

Cookie-Cutter Or Connoisseur?
Genre Theory and John Ford's *Stagecoach*
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The analytic theory posited by Robert Warshow in his essay "The Westerner", itemizes the elements necessary for a film to belong to the genre of the "western". Most contentiously, he mandates that the narrative focus upon the individual hero's plight to assert his identity, and diminishes the importance of secondary characters and issues, or any tendency toward "social drama." (431) He states that it is subtle variations that make successive instances of a genre film interesting, yet limits this variety to "minor variations in the characteristics of the actors who play the hero's role." (430)

It is my belief that while exhibiting many of the traits itemized by Warshow, John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) also exhibits variations in characterization, symbolism and even moral focus which project it dangerously close to what Warshow would view as a "social" film. It would be nearly impossible to declare *Stagecoach* a non-western by either Warshow's own generic criteria or the expectations of the genre viewer, yet the film clearly conveys the more individuated social concerns of its director. While Warshow claims that this perversion of the norm threatens to make the genre uninteresting, I believe the contrary to be true. Subverting the expectations of the genre, while still functioning within the language of the "western" is what makes *Stagecoach* a powerful film, and legitimizes the notion of genre itself.

The traits cited by Warshow as compulsory for the "western" are extensive. Most elements concern the figure of the melancholy cowboy hero, who is certainly present in *Stagecoach* in the personage of Ringo. The hero usually exhibits a certain leisure, an ambiguity of occupation, a nonchalant mode of interpersonal relations, and is easily recognizable by his unchanging dusty white clothes. Other elements expected by the "western" viewer include the importance of the vast landscape in relation to the men upon it; the figures of the morally ambiguous marshall, the cultured Eastern lady, the understanding yet fallen prostitute and the "bad guy"; and the conflict between nature and civilization, usually represented by Apaches and white settlers respectively. Lastly, the most general and material characteristic of a "western" is its setting on the American western frontier in the late 1900's. Each of these motives is evident in Ford's *Stagecoach* ; however, there are several conventions of the "western" which the director intentionally manipulates, which exceed altering the traits of the actor who plays the lead role.

The first convention varied by Ford is the hero's expected relationships with two different types of women. The generic first lady is the refined Eastern "schoolmarm" character. She represents the paradigm of civilized virtue, and as such fails to understand the cowboy's need for revenge, to do "what he has to do." (457) In contrast, we usually encounter the highly-sexualized saloon girl or prostitute, whose shares with the hero

marginalization by the fledgling "civilization" of the frontier. This second woman understands the cowboy's code in a way that the cultured woman cannot. In the conventional "western", the hero often ends up with the "lady", but his choice is excused by the "convenient" accidental death of the saloon girl, usually due to a stray bullet. However, as Warshow says, the hero should not actively pursue love, rather it "is at best an irrelevance." (454)

In *Stagecoach*, Ford skewers the usual dichotomy between the two women, and their relationships with the hero. The usual nonchalance in love is replaced in Ringo, who proposes to Dallas very early in the film's action, by a genuine interest in settling down. In the end, in fact, it is his domestic future with Dallas that saves him "from the blessings of civilization." Mrs. Mallory can be identified as representing the Easterner, but she is never really available to Ringo as she is married. The normal task of protecting the "lady" against the harsher elements of the desert is for the most part neglected by the hero, and attended to only by the enigmatic Southern gambler, Mr. Hatfield. Mrs. Mallory's strictly-guarded virtue is viewed by the audience as unnecessary, hurtful, and hypocritical, as well as by Ringo, who identifies with Dallas from the onset, referring to her as "the other lady." One of Ford's social concerns seems to be with unjustifiable class elitism, the arbitrary marginalization and devaluation of others by the likes of Mrs. Mallory. Therefore, the film demonstrates both the problem of Mrs. Mallory's assumptions about Dallas, and how the former must come to appreciate and value the latter. Likewise, Dallas is not simply the stereotypical fallen woman; rather she possesses the unusual prospect of redeeming both the hero and herself through the actualization of a domestic lifestyle. This potential is never ascribed to the conventional saloon girl, who rarely survives to the end of the action. Also unusual is Dallas's concern for Ringo's well-being; the saloon girl is usually more like the one who tosses the rifle at Luke Plummer before the shoot-out. According to genre convention, Dallas, should be understanding of Ringo's need to face the enemies, yet she is like the refined "lady" in other "westerns", entreating Ringo not to fight, not to risk death or their potential domestic future. By subtly changing what we expect of certain characters, or trading aspects among them, Ford uses the code of the "western" genre in a way which enables the creation of new meaning out of an established form.

Another way in which *Stagecoach* subverts the standards of the "western" is through manipulation of notions of mobility and freedom. In the film's conventional form, the male hero's relation to his horse may be the most important. The horse is his one "trusty" companion, his only stand-by in the isolation of society. Warshow also identifies the horse as a symbol of the extensive personal mobility afforded the individual hero upon the frontier. (455) However, Ford chooses to eliminate this relationship entirely. It is striking to the viewer to meet Ringo, stranded in the middle of the desert without a horse, with neither companion nor mobility.

Warshow would accuse Ford of adding insult to injury when Ringo's expected freedom and mobility are further compromised: the hero is crammed into a crowded stagecoach with a cross-section of society at large. The solitary figure of the hero suddenly becomes one who must both integrate into the flux of societal interaction, *and* use his potential to

ease the interactions of others within the construct, as shown by his constant efforts to treat Dallas with the same care as is received by Mrs. Mallory. Thus the stagecoach becomes a conceptual vehicle for society, and the hero's mandate to function within it. This would be problematic for Warshaw, who views any attempt to show the hero "as the one dominant figure in a complex social order" as breaking the pattern and potency of the "western." (461) How could the central focus (even the title!) of the film be upon a metaphor for society, when the "western" is supposed to be about one man? Here, the limitations of Warshaw's theory are evident, as rather than causing the "western" to become "uninteresting", Ford's introduction of the hero's social functions gives the film an entirely new depth, and allows it to address certain issues such as anti-materialism and anti-elitism.

Even in his final get-away, when Ringo rides into the free horizon, the conventions of mobility are craftily manipulated. The hero is not alone with his trusty steed, but is on the wagon with his future bride. Furthermore, the traditional (cliched) image of riding into a sunset, an indicator that the hero's story is ending, now that he has killed his enemy, is changed in *Stagecoach* to the image of riding into a sunrise. This reversal from the norm illustrates that although Ringo's mission all-along *was* indeed to kill the Plummers in revenge for his father and brother, there is life after the shoot-out, a life of naturalized, redeeming domesticity on an "uncultured" new frontier.

Finally, in *Stagecoach*, Ford manipulates the importance of the hero's style. According to Warshaw, the most important function of the hero, and the reason that the "western" is popular as a genre, is to assuage fear of violence. Strangely enough, the fact that the hero believes and engages in violence is not troubling, but rather comforting, as he suggests "that even in killing or being killed we are not freed from the necessity of establishing satisfactory modes of behaviour." (466) The emphasis in the generic "western" is on an overwhelming style, style which is conveyed through the honourable manner in which the cowboy hero kills or dies. The ultimate need of the hero is to have the opportunity to kill his enemy, to express the purity of his stylistic, honourable self. In *Stagecoach*, while this necessity is fulfilled, it is not in my mind the most important aspect of the hero's being. It seems that the revenge plot only contrasts with the larger issue of Ringo's style and poise in the face of society's various limiting factors. The shoot-out scene, which *should* be the climax, is actually quite abbreviated. We see the Plummers and Ringo approach each other, and Ringo draw and fire three shots. However we do not see their impact; the next image is of Dallas outside the brothel. Thus, although Ringo is supposedly the killer of the Plummers, we are distracted from seeing him actually kill. His style in terms of his relationship to Dallas is more important, as the first thing we witness him do after firing his gun is to return to "his woman."

The "style" that is emphasized in Ford's hero is the mildly anarchic social style of one who endearingly takes the defence of the downtrodden, and does the unexpected. Earlier in the film, we see him continually treat Dallas with respect in the face of the sneering social elite represented by Hatfield and Mrs. Mallory. This is exemplified during the meal scene, where Ringo seats Dallas before himself, and Hatfield moves Mrs. Mallory away from them. In this way, Ringo exhibits a level of poise and virtue which is claimed by the

refined elite, but which they seriously lack, and in doing so, he tactfully critiques a social system rampant with hypocrisy, and wins the support of the viewer. By making the aspect of the hero which we expect to be most important inaccessible to us, Ford forces us to look at him contrarily to our conditioning, and to examine what else is valued. The process of the successful genre film thus becomes an ultimately resistant one: the director can succeed only through taking the viewer's expectations, and working against them.

It is ironic that while Warshaw's theory is useful in examining *Stagecoach*, the deliberate deviations navigated by Ford's film make it equally productive to reverse the process, to critique the theory by the film. Warshaw's theory of genre maintains that the spectator's pleasure in viewing a "western" like *Stagecoach*, stems from his/her position as a "connoisseur" who appreciates the "minor variations within the working out of a pre-established order." (461) However, his theory seems too eager to limit a genre film to achieving the same end in every incidence. I believe that *Stagecoach* reveals that it can be more constructive to achieve something new through the use of the conventional mode. It seems that it is only through the creation of an ostensibly new product by each recurrence of a generic form that a genre can continue. Theorists who deny the possibility of retaining enough of the original mode to make the film recognizable as part of a genre, while still capitalizing on the full range of variation available through plot, characterization, and style, underestimate the audience's capacity to simultaneously make connections and receive a new product. I believe an audience would rather be challenged than spoon-fed another "creative" recreation.