

## Notes for Viewing John Ford's *Stagecoach*

The movie is set in 1885.

### Sources:

Like the characters in "Last Stage to Lordsburg," the characters in the film stagecoach are stereotypes, but, except for Gatewood, they acquire a depth and humanity that Haycox's characters don't. In what ways is this difference a result of the film's visual presentation, its dialogue, and/or changes in the story?

Like de Maupassant, Ford depicts class consciousness and the venality, hypocrisy, selfishness, and cruelty of respectable "pillars of society."

### Themes

Revenge

Redemption

Community, within the stagecoach and outside (Tonto & Lordsburg)

Society (convention) or civilization vs. the individual (freedom)

Social class and respectability and democracy (The stagecoach is a microcosm.)

Sacrifice

Journey, with characters' goals and their emotional, personal, and social changes or lack thereof

Settling the nation/creating America and the national character (implicit expression of Manifest Destiny?)

New life, starting over (The West allows transformation.)

### Movie's center

What is the movie's center? Is it Ringo? Dallas? Their relationship? The stagecoach? The community developed among the stagecoach passengers, driver, and sheriff?

### Ford's approach to filmmaking

Ford cuts dialog to a minimum and focuses on action and visual detail.

Ford believes, "The main thing about motion pictures is to photograph the people's eye. Look at their faces." Notice how often information is communicated silently with a gaze, e.g., Hatfield's looking at Mrs. Mallory through a window, her looking back from the stagecoach window, or Ringo and Dallas looking lovingly at each other as she holds the baby.

He also develops the action and its meaning by showing how characters react to one another.

Scenes of action alternate with scenes of character development, a pattern some see as too rigid or schematic.

### Characters

Do any characters change as a result of events on their journey, or do they reveal traits always there?

What is Dallas's attraction for Ringo? Does he know she is a prostitute? Or care?

Does the simple or naive Ringo, with his closeness to nature, live by his own moral code? Is it significant that he went to prison when he was "pushing seventeen"?

What is Mrs. Mallory's attraction for Hatfield? Consider his statement at the card table that she is "like an angel in a jungle" and that his companions have never seen an angel or a gentlewoman.

Observe how the men treat the two women passengers. Is a distinction made between them as "ladies"?

Sectionalism appears: Peacock, the whisky salesman from Kansas City, is perceived as an "Easterner." Mrs. Mallory and Hatfield are Virginia gentry, though, as Mrs. Mallory's friends make clear, Hatfield is no longer a gentleman but a notorious gambler; Hatfield and Doc served on opposite sides in the Civil War.

Both Gatewood, who says he got a message to go to Lordsburg, and Ringo stop the stage to get on.

Characters form pairs, except for Gatewood, a fact emphasized by the cutting. For instance, Gatewood is absent from the scene with Dallas holding the newborn.

Does Dallas appear more domestic than sexual, with her making coffee, repeatedly offering help to the

other passengers, staying up all night with Mrs. Mallory, and constantly holding the baby?

Are the respectable characters tested by their perceptions and treatment of the disreputable characters? Does Mallory express guilt and growth in Lordsburg in her exchange with Dallas? Is it significant that Hatfield stops criticizing Doc after the safe birth of the baby and once stands up for Ringo when Gatewood criticizes him? Is it significant that Peacock refers to both Mrs. Mallory and Dallas as ladies and invites Dallas to visit his home in Kansas City, Kansas?

Is Doc a heroic figure? Are his judgments about men and society almost always right? He ironically calls Hatfield, who shot a man in the back, a “gentleman.” Others ask his advice. He confronts Hank Plummer in the saloon about carrying a shotgun. If he is heroic, why does he say, “Don’t ever let me do that again”? The next to last scene is Curley offering to buy Doc “just one drink.”

## **Society**

In Tonto, a bustling town, the Ladies Law and Order League is forcing Dallas out of town. Doc Boone, who is being thrown out by a sour-faced landlady, tells Dallas they are “victims of a foul disease called social prejudice.” Men idling on the street stare at Dallas’s leg as she climbs into the stagecoach. What is she referring to when she says, “There are worse things than Apaches”? (There is a quick cut to the sour-faced ladies of Tonto.) Note Doc’s comment at the end of the movie (“Well, they’re saved from the blessings of civilization” and the decision of Ringo and Dallas to flee civilization for unsettled country (Mexico). Are escape and expansion into new territories part of American history and myth? Why does the movie end with a long shot of the wagon getting smaller and smaller in the grandeur and space of Monument Valley?

Like Tonto, Lordsburg has people in the streets, and though respectable, upright ladies greet Mrs. Mallory, its streets are lined with honky-tonk saloons and brothels.

How is Curley, who represents law and the justice system, characterized? He also sides with or even protects the weak or vulnerable. He rides shotgun with Buck on the coach to Lordsburg to prevent Ringo from being killed—as well as to collect the reward money.

Might the portrayal of Gatewood, who represents banking/business, reflect the views of a 1939 audience, who had suffered a decade of the Depression, unemployment, bank failures and foreclosures? Gatewood spouts a number of conservative, Republican values: “America for Americans,” “What’s good for banks is good for the country,” “What this country needs is a businessman for president,” and “Government mustn’t interfere with business.”

Disagreements within the group are worked out democratically, by voting or consensus. Curley polls the other passengers about continuing without cavalry protection.

Threatened and then attacked by Indians, the passengers, sheriff, and driver work together to survive.

Ford has been accused of a racist portrayal of Indians and of Mexicans.

## **Action**

Ford cuts dialog to a minimum to focus on action. He prepares for the Apache attack and the ending: There are constant brief references to the Apaches (Ringo saw a ranch house burning) and quick cuts to the Apaches.

Actions reveal characters and motivation. Gatewood frantically keeps track of his valise; the telegraph wires which were down in the beginning of the journey have been repaired by the time they reach Lordsburg.

Action moves quickly; the feeling of speed is reinforced by the editing/cutting, as in the attack, which lasts 7.5 minutes. In the Lee’s Ferry scene, close-up shots of the driver’s seat, which focus on physical movement and struggle, and long shots of the whole coach, which seems to float through the water, alternate to create varied rhythms and movement of action. The filming of the attack and the confrontation in Lordsburg is based on silent films.

The scene of the Indian attack and cavalry rescue focuses on the passengers’ experience, their despair and growing hope. Music plays offscreen, including a bugle; Hatfield’s gun moves toward Mrs. Mallory praying, a shot is heard off the frame, his hand drops out of the frame, the bugle is more distinct, and Lucy asks the other passengers whether they hear it. Not until this point does Ford cut to the cavalry. The louder bugle indicates the calvary getting closer. The fight between the Indians and cavalry is hidden in the distance behind clouds of dust; what we see is a victorious cavalry riding into Lordsburg with the stagecoach.

## **Stunts**

Two of the most famous stunts in movie history occur in this film, both of which have been widely imitated. Portraying an Indian, the stuntman, Yakima Canutt, leaps from a galloping horse onto the coach's lead horse, slips between the horses, and falls under the coach; next, as the Ringo Kid, he jumps from the coach onto running horses.

## **Camera shots**

Ford generally places the camera at eye level and lets it record. He doesn't often use complex camera shots or movement. Because almost every scene adds movement or character development, simple camera shots suffice.

In the beginning, the coach moves in a leisurely manner, with high angle shots foreshadowing its vulnerability (it looks small against the implacable landscape); later, the Apaches look down on the coach from a high ridge. Extended shots of the coach getting smaller and smaller, more isolated and alone, set against a magnificent sky emphasize its vulnerability.

Shots of the stagecoach struggling up steep grades emphasize the ability to overcome obstacles.

Ford thought one of the most beautiful sights/shots was a horse running.

Ringo's appearance is photographed in stages, suggesting there is more to him than his first impression. When the Ringo Kid stops the coach, the camera tracks to his face so quickly that it goes slightly out of focus briefly.

In the shoot-out at the end, the Ringo Kid falls into the camera, which is at ground level.

Ford often frames a shot and the characters in a doorway, a window, or a hall. When Doc enters a Tonto saloon, the shot is a long one of the bar, with Doc in the foreground and a small Peacock next to a window at the other end of the room, with a horse looking in.

The movement of the camera comments on the scene and identifies visually the important elements: at the dinner table, a tracking shot brings Mrs. Mallory into the center of the frame for her conversation with Hatfield; at Lee's Ferry, the camera pulls back from the stopped coach to reveal the devastated way station; a long shot shows the separate ways of the cavalry and the coach when the road forks, with a close-up of the officer's face expressing his concern for its safety; and the coach getting smaller and smaller in the landscape.

In the inside scenes, the ceilings are filmed, creating a sense of confinement.

The camera pans *up* to Geronimo twice, to create a sense of dignity, authority, and power.

In the shoot-out at the end, the Ringo Kid falls into the camera, which is at ground level.

## **Photography**

Ford is regarded as a master of the image, a visual lyric poet. He used Monument Valley because it was "the most complete, beautiful, and peaceful place on earth." The many high-angle shots, which foreshadow later developments like the cavalry taking a different road or the Apaches appearing on a ridge overlooking the road, capture its stark grandeur.

He uses stylized lighting and formal compositions to express strong emotions. Ford expended considerable energy to get the glint of light in Dallas's close-up when she announces, "It's a girl."

When Luke Plummer hears of Ringo's arrival, he stands up, his face is shadowed in darkness, indicating his nature and foreshadowing the end.

## **Editing**

For the river crossing, the closeup of the driver's box alternates with a long shot of the whole coach. The closeups show movement and struggle, and in the long shots, the coach seems to float through the water, thereby creating a contrasting rhythm in the action.

The scene moves abruptly from the calm in the coach to Geronimo preparing to attack.

## **Setting**

The timelessness, majesty, and vast space of Monument Valley are set against the small, moving, vulnerable stagecoach and provide a grand background for the moral issues. (Interestingly, only 7 of the 47

days of shooting were spent in Monument Valley because of budget constraints.) Ford explains, “I think you can say that the real star of my Westerns has always been the land.”

The film cuts between the petty squabbles and social concerns inside the coach and the magnificent, spectacular landscape, which suggests the existence of greater moral and spiritual values.

Would the landscape have a special meaning at a time when Europe was on the brink of a world war, which most Americans did not want to be involved in?

The scenes inside the coach were shot in front of process screens in Goldwyn studios; this is why scenes seen through the windows looks unreal and jittery. In contrast, the long shots of the coach, which were mostly done in Monument Valley, are stunning.

## **Music**

Music is used to set the mood, and it changes often.

The opening credits state the musical score “is based on American Folk Songs.” The film opens to the rising, assertive strains of a Western, “I’m Gonna Leave Old Texas Now.” Stephen Foster’s “I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair” is associated with the Southerner and former Confederate soldier Hatfield; it plays when Mrs. Mallory notices the crest on his silver cup and just before he is about to shoot her in the head. The Methodist hymn “Shall We Gather at the River” is first played on an organ (religious connotations), then repeated with strange orchestration as background to the self-righteous women of Tonto, in humorous irony. W.C. Handy’s “Careless Love” plays when Dallas and Ringo first meet at Dry Ford, when they share a drink of a canteen, and when they bundle up during the snowstorm. Also included are the cowboy ballad “Oh, Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie,” the Virginia State song “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” the Union Civil War song “The Battle-cry of Freedom” (which plays during the cavalry ride-to-the-rescue) and the traditional Mexican song which Yakima sings “Al pensar en ti” (it expresses yearning for her native land), and “She is More to Be Pitied than Censured.”