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**Road as Allegory: John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939)**

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Stories structure the meanings by which a culture lives. When we get a number of stories with a fairly close family resemblance, we tend to identify them as a genre, a set of stories in which the meanings by which a culture lives are practically preordained, handed down seemingly anonymously for anyone to manipulate. Jacques Derrida can play with the notion that the law of genre cautions against mixing genres, even as he understands that “the law of genre” is “precisely a principle of contamination.”<sup>1</sup> Genres are born of other genres and never quite retain a purity of difference. What should we call John Ford’s 1939 film *Stagecoach*? It has numerous marks of the genre of the Western. But it is certainly related to a phenomenon of the American Great Depression in Hollywood entertainment that we refer to as the road film. When Frank Capra decided to work on one of the most successful road films of the Depression, *It Happened One Night* (1934), he was aware that “bus films” had not necessarily been successful financially.<sup>2</sup> The road film serves as a characteristic story for the Depression era, since it implies the breakup of normal life; a utopia of stasis breaks down into a human diaspora, as the displaced human beings take to the road in a struggle to survive, as in William Wellman’s *Wild Boys of the Road* or John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, two films spanning the Depression era. The road does not necessarily promise a happy adventure.

But there was always, in the U.S., a built-in happy prospect in the phenomenon of movement, no matter what its cause. Americans have always been said to find movement as their

identifying mode of being in the world. Even at rest, it is claimed, Americans sat in a rocking chair.

*Stagecoach* might just as well be classified as a road film than as a Western. The screenplay derives from a short story from the 1930s, Ernest Haycock's "Stage to Lordsburg," which is, itself, a minimalized version of a story by Guy de Maupassant, "Ball of Fat," written about a group of people on a stagecoach leaving Rouen in the Franco/Prussian war.<sup>3</sup> Ford rediscovered the meanings of American culture in such stories deriving from the mythologies of the frontier and the West after the Civil War, highly formalized narratives echoing high culture for adults. In *Stagecoach*, he found a way to state meanings for a culture within the quasi-formula of a narrative of what the dominant culture referred to as "civilized" people traveling through a forbidding, barren wilderness in which dangerous wild men are on the loose. Geronimo, the most mythic Native American of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, considered by the dominant culture to be an evilly charismatic military leader, has "jumped the reservation" and is likely to attack Anglo settlers or travelers who might encroach upon a territory traditionally belonging to Native Americans. Everyone planning to travel through this territory, who leaves the defended confines of a village and travels in the fragile gothically designed mobile fortress of a stagecoach, is now endangered by this unexpected event.

It was John Ford himself, in his interviews with Peter Bogdanovich, who noted that *Stagecoach* was really the Maupassant story and implied that Haycock must have read the story for his own magazine version of the story.<sup>4</sup> "Boule de suif" (Ball of Fat) narrates a stagecoach ride that emphasizes the situation of a forced equality between the French social classes as they are all thrown into the same situation of escaping Rouen, now occupied by German forces. The stagecoach is on its way to Dieppe, still in control of the French and a stage to Havre, an outlet to

England and total escape from the war. And one of the leading characters is a woman of little virtue, the Boule de Suif—a young sensuous and overweight prostitute who ends up being the salvation of the respectable people on the stage, including Lords and Ladies, some bourgeois couples such as a wine merchant and his wife, and two nuns. The trip is long and arduous, and when the passengers get terribly hungry, the prostitute feeds everybody from her stash of food she has brought for the journey. When the stage finally reaches a town for a dinner and sleepover, it is forbidden to proceed by a German officer until Boule de Suif gives in to his demand for sex. Maupassant's interest is that the most illegitimate person, the whore, becomes the key figure who is constantly willing or asked to make sacrifices for the group as a whole. The other passengers conspire to persuade her to give into the German after a couple of days of waiting and anxiety, and finally she does. As they resume their journey, all of the passengers have brought food, except the Boule de Suif, who now is excluded from sharing or conversation. The story ends with the whore sobbing at her exclusion and abandonment as the stage moves on. The respectable people have returned to their snobbish and exclusionary mode of social existence.

Although Ford was probably correct in thinking that Haycox had read the story, it is just as likely that the learned Ford knew the story and was interested in some of Maupassant's techniques for generating meaning. As Maupassant notes at one point, when the conquering German calls out one of the passengers, any French person becomes a representative of the nation.<sup>5</sup> Maupassant sees this story of the stage ride as a commentary on contemporary France—in a crisis, there are possibilities to break down the traditional divisions in French society. Once the crisis is lifted, the people forget about this brief politically utopian, albeit anxious, moment and return to their class and moral prejudices. Although Maupassant does not emphasize the

stage ride itself, since much of the story takes place while the riders are stranded in the town, he nevertheless makes the story an allegory of the state of the nation. Everyone is in the same state, in the same stage, in the same class, a democratic situation provided by a crisis.

In the Haycox story, many of the elements of the screenplay are present, but Haycox seems uninterested in making anything more out of the elements than the salvation of the prostitute after an Apache raid on the stage. He no doubt has another short story writer in mind as did Ford, namely, Bret Harte. But it is Ford and his screenwriter Dudley Nichols who see the value of the movement of the stage, with its various passengers who come from the traditions of American popular culture. *Stagecoach* confronts the issue of class, but the idea of social class as separating human beings is presented, rather, as a case of “social prejudice,” a state of mind that could presumably be overcome with a spiritual conversion of some sort, like the need to face a crisis of life and death together. As Ford was very much engaged in the writing of his screenplays,<sup>6</sup> what is added to his version of this story is: movement that is serious, risk-taking, life-threatening—a group of people unrelated to each other having to form bonds of mutual defense in order to survive an Indian attack. They do this from within a mobile gothic-American fragile and cramped house, of the sort that 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans were advised to build in order to display their civilized and Christian values, a defense against barbarism.

In a time of crisis or danger, the existence of an individual, protecting his or her secrets of character, is likely to become public through and through. These characters are each public and private, at once classic stereotypes and individuated. They become public to each other, in the “close quarters” of the stagecoach that is also a “public conveyance” run by a private corporation. Despite their stereotypicality, Ford’s characters, thrown together in their

individually and variously motivated willingness to risk the dangers of travel, are allowed to convey hints of their humanity, hints of personality, of a privacy that cannot be articulated fully.

We are inclined to say that the job of the stage is to keep moving; it has a simple schedule to keep, and there is little need for any heroics in overseeing the normal, routine movement of the stage by the driver Buck. But, in this instance, something has interrupted the normal situation, and it would be understandable for the stage to cancel its routine movements and wait for the U.S. cavalry of the federal government to bring under control the sources of the disruption. In the film's terms, Geronimo has jumped the reservation and is on the warpath. So now, the routine itinerary of the stagecoach from station to station is always in a state of possible revision, of cancellation, even of catastrophe. Whether or not the journey will take place is always in question. And there will be important moments of assessment and decision, even a moment of voting, as to what the passengers should do: go on, turn back, stay where they are. What suggests allegorical significance here is that the characters on the stage must make the decision for the stage to keep moving. They must take the initiative, even to move on unprotected. They may be accompanied for a while by troops, and the troops may rescue them in the end, but the stage is basically on its own. And life goes on during this ride—people fall in love, social and political prejudices as well as betrayals and loyalties get expressed, babies are born, plans are made for a future life.

First of all, I would have you remember Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which he values plot over character. Plot (mythos), in his view, drives character (ethos). Some plots, he claims, do not have character, although there would have to be agents of some sort, no doubt.<sup>6</sup> But what if we have a plot seemingly so simple, so routine, so uninteresting in its pure seriality, that the focus has to be directed toward character? That might be the case with *Stagecoach*. The routine movement of the

stagecoach from its regular and uneventful stations to other stations is an anticipation of the fact that there will be, in all probability, human beings who wish to move from one of these places to another.

On the other hand, what shall we say if the characters are so simple and stereotypical as the ones in *Stagecoach*? We shall say that the very simplicity of character swerves the focus, even the initiative, back to the plot. The characters are subservient to the plot. But the plot is perhaps as simple as any plot that we could ever imagine. What could be less dramatic than such serial movement—from Tonto to Dry Forks to Apache Wells to Lee's Ferry and Lordsburg? (Road films like *It Happened One Night* also play with this simplicity.) *Stagecoach* achieves its significance in the constant interweaving of, and interchange between, these two basic features of narrative, mythos (plot) and ethos (character).

The collection of characters also is a serial social grouping, constructed by chance. Their unity is of the simplest nature: each one has his or her own personal individual motive for riding the stagecoach to Lordsburg. However, even before the stage leaves Tonto, at the beginning of the film, the figures already begin to suggest affiliations with each other; they begin to enter into relationships—Doc and Dallas as outcasts, Doc and Peacock and the suitcase full of liquor samples, Mrs. Malory and Hatfield as post-Civil War Southerners, Dallas and Lucy Malory, Hatfield and Ringo. This affiliation can quickly shift from one person to another, mainly with the three old men, but these affiliations point to the fact that, as echoes in their affiliations, their role is to generate rather abstract themes or discourses that are available to the cultural/historical moment in the form of characters. Chivalric discourse comes readily to mind: Hatfield: “I am offering my services for the protection of this lady.” Ringo: “Where's your manners, Curley? Aren't you going to ask the other lady?” What is at stake here is competition for a certain

chivalric image of language and of action. Shall we say that Ringo wins and Hatfield loses? In the end, that does not seem to be the point. The commitment to chivalry entails commitment to the possibility of losing or risking one's life for the protection of someone else. Of course, Hatfield ends up dead, and Ringo ends up alive after his confrontation with the Indians and the Plummer brothers. The progress of the narrative ends up honoring both embodiments of the chivalric, although the narrative tends to convey the notion that the chivalry of the old South will be taken over by the chivalry of another time and place. And even though such language is risk-laden, Ringo's version is more strategic, better designed for survival, whereas Hatfield's is better designed to convey the fatalistic and suicidal loyalty to the chivalric discourse and ideal as loyalty to the dead, to a dead nation, to a dead world, even to a dead woman (as he places his cape over the corpse of a woman killed in an Apache raid at Lee's ferry). Hatfield is always already dead, a ghost of the dead nation of the confederacy, rootless, wandering around in deserts, killing men indiscriminately in upholding some kind of personal, or denationalized, honor, or just plain nihilism. Ringo, at least, is on his home ground, committed to survival in literal and spiritual terms, committed to carrying out a personal version of his sense of justice, with a motive for justice which even the marshal and the driver can discuss and even Ringo can be talked out of by Dallas at Apache Wells. He is willing to substitute love for revenge, although in the end he gets both.

Moreover, this cast of characters, a "veritable who's who of Western stereotypes,"<sup>7</sup> has been constructed and conventionalized by decades of writing about the American West. The Ringo kid (the bad-good boy, adolescent), the whore with the golden heart, the snobbish high society woman from the pre-Civil War plantation South, the alcoholic doctor, the corrupt banker (perhaps the most telling figure for a Depression era audience), and so forth. We might keep in

mind that Ford told a friend that he had just made a Western in which there was not a single respectable person among the cast of characters. Even Mrs. Malory has now become, after the defeat of the South, a member of this platoon of outsiders, marginalized people who have lost their status or social position. (The fact that Mrs. Malory is traveling to her husband rather than the husband traveling to be with his wife at childbirth is a sign of the utter devastation of the Southern way of life.) In effect, they are all people who have lost everything that at one time they might have thought would give their lives a sense of purpose and order. The ride through the desolate and ruined land of Monument Valley, with its dangerous renegade Apache tribesmen, presents this cast of losers as people who may be ruins themselves but whose spirit has not been defeated. Something of nobility and purpose remains within them, so that the stagecoach ride takes on the aura of a deeply religious pilgrimage, in which, without their actually seeking or questing for it, most of the characters undergo redemption of sorts. Their lives are brought back into purpose and integrity. (Everyone on the stagecoach is, in effect, redeemed except Gatewood, a sure sign that Ford and the company knew the cultural status of bankers in the Depression era.) Ringo's redemption is falling in love, settling the feud with the Plummers, and being freed by Curly, who serves as both an institutional and a moral authority in this group, although the figure of authority bounces around from person to person, as the focus on individuals bounces around. Who gets to be the focus of attention? Gatewood keeps demanding his authority, his rights. Peacock is completely effaced except when issues of motherhood come to the group's attention. The marshal allows him a moment of recognition in the child birth episode. And so forth. These people are redeemed in their relationships with each other, by humanity, not by some transcendental principle.

Secondly, a stagecoach is a peculiar vehicle. Of course, it is a business enterprise. It carries people who have private motives or intentions, but it is what Gatewood calls a "public conveyance." The cavalry is strictly a public entity, and it can accompany the stage only insofar as the movement of the stage coincides with its own pre-ordered and orderly movements. Curly, the marshal, a strictly public figure, paid for by the territorial community, rides shotgun on the stage and intends to capture Ringo who has escaped from prison. The people or characters are basically private people, let's say, although this notion gets complicated. Gatewood is trying to privatize, by stealing, what is public property, a payroll delivered to his bank to be dispersed as wages earned by hundreds of people. Doc Boone confiscates a kind of public property in kidnapping the whiskey samples of Mr. Peacock. Such samples are meant for public consumption in the line of business. They are certainly not meant to be appropriated by a fully committed alcoholic, the embarrassing town drunk. The stagecoach is a private/public entity in a peculiar combination. It is named the Overland Stage Line. It is a private enterprise whose intention is to serve the public in its travel needs.

The point is that the film is about trying to keep the private and the public defined or redefined, and to show the ways in which public and private combine and interweave with each other. The set of characters looks rather like a platoon which must offer a plausible representation of the population of the U.S., or rather, representative figures of our national popular history who, in theory, can be instantly recognized. Within the prolonged experience of the Great Depression of the 1930s, these people could evoke, not the whole vulnerable American population, of course, but a sampling of the American population that can serve as a legitimate representation of the country. In its general framework, the narrative is a version of the theme of the regeneration through violence myth in American culture.<sup>8</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner presents

the Western frontier experience as the perpetual renewal of American democratic institutions. Ford keeps his story fairly simple and unpretentious, and adds the feature of throwing these characters upon each other in close quarters, within a profoundly mythical conveyance of a mobile fortress, with its gothic style and decorations which, for Ford, invokes the civilization of the Western world as represented by the more or less sublimated militancy of a fundamentally protestant Christian view of life and the world.

The narrative is, thus, deeply ideological, on the issue of private vs. public. It could well be that the film is striving to define the boundaries between these categories, because there was a fear that President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies had transgressed traditional boundaries between private and public. Ford and the studio found a narrative that would establish an authenticity of the natural, within human behavior, within sectional and class differences. This narrative offers a brilliant example of a group of people caught in the possibilities of utter disaster, who have to join together in a primitive sense of community, defense against a murderous external enemy, here personified by the Apaches led by Geronimo. It is important that each figure has his and her own private reason for being on the stage. In this American mythology, everyone's intention is clarified and respected.

In case the will of the passengers is insufficient to keep the stagecoach moving, there are supplements to the human will to keep a plot moving. There is the fact that Mrs. Mallory's pregnancy cannot be stopped. Ringo's vengeance would be another version of this inevitability. Vengeance is conceived as a compulsive narrative, a resolute willfulness that has its own dynamic. Nothing can satisfy vengeance but carrying it out just as nothing can satisfy pregnancy but birth. Gatewood's attempt to escape would be another form of a compulsive narrative. Once

he makes his decision, the movement of escape has its own dynamic (“I can’t go back”). There is also the version of Doc’s movement toward a deep drunkenness, as long as he has control of Peacock’s sample case. He does not necessarily compel the movement of the stage, but his need to drink everything available to him is a form of a compulsive narrative. Of course, there are characters here who are not involved in a compulsion to move. Dallas is one, having been kicked out of Tonto and then refusing to leave the stage; Peacock another. Hatfield seems merely fatalistic, despite his desire to protect a great lady. His use of the draw of the cards indicates both his own distance from compulsion and a fate that compels the narrative, just as the cards reveal Luke Plummer’s death later.

What the crowded confines of the stagecoach allows is at least a momentary collective ability for people to carry out their authority as based on social status or social prejudice. Social prejudice may reappear at one of the stations, Dry Forks, and there can be instances of it in the movement of the coach. There can be nasty arguments or behavior on the moving stage, but, basically, these prejudices cannot become effective with everyone at risk, with the whole group caught in a common danger. In a sense, we could say that a new sense of the public arises in a time of crisis—now the very idea of the public is based on the notion of a general interest sufficiently basic that discourse about it need not be distorted by particular interests. The sense of motive or intention for being on the stage individualizes each character, but this peculiar public is conceived as the sphere of private people coming together as forming a public. The federal or state-related entity, the cavalry, can accompany this entity of the stage only so far, and must turn its attention elsewhere. But it is also available to rescue the civic public of private individuals in the nick of time, when the civil public has run out of defenses. What interest does the federal

public have in this civil public? Of course, its role is to protect the civil public—that is its *raison d'être*.

The will of the people, with supplements, is that the stage must go on. Like the popularity of the back-stage musicals of the 1930s, the show must go on. Ford invokes the past of American history by updating the Western and frontier experience for the period of the Great Depression in order to suggest that the U.S., despite the Depression, is still in movement. One could also read the film as anticipation of American entry into World War II, but that is a different story. In the Depression era, Americans may not have taken to the road willingly, but once they hit the road, they tried to make the most of it. They are the *Wild Boys of the Road*, the couple in *A Night to Remember*, and the Oakies in *Grapes of Wrath* as well as the figures in *Stagecoach*.

The fact is that mobility, the road, can be used to signify almost everything in the United States. U.S. culture is so profoundly saturated with the metaphor of the road, of mobility, that it is a national allegory; any version will work for whatever is needed at the moment. The interesting feature is that, in 1939, a story of the post-Civil War transmississippi West could so adequately frame the political and cultural issues of the crisis of the Great Depression. In my view, when these Western stories construct a frame that resonates in the culture at large, the actual films tend to be the greatest versions of the genre. This is the case with *Stagecoach*, as with some of John Ford's post World War I and post World War II Westerns.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Law of Genre," *Glyph* 7 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), 206.

<sup>2</sup> *The Name Above the Title* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 159.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Haycox, "Stage to Lordsburg," *Stagecoach* (London: Lorrimer, 1971), 5-18. Guy de Maupassant, "Boule de Suif," *Selected Short Stories*, trans. Roger Colet (New York and Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 19-68. A recent study by Richard Fusco has demonstrated the pervasive influence of Maupassant on American fiction writing in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Maupassant and the American Short Story*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994). Ernest Haycox would be considered too minor an author to be mentioned in such a study, however.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1978), 69.

<sup>5</sup> "Boule de Suif," 39.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *John Ford* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1979), 80.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1967), 27: "a tragedy cannot exist without a plot, but it can without characters."

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Kalinak, "'The Sound of Many Voices,'" *John Ford Made Westerns*, ed. Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2001), 182.

<sup>8</sup> The term is Richard Slotkin's, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973).