film have been little considered. Our national swing from the political right has also been a swing away from the political certainty espoused by Reagan and Bush and all its implications. In addition, world events have undermined our sense of easily knowing right from wrong. Who are the "good guys" and who are the "bad guys" in Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti, and in post-election Russia? Hard to know. Our national confidence in a Manichean world of easily distinguishable good and evil is quickly eroding.

As they have done in the past, Westerns can help us here. Once again, we turn to the silver screen to know right from wrong, when in real life we are confused. Once again, we know that a heroic individual will fight for moral values when we are not sure this will happen in the gritty world outside the darkened theater, just as we are equally unsure of the correctness of the prevailing moral values. And once again, we can see that our films clearly, but never simplistically, reflect our psychological lives; rather they are complex manifestations of it.

But there is more to this new generation of Westerns than simply supplying myths missing in contemporary culture. The New Westerns are significantly different from their predecessors in two equally important aspects: revisionism and historicity. *Geronimo* is revisionist in its view of Indians (in the 1870s the term "Native American" was not yet in vogue) and bases that view on "history."

I place the word "history" in the above paragraph in quotation marks for a good reason. I believe that there is no single history of any single event. There are as many histories as there are participants. In most cases, the winners write the histories. In other cases, those who are literate or who have access to the media write them. "History" is the domain of a precious few. The "history" we see in Geronimo is no different. The filmmakers here interpret, or reinterpret, history as they see it and make a convincing visual argument to persuade us of its veracity; the visual authenticity of the film is stunning.

The makers of *Geronimo* went to great lengths to provide their film with the look of authenticity. Indians are played by Native Americans. In addition, Native Americans were involved in the production as consultants on Native American practices, objects, and languages to assure accuracy in these areas (however, one must question just what "accuracy" is a hundred years after the fact). This "real look of things" extends beyond the Native American aspects of the film. If we look closely, we can see that most of the construction is ax-hewn, historically correct in a day when saws were rare.

However, all Westerns are works of imagination; some stick more closely to history while others are total flights of fancy. *Geronimo* attempts to use history as its basis. However, the difficulty is that history is not a good dramatist, and the events must be organized into some sort of whole that will play in a meaningful and entertaining form in a few hours. Real history takes years, often decades, or even centuries to play out. Thus, no matter how a film strives to be historical, especially a Western, it will always be more

myth than reality. Were it not so, if the Western were merely history, it would have no audience. For it is only our time's politics that demand historicity, but it is the deepest psychological needs of the audience that demand the myth of the Western.

To demonstrate this point, let's take a look at the "historical" life of Geronimo after the conclusion of the picture. True, he was never released from his Florida imprisonment and died there after 22 years. However, his prison was not in reality what flashes into our minds when we hear the word. He was allowed to parade himself about the country in search of publicity for his cause; he rode in the inaugural parade for Teddy Roosevelt; he made considerable money in personal appearances, lectures, and in the souvenir business. His death, as tragic as it might be, belies the political aspirations of *Geronimo* by clearly demonstrating what the film avoids telling us: as Geronimo was riding back to his "prison" after a night of carousing in the tavern of the local town, he drunkenly fell off his horse. He was discovered the next morning in a wet ditch and was immediately taken to a hospital but died a few days later of pneumonia. Is this the Geronimo that *Geronimo* touts as, "An American Legend?"

What the film does show clearly is Geronimo's Native American heritage; he plays the archetypal Trickster with a subtlety and grace rarely seen in movies – he lies to the government. While the film is neutral on this point – he disappoints the sympathetic General Crook, but he does it for the good of his own people and culture – I am not neutral. The Trickster is a dangerous archetype for he breaks social rules and contracts with impunity, looking far further forward than we can see, looking into a distant future when his goals will be achieved. It is only under the most dire of social, political or economic conditions that the Trickster emerges.

Despite *Geronimo's* admirable attempts to give us a feeling of the tragic events that surrounded the closing of the frontier with regard to the Native American populations, it is still a Western and is thus imbued with all the characteristics of that genre. We have the lone man icon: While Lieutenant Gatewood is part of the Army, the film sees him as an individual out of step with his culture. His background, fighting for the South during the Civil War, makes him an outsider and a loser. What an 8000-man army cannot do, Lieutenant Gatewood does practically single-handed. Sounds like any other Western, doesn't it? We also have the clear distinction between right and wrong. While the characters in *Geronimo* are more complex and ambiguous than those in the older Westerns, *our* feelings about right and wrong are never challenged. We side with the individual against the culture, with the Natives against the Army. Gatewood and Geronimo are sympathetic; Sieber and Crook are on the border; and almost everyone else is bad. It is that simple. And doesn't this, too, sound like any other Western?

By asking this I am not implying that there is anything wrong with *Geronimo*. Indeed, I think it is a moderately well-crafted film that breaks considerable social and cultural ground within the film industry. Native Americans can now appear on the screen and behind it just as African Americans and Hispanics have been able to do for some time, and Asian-Americans have very recently. This can be nothing but invigorating for the industry. It also broadens the way in which these films can relate to their various

audiences. All this is admirable. The point I want to stress is that no matter who populates these myth structures, the basic mythic principles remain intact. The human need for myth crosses all racial, ethnic and color boundaries. And any film that recognizes this is admirable.

Geronimo: An American Legend. Directed by Walter Hill. Screenplay by John Milius and Larry Gross. Story by John Milius. Photography by Lloyd Ahern. Production Design by Joe Alves. Costumes by Dan Moore. Distributed by Columbia Pictures, 1993.