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BARRY KEITH GRANT

Introduction

Spokes in the Wheels

THE GOLDEN COACH

A famous passage in Walker Percy's novel *The Movie-goer* testifies to the mythic power of John Ford's *Stagecoach*. As Binx Bolling, Percy's eponymous narrator, confesses:

> The fact is, I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie. Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives – the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lovely girl in Central Park, and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I, too, once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in *The Third Man*.[1]

But in fact Ford does not show us John Wayne as the Ringo Kid killing the three Plummer brothers. After Ringo drops to the dusty street as he fires his three bullets, the film cuts to Dallas (Claire Trevor), showing us her reaction to the gunfire that carries over on the soundtrack, her fear that one of those bullets may have injured or killed Ringo. Bolling remembers – or, more accurately, misremembers by embellishing – the second of *Stagecoach*'s two thrilling climaxes as if he actually saw it. As Ed Buscombe notes about this scene, it is "believable only because we don't actually see it."[2] Bolling's "belief" in the scene is so strong, so etched in his consciousness, that he remembers having "seen" it.

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This climactic moment from *Stagecoach* reverberates in Bolling's mind because the film is one of most powerful and important instances of the Western myth in the history of the American cinema. Ford's handling of the conventional shootout-on-main-street scene in *Stagecoach* – here, in expressionist evening darkness rather than the more typical high-key daylight at high noon – is characteristic of the entire film. For *Stagecoach* is built upon the numerous established elements of the Western genre, many already familiar enough to have become cliché, but they are imbued with extraordinary depth and admirable artistry throughout. As André Bazin said, *Stagecoach* is "the ideal example of the maturity of a style brought to classical perfection."[3]

There is indeed a fundamental truth to the common claim that *Stagecoach* was the first "adult Western," for the film achieves a fine balance of the genre's specific visual pleasures, the action and *mise-en-scène* that audiences expect from a Western, with generic innovation and authorial expressiveness. *Stagecoach* is frequently cited as the movie responsible for reviving interest in and the production of Westerns, a genre that was dominated by formula B-pictures and singing cowboy serials during the 1930s. Released in the pivotal year of 1939, *Stagecoach* was both a solid commercial hit and a critical success, blazing the trail for the many A-Westerns that would follow for the next two decades. In the opening essay in this volume, Thomas Schatz closely examines *Stagecoach* within the context of a generic cycle that included such other important and contemporary Westerns as Cecil B. DeMille's *Union Pacific* and *Dodge City* with Errol Flynn. Schatz questions the extent to which *Stagecoach* actually influenced the production of these movies or simply anticipated them, but while the film's direct influence on these specific Westerns is debatable, it is clear that Ford's film marks the beginning of the genre's golden age.[4]

Stagecoach's influence on the genre is evident in subsequent Westerns, from Raoul Walsh's *Dark Command* (1940), which reunited Wayne and Trevor on the frontier just a year after they lit out for the territory at the end of *Stagecoach*, to the flat 1966 remake (an idea about as good as remaking Hitchcock's *Psycho*). Ford's film set the stage for all subsequent stagecoach melodramatics, as can be seen, for example, in Martin Ritt's *Hombre* (1967), which deliberately plays off some of the characters and situations in *Stagecoach*. Its influence,

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in fact, extends well beyond the Western, for *Stagecoach* provided a template for other kinds of action and adventure films as well. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), director Steven Spielberg acknowledges *Stagecoach*'s profound influence on subsequent action movies by visually quoting Yakima Canutt's famous riding stunt as an Apache who jumps from his own horse to one of the stage's lead team and then, after being shot by Ringo, hangs briefly from the stagecoach's tongue before dropping under the bolting horses. (Ford maximizes the impact of the stunt by holding his camera, even though it is tracking with the coach and the pursuing Indians, on the action long enough to show Canutt getting slowly to his feet after rolling on the ground so we can see that it was actually he and not a dummy.)

Apart from Orson Welles's famous claim that he saw *Stagecoach* forty times in preparation for making *Citizen Kane* (1941),[5] *Stagecoach*'s influence on popular cinema has been so wide in part because it is an adept generic hybrid, taking elements not only from the Western but from a number of other genres as well. In addition to being a Western, the film also mobilizes elements of the melodrama, the road movie, and the disaster film, particularly those featuring a "ship of fools" format. At the time of its release, *Photoplay* called it "a *Grand Hotel* on wheels."[6] One can already see aspects of *Stagecoach* worked into the adventure film *Five Came Back*, about a group of passengers trying to survive a plane crash in the Amazon, also released in 1939.

As Schatz points out, this omnibus narrative device, which brings together a disparate group of individuals in the context of dramatic action, had already been used in Bret Harte's Western story "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" (1892) almost a half century earlier. Ford directed the screen adaptation of Harte's story in 1919 and used a similar narrative construction years later in *Wagon Master* (1950). That Ford was partial to this type of story (elements of which can also be found in *The Hurricane*, made two years before *Stagecoach*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, made one year after) suggests how central *Stagecoach* is, not only in the context of the Western and American cinema but also for its director. The omnibus plot allows Ford to explore in the context of the Western such themes as class and social prejudice, community, and democracy and America, themes frequently found in his non-Western films as well.

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Released in the same incredibly fertile year that also produced *Drums Along the Mohawk* and *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Stagecoach* marked Ford's return after more than a decade to the Western, thus initiating the beginning of the director's mature period and greatest work. Ford acknowledged the importance of *Stagecoach* to his career in *My Darling Clementine* (1946), when a stagecoach travels through the center of the climactic gunfight at the OK Corral, and in the opening of *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), which includes a shot of a stagecoach running out of control after an Indian attack in the desert. Years later, a substantial part of the elegiac poignancy of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) was established by the images of the dusty old Overland coach sitting neglected on blocks inside the train station.

Stagecoach also established Ford's most recognizable authorial marker, for it was the first film he shot in Monument Valley, a remote, picturesque area in the Navajo Indian Reservation straddling the border between Arizona and Utah. Ultimately Ford would shoot a total of nine movies in Monument Valley between 1938 and 1964, working the images of its distinctive contours to the extent that, as Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington have observed, the place transcends its geographical location to become a "state of mind . . . pointing toward Eternity."[7] Ford's use of Monument Valley is so distinctive that subsequent films containing scenes shot there cannot avoid invoking his name in most viewers' imaginations. In *Stagecoach* Ford counterpoints the epic grandeur of Monument Valley with the personal dramas inside the stage in the film's celebrated alternation between long shots of the coach wending its way through the expansive vistas of Monument Valley and more intimate two-shots and closeups of the characters riding it. For Andrew Sarris, this technique is the essence of Ford's "double vision," his unique ability to capture both the concrete immediacy of the story and its more abstract mythic implications – "both the twitches of life and the silhouette of legend," as he put it.[8]

Stagecoach also made John Wayne a star, one of the most enduring Hollywood has ever produced. Before Ford cast him in *Stagecoach* (over the objection of the producer Walter Wanger, who wanted Gary Cooper), Wayne was churning out B-Westerns for Republic, a lowly Poverty-Row studio. Appropriately, Wayne's first appearance as the

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The epic journey of the stagecoach through Monument Valley. (Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)

Ringo Kid in the film, afoot in the desert, rifle in one hand and saddle in the other, is, as Buscombe notes, "one of the most stunning entrances in all of cinema."[9] Wayne's physical presence, his bearing and gait, seems perfectly to embody Ringo's charming combination of romantic innocence and unwavering toughness. Raoul Walsh earlier had tried to make a star of Wayne in *The Big Trail* (1930), but it was his performance for Ford in *Stagecoach* that elevated the actor to A-level status. Wayne's role as the Ringo Kid established his screen image as the embodiment of rugged American individualism – an image so strong that it informs Wayne's characters in the Westerns he made subsequently both with Ford as well as with other directors such as Howard Hawks (*Red River*, 1948) and Don Siegel (*The Shootist*, 1976), his last film, and even in non-Westerns like the war film *The Fighting Seabees* (1944), the McCarthy-era anti-communist tract *Big Jim McLain* (1952), and the pro-Vietnam *The Green Berets* (1968), which Wayne also directed.

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MOUNTING THE STAGE

Stagecoach was Ford's first Western in thirteen years, the first since *3 Bad Men* in 1926 and only his second after the epic achievement of *The Iron Horse* in 1924. But it was a film that he very much wanted to make. Ford purchased the rights for the short story "Stage to Lordsburg," on which *Stagecoach* is based, by the prolific Western writer Ernest Haycox, just a few months after it was published in *Collier's* magazine in April 1937. The director once suggested to Peter Bogdanovich that the premise of *Stagecoach* was based on Guy de Maupassant's story "*Boule de suif*"[10] (literally, "tub of lard"), but while both narratives share a coach, a prostitute as a central character, and a strong sense of class difference, Maupassant's story of French refugees during the Franco-Prussian War bears little resemblance to the plot of Ford's film.

Unlike most of the films Ford made in the previous decade, which were studio assignments, *Stagecoach* was from the beginning a personal project for the director. Despite Ford's established reputation (in the 1930s Ford had directed such prestige pictures as *The Lost Patrol*, 1934; *The Informer*, 1935; and *The Hurricane*), it took him and the producer Merian C. Cooper (whose previous credits included co-directing *King Kong* in 1933) a year to arrange financing for the film. For most of the decade Westerns were held in low regard by the studios. David O. Selznick, eager to work with Ford, famously dismissed the script of *Stagecoach* as "just another Western" and refused to produce the film for his company Selznick International. Columbia and RKO also turned it down, but eventually the project was picked up by Walter Wanger, a respected independent producer, to be distributed through United Artists.

The screenplay was written by the important Hollywood screenwriter Dudley Nichols, with whom Ford worked closely. In his essay in this volume, Charles J. Maland examines the evolution of the script and its departures from Haycox's story. Some of Ford's additions to the script were merely pragmatic, such as adding a line spoken by Buck, the driver (Andy Devine), explaining that he has chosen the high road to avoid "those breech-clout Apaches," to account for an overnight snowfall that occurred during shooting. Other changes were more substantial, however, the most important undoubtedly being the famous penultimate line spoken by Doc Boone ("Well,

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they're saved from the blessings of civilization"), a line that adds considerable ideological ambiguity to the film's message and which for that reason has been the focus of much critical commentary. Maland demonstrates the significant influence of Nichols's liberal political views on the film without denying the considerable influence of the director, particularly in the characters of Gatewood the banker and Doc Boone, both of which have no counterparts in Haycox's story and were invented by Nichols.

Ford apparently decided to shoot *Stagecoach* in Monument Valley after being shown photographs of it by Harry Goulding, one of the first white settlers in the area and the owner of the only trading post and lodge nearby. But filming there offered a serious challenge. According to the director's grandson, Dan Ford:

> . . . in 1938 Monument Valley was an exceptionally difficult place to work. One of the least accessible points in the United States, it was a 200-mile drive over washboard dirt roads from Flagstaff, Arizona. There were no telephones, no telegraphs, and no bridges over the countless streambeds that cut across the single road. At an elevation of almost 5,000 feet, it was bitterly cold in winter and unbearably hot in summer.[11]

Although parts of the 1925 silent Western *The Vanishing American* had been shot in Monument Valley, no sound film had ever been photographed there. But Ford enjoyed shooting in Monument Valley not just because of the picturesque possibilities of the landscape. Leaving Hollywood far behind for distant location shooting may have had pragmatic advantages for the director. By all accounts he was happy to be at a far remove from studio interference; and by filming in a remote, isolated area he was able to establish the kind of close, almost familial working relationship with cast and crew that allowed him to develop his distinctive stock company. Ford also employed Navajos as extras, bit players, and laborers, a practice he would maintain for all the films he would go on to shoot in Monument Valley.

Shooting commenced on October 31, 1938, and lasted until December 23. In addition to the location photography in Monument Valley, exteriors were shot on the Western-town set at Republic and interiors at the Samuel Goldwyn Studio. Ford fended off studio

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John Ford on location in Monument Valley shooting *Stagecoach*. (Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)

interference by shooting sparingly, giving the studio little to re-edit. The film came in at slightly under its less than exorbitant budget of $546,200.[12] *Stagecoach* was previewed on February 2, 1939, at the Fox Westwood Theatre in Los Angeles and given wide release exactly one month later. According to Ronald L. Davis, when the film opened at Radio City Music Hall in New York City, "it did fantastic business and received rave notices."[13] Across the country, reviewers were unanimous in their praise for *Stagecoach*. It was a substantial hit both critically and commercially, grossing more than a million dollars in its first year.[14]

In his contribution to this volume, Leland Poague examines some of the ways in which the film was promoted upon its initial release. Through his examination of contemporary newspaper advertisements, Poague provides an intriguing context for the reception of *Stagecoach* in Ford's earlier pictures, particularly his other two films released later in 1939, *Drums Along the Mohawk* and *Young Mr. Lincoln*. Poague sheds considerable light on how *Stagecoach* would have been

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read by audiences at the time, and among his surprising conclusions are the extent to which the film was marketed for its multi-generic qualities and the degree of awareness the promotional campaign assumed about not only the director but the film's producer as well.

The National Board of Review rated *Stagecoach* the third best film of 1939, and Ford would win the New York Film Critics Award for best director of the year. *Stagecoach* garnered two Academy Awards, one for Thomas Mitchell for Best Supporting Actor for his portrayal of the drunken Dr. Josiah Boone, and another for Richard Hageman's score, which skillfully interweaves more than a dozen standard folk and popular songs, including Ford's signature tune "Shall We Gather at the River?" Some of these songs function as musical leitmotifs associated with particular characters, as with Stephen Foster's "I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair" for the southern lady Lucy Mallory (Louise Platt), while others are connected to the action on the screen, as with "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," which is heard when the stagecoach is shown traveling through Monument Valley. Because Hageman's ability to interpolate popular music into his scores was well suited to the director's mythic folksiness, he provided the music for six more of Ford's films. *Stagecoach* also received Academy Award nominations in five other categories (Best Film, Director, Art Direction, Editing, and Cinematography) but lost, mostly to *Gone with the Wind*.

PRINTING THE LEGEND

Stagecoach tells the story of seven disparate passengers, along with the driver and the marshal riding shotgun, on a perilous journey through the American Southwest aboard a Concord stagecoach in the 1880s. Each of these characters has a personal drama. Dallas is a prostitute who is being forced out of town by conservative moralists, as is Dr. Josiah Boone, an alcoholic; Ringo is an escaped convict bent on revenge against the three men who killed his father and brother, and who falls in love with Dallas; Hatfield (John Carradine) is a former southern aristocrat who, after the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War, has become a drifting gambler; Mrs. Lucy Mallory (Louise Platt) is a dutiful pregnant wife trying to find her husband, an officer in the cavalry; Ellsworth H. Gatewood (the blustery Berton Churchill) is a

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bank manager and prominent member of the town of Tonto's business community who is fleeing with embezzled funds; and Samuel Peacock, a timid whiskey salesman (the appositely named Donald Meek), is struggling with his own inclination for self-effacement. Taking these passengers on their dangerous journey from Tonto to Lordsburg is the comical driver, Buck Rickabaugh (Andy Devine), beset by his large Mexican family, and Marshal Curley Wilcox (George Bancroft), torn between his knowledge of Ringo's innate goodness and his duty as lawman.

The stagecoach must travel through territory containing hostile Apaches, forcing the passengers to cooperate and show their mettle in order to arrive at their destination safely. In her essay in this volume, Gaylyn Studlar explores the historian Frederick Jackson Turner's concept of the frontier as democratic "crucible," and how the stage's journey and the changing attitudes and relationships among the characters enact this idea dramatically. Leaving Tonto, the stagecoach stops at the Dry Fork way station (with its famous dinner sequence, discussed here from different perspectives by Maland, Studlar, and William Rothman), Apache Wells (where Mrs. Mallory's baby is born), and the burnt-out Lee's Ferry, after which comes the thrilling chase on the salt flats, followed by the stage's arrivial in Lordsburg. On the journey the individuals in the group interact with one another, forming allegiances and animosities, undergoing character development or steadfastly resisting it. As Studlar explains, class barriers are broken down by the immediate demands of frontier survival. The film's characters, on the "stage," with its connotations of a theatrical space, act out the epic drama of defining a communal harmony befitting the peculiar challenges of American democracy. The fact that these otherwise very different characters, a cross-section of American types, are thrown together in the first place is indicative of the democratic promise of the frontier.

The people on the stage travel on an epic journey – physically, from civilization to the wilderness and back to civilization again, and thematically, from Old World values to New World ones (in the movie, from the Oriental saloon in Tonto to the El Dorado saloon in Lordsburg). On the journey, as virtually every commentator of the film has observed, the majestic panoramic shots of the stagecoach at the bottom of the frame, dwarfed by and moving through the

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