

Stagecoach Lecture

We begin our series with John Ford's *Stagecoach*, from 1939, frequently described as the greatest year in the history of film. 1939 saw not only *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*, but a host of other great films including *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, *Gunga Din*, *The Little Princess*, *The Women*, and *Wuthering Heights*, among many others.

1939: the greatest year in film history

Another Thin Man (William Powell and Myrna Loy)
At the Circus (the Marx Brothers)
Babes in Arms (Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland)
Beau Geste (Gary Cooper, Ray Milland)
Dark Victory (Betty Davis and Humphrey Bogart)
Gone with the Wind (Vivian Leigh, Clark Gable, Olivia de Havilland)
Goodbye Mr. Chips (Robert Donat and Greer Garson)
Gunga Din (Cary Grant and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.)
Intermezzo (Ingrid Bergman and Leslie Howard)
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (James Stewart and Jean Arthur)
Ninotchka (Greta Garbo and Melvyn Douglas)
Son of Frankenstein (Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi)
Stagecoach (John Wayne, Claire Trevor, Thomas Mitchell)
The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce)
The Hunchback of Notre Dame (Charles Laughton and Maureen O'Hara)
The Little Princess (Shirley Temple)
The Roaring Twenties (James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart)
The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle (Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers)
The Wizard of Oz (Judy Garland, Frank Morgan, Ray Bolger)
The Women (Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Rosalind Russell)
Wuthering Heights (Merle Oberon, Laurence Olivier)

Even among such strong competition, *Stagecoach* garnered two Academy Awards, including an Oscar for its musical score. "I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair," heard at the opening, becomes Lucy Mallory's theme music. "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie" becomes the theme whenever the stagecoach is crossing the desert. "Shall We Gather at the River" is presented in burlesque as the members of the Law and Order League escort a prostitute out of town. Many other American folksongs are also incorporated into the score.

In the handout I offer one possible answer to the question, "What is the story about?" *Nine socially disparate characters on a journey, in responding to its challenges re-evaluate their opinions of one another and question the "blessings of civilization."* How do you know that this is what it is about? Let's consider the answer phrase by phrase. Who are these "*Nine socially disparate characters*"? I refer you again to the handout.

Characters and Their Goals

BUCK RICKABAUGH	(Andy Devine)	stage driver going to visit his large Mexican family in Lordsburg
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CURLEY WILCOX	(George Bancroft)	marshal going along as guard, trying to capture the Ringo Kid
DOC JOSIAH BOONE	(Thomas Mitchell)	alcoholic, forced to leave Tonto by the Law and Order League
RINGO KID	(John Wayne)	escaped convict who wants to get to Lordsburg to avenge himself on the Plummer brothers, who killed his father and brother and framed him for murder
HATFIELD	(John Carradine)	former Confederate officer and southern aristocrat who, after the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War, has become a drifting gambler
DALLAS	(Claire Trevor)	prostitute forced out of town by the Law and Order League
MRS. LUCY MALLORY	(Louise Platt)	pregnant woman trying to find her husband, an officer in the cavalry
ELLSWORTH H. GATEWOOD	(Berton Churchill)	bank manager absconding with the payroll money deposited in the bank
SAMUEL PEACOCK	(Donald Meek)	timid whiskey salesman on his way home to join his wife in Kansas City

We can separate the characters into three groups: the upper and middle classes (the southern aristocrat, the officer's wife, the whiskey salesman and the bank manager), the lower class (the alcoholic, the prostitute, and the convict), and those attached to the stagecoach by their professions (the driver and the marshal). Dallas, the prostitute, turns out to be the key character: all the other characters can be defined by their attitudes toward her.

The director John Ford focuses on the relationship between the individual and the group, and the group in its larger social context. Ford's motto both for plots and filming is: "actions speak louder than words."

These disparate characters are taking a journey from Tonto through Dry Fork and Apache Wells to their eventual destination in Lordsburg. The plot, which traces this journey, displays a symmetrical structure, as suggested in the handout. The first section of the prologue announces the threat of an Indian uprising, a threat that materializes in the final leg of the trip. The cavalry that we see in this opening scene will play a crucial role in rescuing the passengers. The second section of the prologue, introducing the main characters, corresponds to the epilogue in which we learn what happens to each character when they reach their destination. The main section of the film, the journey itself, is punctuated by the way stations at Dry Fork and Apache Wells.

<i>Stagecoach: Symmetrical Narrative Structure</i>	
Departure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prologue: cavalry receives word of Indian uprising • Introduction: we meet most of the main characters and learn their class distinctions and goals for the journey
Journey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first leg of the trip on the stagecoach to Lordsburg

- The Dry Fork way station where the coach stops for food - includes the memorable dinner table scene
- The second leg of the trip toward Apache Wells in the snow
- The Apache Wells (Mexican) outpost, where Lucy's baby is born (night); Ringo proposes to Dallas
- The final leg of the trip to Lordsburg, including the river crossing, the exciting Indian attack and the cavalry rescue

Arrival

- Conclusion: resolution for the main characters; Ringo Kid faces the Plummers in a shoot-out
- Epilogue: Ringo and Dallas depart for Ringo's ranch

Along the way the group encounters challenges that force them to re-evaluate their opinions of one another. In particular, Dallas, Doc Boone, and Ringo Kid, viewed as social outcasts at the beginning of the film, turn out to be the strongest characters. Their challenges include the delivery of Lucy's baby and the Indian attack. A comment may be in order regarding Lucy's pregnancy. Censorship rules in effect in 1939 forbade any visual display of a pregnant woman. Contemporary viewers, if they aren't paying very close attention to the few hints in the dialogue, may be forgiven for their dismay at seeing a baby suddenly appear as if from nowhere.

I refer you again to the handout for a summary of the actions which bring about the re-evaluations of the characters.

“in responding to its challenges re-evaluate their opinions of one another”

- Doc keeps filching drinks from Peacock's sample case. But he sobers up enough to deliver Lucy's baby and stands up to the Plummers in the tavern before the shoot-out. His “just one” at the end suggests that even he has been reformed somewhat by his experiences on the trip.
- Gatewood scowls, complains, and generally gets in the way. (When Peacock is shot by an arrow, Doc has to slug Gatewood to stop his interference.)
- Hatfield constantly does little favours for Mrs. Mallory, e.g. letting her drink from a silver cup rather than from the common canteen. (Later in the film we learn the reasons for his attentiveness.)
- Ringo constantly insists that the company regard Dallas as “the other lady.” At least to begin with, Ringo seems to be operating out of a simple sense of decency and not any personal concern for Dallas in particular.
- Peacock, essentially a comic figure, keeps correcting mistakes of his name, or supplying it for those who forget it completely.
- Dallas selflessly tends Lucy's baby and gives Lucy her shawl when they arrive in Lordsburg.

We find that the so-called aristocrats do little to merit our esteem. Lucy keeps to herself and remains a more or less passive figure. Gatewood, the bank manager, turns out to be a complete scoundrel. The characters from the lower class redeem themselves, with Doc and Dallas tending to Lucy's baby much more competently than its mother.

The disparity between class and morality reflects Ford's larger questioning of the so-called “blessings of civilization.” The character of Doc Boone, who utters that phrase

sarcastically at the end of the film, merits closer attention. In one of the opening scenes Doc says to Dallas, “We’re the victims of a foul disease called social prejudice. ... These ladies of the Law and Order League are scouring out the dregs of the town. ... Come, be a proud, glorified dreg like me.” No question, Doc Boone is an unapologetic alcoholic.

- Doc begs for one last (free) drink before the stagecoach departs
- He shamelessly drinks up Peacock’s entire sample case
- Just before the Apache attack he toasts the other passengers, but offers them nothing to drink
- Doc’s first act on arriving in Lordsburg is to get a drink at the bar

Yet Doc extends kindness to all the other characters, not just to Dallas and Ringo.

- When Hatfield orders him to put out his cigar, Doc apologizes to Lucy.
- He sobers up when Lucy is about to deliver.
- Once the baby is born, Doc becomes matchmaker—or at least counselor—advising Dallas when she asks him whether she and Ringo have a future.
- He staunchly stands up to the Plummers in the Lordsburg tavern, preventing Luke from attacking Ringo with a shotgun

John Ford, like Doc Boone, seems to cast a jaundiced eye on the so-called blessings of civilization. We notice a downward social progression: the social order seems to allow moves only down the class ladder, never up. This pessimistic view of society invokes the Great Depression nightmare scenario of social displacement, often involving literal eviction and homelessness.

The downward social progression

- Gatewood, the banker, loses his credentials as a proper middle-class businessman when his theft of a mining payroll is revealed to the authorities, and he is carted off to jail by the marshal of Lordsburg and a boisterous crowd of onlookers. This negative portrayal of a banker would have found favour among Depression-era audiences.
- Lucy is a former Virginia aristocrat who has a newly-assumed identity as an army wife. In the antebellum South the most coveted class credential was staying put on inherited land. In spite of Lucy’s apparent fall from aristocratic circumstances, she rejects the egalitarian West represented by Dallas’s altruistic attempts to provide the expectant mother with some degree of physical comfort and emotional support.
- Hatfield’s status as a fallen aristocrat is mirrored in Doc Boone’s status as a fallen professional. Doc and Dallas are regarded by civilization’s defenders as lower-class degenerates who need to be swept from town.
- Ringo Kid is established as a landowner (his ranch in Mexico), and his desire for revenge is based on family loyalty. All along the journey, we learn about his familial and social links to the community. He knows Buck (and his family); Curley was a friend of his father; Doc once set the arm of his brother. Nevertheless, he is an escaped convict, one whom the “better” elements of society (like Gatewood) regard as “notorious.”

Toward the end of the 19th century historian Frederick Jackson Turner offered the so-called Frontier Thesis, drawing a contrast between the aristocratic values of the

East and the democratic values of the Western frontier, a contrast played out repeatedly in *Stagecoach*. Eastern values were based on position and wealth, western values on individual character and ability, regardless of one's past history.

We note the irrelevancy of the socially "superior" classes to the safe passage of the stagecoach and to the resolution of the main protagonists' conflicts. Upon arriving in Lordsburg, the middle- and upper-class easterners (Peacock, Lucy Mallory, Hatfield, and Gatewood) are all dispersed: Peacock and Lucy to the hospital, Hatfield to the morgue, Gatewood to jail. This dismissal is Ford's way of asserting the functional inferiority of the social elite, their lack of vitality and adaptation to Western democracy.

Yet the democratic ideal of the West has its own limitations, as embodied by the marshal, who calls for a vote whenever the company must decide how and when to proceed on their journey. The two southern elitists try to assert their social standing. Ringo and Dallas, on the other hand, are treated like two criminals who have lost their right to vote in the determination of the journey. Curley, the marshal, announces that he holds the Kid's "proxy" and does not even think of asking Dallas what she wants to do until he is prompted by Ringo.

Stagecoach romanticizes the lower, working classes of the frontier. The source of good in the film emanates from the marginalized common people. Doc and the two other Western "common people" on the stagecoach—Curley and Buck—all realize that Dallas and Ringo are basically good people to whom life has dealt some tough blows. *Stagecoach* radically suggests that a prostitute could, and even should, be a mother. In fact, it suggests that she is the best material for motherhood. Lucy Mallory is visually isolated from her own offspring. Dallas holds the new-born infant to show her to Buck, Curley, and the male passengers gathered in the hall. Dallas symbolically displaces Lucy as the "Madonna" figure. When the stagecoach reaches the salt flats, it is attacked by the Apaches. Dallas, not Lucy, holds the baby in her arms, looks at it, and, despairing of the newborn's future, collapses in tears over the tiny bundle. By way of contrast, there is no indication that Lucy is even thinking of her child. At this moment, she is wedged into a corner against the side of the coach, looking away from the baby.

Ford encourages us to judge people by their actions rather than their words. During the journey the upper- and middle-class "easterners" are of little help in guaranteeing the survival of the group. When they are attacked, Curley calls for Ringo's assistance, and together with Buck, they literally keep the stage afloat (in the river-crossing sequence) and moving across the salt flats as the Apaches attack. It is Doc and Dallas who minister to Lucy Mallory when she is ready to deliver her baby, and Doc who evidently saves Peacock's life and attempts to help the dying Hatfield.

Stagecoach offers an essentially dystopic view of civilization. Lordsburg and Tonto are unenlightened places—sleazy towns filled with "mean, intolerant, aggressive people." The film traces a downward progression from the self-righteous Law and Order League of Tonto through three successively bleaker desert outposts of civilization and finally into the violence and unruliness of Lordsburg.

Dallas and Ringo—the film's "outlaws"—both embody the best of civilization's values—altruism, sensitivity, regard for family and marriage, a sense of tolerance and fair play, and good manners. Yet the social forces which seek to reestablish the order of

civilization are too strong. They will make it impossible for Dallas to assume her true “natural” vocation as wife and mother and for Ringo to reenter society as the “good cowhand” he yearns to be once again.

The ending of the film suggests the ultimate impossibility of preserving the best of Western values: social tolerance and class indifference. Escape across the border is the only solution. Dallas and Ringo are free to “settle down” on his ranch—but only south of the border, in Mexico, a place outside the “civilization” to which they will never be free to return.

Ford’s genius lies in conveying all these ideas cinematically rather than verbally. In the clips that follow, consider the most important ideas of the film and how each almost invariably conjures up an image rather than a piece of dialogue.

Clip 1 (First 20 minutes)

1. The first section of the prologue employs a kind of narrative shorthand. Instead of distinct episodes Ford dissolves from one scene to the next as we see riders approach a cavalry camp and a telegraph office, where a group of men receive a single coded word before the lines go dead: “Geronimo.”

2. Ford introduces his characters in an economical vignette style with brief cameos to establish stereotypical figures:

- Buck: squeaky style of speaking; other characters speak over him; as a consequence, we don’t take him seriously
- Lucy: hesitant; we suspect a link with Hatfield
- Gatewood: repeated shot with low camera angle making him look imposing, accompanied by a frown; shadows behind him in shape of cross or prison bars
- Hatfield: gambler, claims gentility (others call him “no gentleman”)
- Dallas: bows to necessity—physically compelled by army of women and the authority of the sheriff, but she protests her ill treatment, flounces her skirt at whistlers—a gesture that suggests her independence
- Curly: all business; decisive (hears Ringo Kid is headed to Lordsburg so he decides to ride shotgun on the stagecoach)
- Doc: forced out of town; drunken but grandiloquent; polite (apologizes for cigar smoke); not intimidated by gentry in encounter with Hatfield
- Peacock: comic figure—nobody gets his name right; repeatedly mistaken for a clergyman; Doc seizes his sample case
- Ringo: Ford delays John Wayne’s entrance and introduces him with a special dolly shot—one in which the camera is mounted on a set of tracks. In a few words, Ringo shows himself to be friendly, as he inquires after driver’s family, and sure of himself (“you may need my rifle”)

Notice how little these introductions depend on content of dialogue and how much on gesture, tone of voice, or rhythm of dialogue. We see a clear division between the elite (Hatfield, Gatewood and Mrs. Mallory) and the lower working class (the others)

3. Contrast between the epic grandeur of Monument Valley (against which the stagecoach appears insignificant) and the constricted space of the coach interior, emphasized by tight shots with never more than two or three people in the frame.

We learn more about the setting from the director's grandson: "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."

This remote setting had its advantages for the director: the extreme inaccessibility kept the producers and other studio executives out of his hair. When Ford delivered the film to the studio, he made it difficult for the producers to interfere with the final product by shooting so little film that the movie could really be put together only the way he intended it. The film was shot between October 31 and December 31, 1938 (less than two months!)

4. Watch for the number of reaction shots, often wordless, that tell us about both speaker and listener.

Clip 2 (Personal Histories, 4:00)

When the stagecoach stops at Dry Fork for a meal, the disparate social standings of the characters become evident.

1. The virtual absence of dialogue gives added weight to the occasional words

a. "May I find you another place, Mrs. Mallory? It's cooler by the window."

Hatfield's mention of the temperature is a euphemism for his actual motive, removing her from the embarrassment of sitting beside Dallas.

b. "Looks like I got the plague, don't it," Ringo says as Gatewood moves to the end of the table with the other two members of the elite. He doesn't understand that Dallas is being shunned, not he.

c. Lucy: "Have you ever been in Virginia?"

Hatfield: "I was in your father's regiment." The tone of voice in which Hatfield utters these words changes our attitude toward him. He really is acting out of concern for a fellow southern aristocrat.

2. Communication by visual imagery: notice how long it takes for Lucy, Hatfield and Gatewood to leave their seats and locate new ones, and how much is conveyed by glances given and received, along with their refusal to interact with Dallas. Then Ford pulls back for a long shot showing the result of the conflict. But then, just when our indignation is strongest, Ford isolates Hatfield and Lucy together for a sympathetic exchange.

Clip 3 (Sobering Situation, 7:30)

The company arrives at Apache Wells.

1. Precipitating crisis: Mrs. Mallory faints. This may come as a surprise to those unaware of her state of advanced pregnancy.

2. Those who talk: Gatewood blusters about the absence of cavalry; Hatfield complains about Doc's delay

3. Those who act: Curly and Ringo help Doc get sober; Dallas calls for hot water and the assistance of the innkeeper's wife; together Doc and Dallas deliver the baby. Later we learn that Dallas stayed up all night keeping watch over Lucy. We see her in the morning braiding Lucy's hair. (Again, no dialogue.) Dallas has also made broth for Mrs. Mallory. The disparate group is almost completely united by the common purpose of seeing that Lucy's baby is delivered safely.
4. Note the blatant racism of the members of the privileged class. Ford indicates his own sympathies by giving the Indian woman a song of her own, which serves as a marker for the passage of time.

Clip 4 (Under Attack, 9:00)

1. Ford cuts back and forth to underline the relative weakness of the stagecoach compared with the strength and determination of the Apaches, led by Geronimo; Notice the unusual camera angles. At one point the camera rests on the ground looking upwards at the Apaches
2. Problem of verisimilitude: every time a passenger fires, an Indian falls; most of the Apache shots miss. And why don't the Indians simply fire at the horses?
3. Use of sound:
 - a. virtually no dialogue in the 9-minute sequence: a great example of pure cinema
 - b. Just as Doc proposes a toast, an arrow enters the coach and strikes Peacock. We hear the arrow and see Doc's reaction before we observe Peacock fall; we also hear the sound of the Apache rifles before we see the Apaches
 - c. Famous sequence in which Hatfield, down to his last bullet, plans to kill Lucy to prevent her from falling into the hands of the Apaches. Then a shot, and his hand falls. We have been hearing trumpet-like music in the background, but then Lucy says, "Can you hear it? Can you hear it? It's a bugle. They're blowing the charge." Only Lucy's line tells us that this is now a sound **within** the story that signals their rescue.
4. Famous stunt: Apache jumps on horses; when shot, he falls beneath the carriage but stands up on the other side, showing that it is a real human rather than a dummy. (Later the same stuntman portrays Ringo jumping across the horses to regain control.)

Clip 5 (Man of Honor; Saved, total 8:30)

1. When the company finally arrives in Lordsburg, Ford avoids the conventions of the typical shoot-out scene: the confrontation takes place under expressionistic evening darkness instead of high noon on an empty main street; the director cuts back and forth between the Plummer brothers and Ringo instead of showing the antagonists acting within the same frame. And instead of showing us the resolution of the conflict, Ford cuts away from the action: Ringo falls to the ground and we cut to Dallas' reaction to the sounds of gunfire. Ford finds imagination stronger than depiction.
2. Ford shows us visually how Ringo learns of Dallas' profession and accepts her anyway.

3. The Epilogue reverses the action of the Prologue, with Ringo and Dallas riding off as Doc observes that they've been "spared the blessings of civilization."

Conclusion

It may be useful to summarize the visual, cinematic means that Ford employs to tell his story:

1. The relatively sparse use of dialogue makes us focus on tone of voice, body language, action and reaction. We're always aware of Ford's principle of directing: "actions speak louder than words"
2. Cross-cutting between elements of a scene creates greater tension than a distant shot in which we see the entire action unfolding
3. Ford often introduced himself with the words, "I'm Jack Ford; I make westerns." Utterly comfortable with the conventions of the genre, Ford frequently plays with or defies its conventions for dramatic effect.