**John Ford, John Wayne, and *Stagecoach***

**John Ford**

John Ford, the director of *Stagecoach*, was one of the great directors of Western and war films. He had an extensive career in silent movies, starting in 1917, directing dozens of Westerns, most notably *The Iron Horse*. Ford’s career seemed stagnant in the early to mid-1930s, when the pressures of the Depression made producers less likely to support films that challenged audiences. For instance, Ford’s most critically acclaimed film of the 1930s, *The Informer* (1935—an Irish-themed movie, another specialty of Ford’s), won four Academy Awards (Best Director, Actor, Screenplay, and Score), but it lost money at the box office. The studio bosses much preferred to assign him to sentimental projects like Will Rogers movies, all of which were quite successful financially.

There was no denying, though, that Ford had a talent for creating very appealing homespun **Americana** in a historical setting, and when given good material to work with, as in *Young Mister Lincoln*, starring Henry Fonda, he could be both artistic and popular. The year 1939 proved to be a watershed for Ford. He made the immortal *Stagecoach*, which won two Academy Awards (Best Supporting Actor for Thomas Mitchell, playing Dr. Josiah Boone, and Best Score) and established **John Wayne** as a star. Before the start of World War II, he followed up the success of *Stagecoach* with two other classics, *How Green Was My Valley* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

During and after World War II, Ford consolidated his reputation with a series of war documentaries, several navy-focused war movies (most notably *They Were Expendable*, with John Wayne), and more Westerns, including the classic cavalry movie, *Fort Apache*, starring Henry Fonda and John Wayne. Ford also did some more classic Irish-themed movies, one of the best being *The Quiet Man*, starring John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara, about an Irish boxer.

The **studio system** under which John Ford worked as a director did not allow for a great deal of artistic autonomy. Ford, however, did find ways to establish that autonomy, primarily by using location shooting to keep producers and studio executives at arm’s length during shooting, and encouraging the artistic people he worked with to see themselves in opposition to the “money men.” Because of the social and political controversy certain to associated with the film, Ford did work closely with producer **Darryl F. Zanuck** on *The Grapes of Wrath*, allowing Zanuck to help edit the script and approve the final editing of the movie. Zanuck paid author John Steinbeck over $100,000 for the rights to his novel, but Steinbeck insisted that the book be treated artistically and responsibly before he would give final approval. The pro-labor stance of the film caused both Zanuck and Ford to be investigated for communist involvement during the post-World War II “Red Scare.”

Ford’s autocratic directorial style has been variously interpreted. To many, notably the great European directors of the 1950s and 1960s, he was one of the first great **auteurs**, directors who imprinted a personally distinctive vision on a film the way an author imprints a style on a book. To others, who had to endure his temperament more intimately, he was a self-indulgent, alcoholic bully. In retrospect, a lot of his bullying seems to have been carefully calculated. He tried to create a distinctive “atmosphere” on his sets, with little
rituals and initiations that tended to cut actors’ big egos down to more manageable size. A favorite tactic of Ford’s was to ask an actor’s “advice” about how to set up a scene; then, once the actor expressed his opinion, Ford would call the entire cast and crew together and mock the actor’s input, thus subjecting the actor to public humiliation. Major stars such as John Wayne, Henry Fonda, and James Stewart all received this treatment at one time or another. Perhaps Ford’s greatest argument for his artistic vision, though, was the consistent success of his films at the box office from the late 1930s on. The potentially harsh realism in his films was always tempered by sentiment and appeals to predictably popular values.

John Wayne

John Wayne, born in Iowa in 1907 as Michael Marion Morrison, has become an American movie icon if there ever was one, especially to those who admire his image of patriotic American masculinity. Wayne’s career as a movie actor got off to a slow start, though. After playing football for the University of Southern California in the middle 1920s, he played bit parts until 1931, when he starred in The Big Trail, a major flop of a Western. For the rest of the thirties, he labored in one B-movie Western after another, until finally in 1939 John Ford offered him the role of the Ringo Kid in Stagecoach, which finally launched him. Although he played any number of heroic military roles, he never served in the armed forces in World War II. (Granted, he was almost 35 years old when the war began.)

Gary Wills points out in his excellent book on Wayne, John Wayne’s America, that Wayne’s starring debut in Stagecoach is overlaid with a great deal of legend and myth. In truth, Wayne got the part because Ford did not want a star. As will be discussed in greater detail below, John Ford wanted Stagecoach to be an ensemble piece without recognizable heroes and heroines. According to Wills, John Wayne became a star through Stagecoach in spite of Ford, rather than because of him. The Ringo Kid actually has fewer lines than several of the other characters in the movie, but his lines always are meaningful and revealing of his character, and thus is born the John Wayne image of the man whose few words always have memorable impact. (Wayne’s delivery of lines really made an impression on rock and rollers. Wayne’s line in Stagecoach, “My friends call me Ringo,” made such an impression on the young Richard Starkey of Liverpool, England, that he became Ringo Starr of the Beatles. “That’ll be the day!” from The Searchers in 1956, gave Buddy Holly the title for one of his greatest hit songs.)

Wayne’s Ringo Kid role differs significantly from the post-war roles that have defined his iconic status in American life. The mature John Wayne of the 1940s through the 1970s plays mostly characters who are hardened, worldly men of relentless determination, capable of great violence, but always guided by a sense of integrity. Women are important, but respect and honor in the male world are his ultimate values. In Stagecoach, on the other hand, his character, though an escaped convict, is a sexual innocent, showing chivalry and tenderness to a hardened woman, the prostitute Dallas. Though honor-bound and determined to avenge the deaths of his father and brother, Wayne as the Ringo Kid is much more cooperative and passive with official authority than he would be in his later Western roles in movies like Fort Apache and The Searchers.

What John Wayne undeniably establishes in Stagecoach, though, is his extraordinary screen presence. He stands before the camera with a self-confident comfort few other actors
can match, and his movements literally flow with a rolling agility that makes everyone else in a given shot look stiff and tentative by comparison. *Stagecoach* also introduces Wayne’s unmatched style with the use of the rifle, his chosen weapon in most of his Westerns for the rest of his career. He wields a rifle with the same adroitness that others handle the pistol, yet he also is making a statement: he uses a weapon; he doesn’t need to wear it to define his identity; he can be a dangerous man, and kill if he has to, but he is not a gunslinger.

*Stagecoach*

*Stagecoach* has many of the standard elements of the Western genre: a running gun battle with dangerous Indians, the saloon as social center, and the climactic shoot-out. Like other great movies, though, *Stagecoach* transcends the stereotypes of genre. The expressive power of this movie is accomplished through two primary means: its extraordinary location cinematography and its socially conscious characterizations.

John Ford told Peter Bogdanovich in one of his rare interviews that he had discovered Monument Valley (in the Navajo Reservation on the border of Utah and Arizona) while traveling once to Santa Fe, New Mexico. The powerful expanse of the desert mesas is not only visually compelling in itself, but this awesome (and holy, according to the Indians) landscape also works wonderfully as a thematic contrast to the cramped stagecoach, overcrowded with the selfish concerns of petty humanity. Ford would make seven other color movies in the Valley, but impressive as they are, the deep focus black and white panoramas in *Stagecoach* are inimitable.

The ostensible source for *Stagecoach’s* narrative was a Western story in *Collier’s Magazine* by Ernest Haycox, called “Stage to Lourdsburg,” but the true source was a story by nineteenth century French author Guy de Maupassant called “Boule-de-Suif,” about a troubled coach trip in which the presence of a prostitute among the passengers draws out the worst human tendencies toward hypocrisy, exploitation, and cowardice. The title comes from the prostitute’s name, “Boule-de-Suif,” or, in English, “Suet Pudding.” For his part, Gary Wills insists that the movie reflects de Maupassant, both in tone and content, far more than the Haycox story. In his interview with Bogdanovich, Ford gave credit to Haycox, but said first, “It was really “Boule-de-Suif.””

In any event, *Stagecoach* is clearly a vehicle for social comment about inner virtue belying external appearance. All of the characters in the coach are placed there under one compulsion or another and the trip is not one any rational person ought to be taking under the threat of imminent Indian attack. Yet these extreme circumstances provide the crucible for the radical examination of character that the movie provides. There are no heroes and villains, so everyone is equally vulnerable from a melodramatic standpoint, and the ratio of each character’s strengths and weaknesses can shift with the situation.

In the literally wild West of *Stagecoach*, traditional social mores and the ideals of law and order through democratic governance are barely operative, so virtue has to be proved through actions rather than words. As the action unfolds, the characters most inclined toward verbal self-justification, Gatewood the banker and Hatfield the gambler, prove most morally compromised. Gatewood is nothing more than a thief, and Hatfield, for all his fine talk about honor, is willing to kill a defenseless woman to “save” her honor from the
Indians while the issue is still in doubt. (Ford would deal with this same moral question on an epic scale and in painful human depth seventeen years later in *The Searchers* and come to the same conclusion: preservation of human life and family are more important than sexual purity.) On the other hand, those who have been labeled immoral by either public opinion or the legal system—Dallas, the prostitute; Dr. Boone, the alcoholic doctor; and Ringo, the convict—show the greatest strength and virtue under the stress of the dangerous journey.

Once the survivors arrive in Lourdsburg, Ringo still has to confront the Plummer Brothers, who killed his family members and framed him for murder. The viciousness and vulgarity of Lourdsburg under the rule of the Plummer’s brute force is clearly evident; every image of the town is one of gambling, drinking, and prostitution. The Sheriff, understanding his own limitations as a law officer in a place so lawless, lends Ringo his rifle on Ringo’s word of honor that he will return to custody when his “business” is done. Up to this point, *Stagecoach* has scrupulously followed the Production Code then in force: Lucy Mallory’s pregnancy is neither physically shown nor directly spoken of, only non-fatal wounds are shown being physically received, and this same convention is used to heighten the suspense about the outcome of the final duel. At the end, though, according to Gary Wills, Ford ignored the attempted censorship of the Sheriff’s final gesture. The border beckons, and so does freedom from “the curse of civilization.” Life renews itself, having passed through violence and corruption to redemption.

**Works Cited**


Bogdanovich, a director of note himself (*The Last Picture Show, What's Up Doc?*) first met Ford in 1964 and obtained an unusual degree of access to him and his opinions. This book brings together this interview material with a complete filmography. Ford was never too personally or artistically revealing, even to a well-connected, well-informed interviewer like Bogdanovich, but the book does contain some valuable nuggets of information, as well as being a complete compendium of all the production information about Ford’s extant films.


One sentence should suffice. Anyone who cares about John Wayne’s career in particular or American movies in general should read this book.