

FILM

AN INTRODUCTION

ART

FOURTH EDITION

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telephones thus constitute a communications network that permits the narrative to be relayed from point to point.

But Hawks also visually and sonically orchestrates the characters' use of the phones. There are many variations. One person may be talking on the phone, or several may be talking *in turn* on different phones, or several may be talking *at once* on different phones, or a phone conversation may be juxtaposed with a conversation elsewhere in the room, and so on. In scene 11, there is a polyphonic effect of reporters coming in to phone their editors, each conversation overlapping with the preceding one. Later, in scene 13, while Hildy frantically phones hospitals, Walter screams into another phone. And when Bruce returns for Hildy, a helter-skelter din arises that eventually sorts itself into three soundlines: Bruce begging Hildy to listen, Hildy obsessively typing her story, and Walter yelling into the phone for Duffy to clear page one ("No, no, leave the rooster story—that's human interest!"). Like much in *His Girl Friday*, the telephones warrant close study for the complex and various ways in which they are integrated into the narrative, and for their contribution to the rapid tempo of the film.

■ STAGECOACH

1939. Walter Wanger Productions (released through United Artists). Directed by John Ford. Script by Dudley Nichols, from the short story "Stage to Lordsburg" by Ernest Haycox. Photographed by Bert Glennon. Edited by Dorothy Spencer and Walter Reynolds. Music by Richard Hageman, W. Franke Harling, John Leipold, Leo Shuken, Louis Gruenberg. With John Wayne, Claire Trevor, Thomas Mitchell, Andy Devine, George Bancroft, Donald Meek, Louise Platt, John Carradine, Berton Churchill.

Film theorist André Bazin has written of John Ford's *Stagecoach*: "*Stagecoach* (1939) is the ideal example of the maturity of a style brought to classic perfection. . . . *Stagecoach* is like a wheel, so perfectly made that it remains in equilibrium on its axis in any position." This effect results from the film's concentration on the creation of a tight narrative unity, with all of its elements serving that goal.

As in *His Girl Friday*, the narrative consumes a short stretch of story time—two days. The plot takes the word "stagecoach" (a coach traveling in stages, stopping along the way) literally and makes this the basis of its narrative divisions. The film's action consists of the progression of a stagecoach from its starting point to its destination, with the major scenes occurring at the places where the coach stops for meals and rest. Instead of a detailed segmentation of the film, a broader breakdown of the large-scale parts of the journey lets us bring out important aspects of the form's development:

First day

1. Cavalry receives word of Indian uprising.
2. In Tonto, the passengers board the stagecoach.
3. Conversations during the first part of the journey.
4. First stage stop: noon dinner and the word that there will be no escort.

5. Conversations during the second part of the journey.
6. Second stage stop: night. Lucy's baby is born; Ringo proposes to Dallas.

Second day

7. Morning: departure from the second stage stop.
8. Conversations during the third part of the journey.
9. Third stage stop: passengers discover burned ferry, float coach across river, are attacked and chased by Indians, and are rescued by the cavalry.
10. Arrival at Lordsburg; Ringo meets the Plummer brothers in a shoot-out.
11. Ringo and Dallas depart for Ringo's ranch.

The perfect balance of one part against another is apparent in this outline. At the very beginning and end, short scenes take place among the buttes of Monument Valley. Initially we see the cavalry riding and bringing the news that Geronimo is on the warpath. At the end, a single shot shows Ringo and Dallas riding through the valley toward their new life together. The film's second part takes place in the town of Tonto, where the passengers board the coach. The journey ends in Sequence 10, which reverses the second part; here the passengers disembark in Lordsburg, their destination. Here also the various goals these characters had set up for themselves are resolved.

Between these two points of departure and arrival, there are three sequences of travel along the road (parts 3, 5, and 8), each culminating in the arrival at one of the three stages, or stops, along the way. During the first stop, at Dry Fork, the passengers eat their noon meal. At the second, Apache Wells, they spend the night. The departure the next morning parallels the previous day's departure from the town; the pattern of parts 5-6 repeats that of parts 3-4.

As before, the departure scene leads to a new traveling phase, part 8. But after two repetitions of the travel-stage-stop pattern, the narrative introduces a major variation. When the coach arrives at the outpost for the third and final stage, East Ferry, the characters find it burnt by Indians. The coach crosses the river and goes on toward Lordsburg, but our expectation of a major scene at this point is not disappointed. In the formal position of the third stage stop, the Indians attack. After the chase and rescue, an ellipsis moves the narrative directly to Lordsburg, eliminating the last part of the journey.

The initial departure from Tonto (Segment 2) establishes the goals of most of the characters. Lucy Mallory is traveling to join her husband, who is in the cavalry. Mr. Peacock, a whiskey salesman, is on his way home to join his wife in Kansas City. The two leaders of the group are the driver, Buck, who also is going home to his family in Lordsburg, and the marshall, Curly, who goes along as guard to try to capture the Ringo Kid.

Two "undesirables"—Doc Boone, the local drunk, and Dallas, a prostitute—leave town on the same stagecoach, driven out by the "respectable"

elements of the town. Doc and Dallas have no definite goal, except to find a place where they will be allowed to stay. The gambler, Hatfield, also joins the group with no long-term goal of his own; he seeks to protect Lucy Mallory on her journey.

The narrative emphasizes two characters by having them board the coach later. Having stolen the payroll money deposited in his bank, Gatewood hails the coach on the street and gets in. Gatewood's purpose is to escape undetected. A short while after the coach leaves Tonto, it meets Ringo, who wants to get to Lordsburg to avenge himself on the Plummer brothers. He joins the group, under arrest by Curly.

Most of the significant causal developments in the plot come in the scenes at the two stage stops. In the first (Segment 4), the seating pattern at the table defines the social relationships. Within the group, Ringo and Dallas are both shunned as outcasts and hence are thrown together. Mr. Peacock defines himself as the weakling of the group by being the only one to vote to return to Tonto when they discover that no cavalry escort will be available beyond that stop.

The second stage stop (Segment 6) is the most important scene during the journey for its development of character relationships. Doc Boone and Dallas, the two undesirables, earn the admiration of the others by helping deliver Lucy's baby. At this point Ringo proposes marriage to Dallas.

Between the major sequences in the towns, the stages, and the Indian attack come three sequences of traveling through Monument Valley (parts 3, 5, and 8), each consisting of a number of similar short scenes. Each scene begins with a long shot or extreme long shot of the coach, often accompanied by the distinctive "stagecoach" musical motif. Several times, especially early in each sequence, this long shot is followed by a medium shot of the driver's seat, with Curly and Buck talking. These shots give snatches of exposition. For example, we learn that Curly is sympathetic to Ringo's revenge motives and that he is suspicious of Gatewood.

Each short scene also contains one or more shots inside the coach, with the passengers making conversation or exchanging glances. These interchanges tend to reestablish character traits and relations rather than move the action forward. Gatewood complains constantly; Boone filches drinks from Peacock's sample bag; Hatfield courteously assists Lucy's comfort. Several motifs enter into these characterizations. Boone's liquor contrasts with the canteen the women drink from, and the two valises belonging to Gatewood and Peacock also set up a contrast. The development of the characters' attitudes toward one another is also apparent. Before the birth of Lucy's baby, the other characters ignore Dallas; in later scenes they are relatively kind to her.

These numerous short scenes, strung together within the travel sequences, function to give a sense of the coach's progression. Dissolves link most of them, indicating the passage of time and the movement through space. Unlike *His Girl Friday*, *Stagecoach* has almost no scenes that end with dangling causes that "hook" over into the beginning of the next scene. Causes are introduced, but these tend to disappear for long stretches of the action. Thus early in the film Curly mentions that he sympathizes with Ringo's desire for revenge. This sympathy emerges only in the final scene, in which Curly lets Ringo go have his shoot-out with the Plummers. Because

most or all of the nine characters are present in almost every scene of the journey, *Stagecoach* has little need for dangling causes. The coach's journey itself provides the forward development of the action.

Much of the richness of *Stagecoach*'s narrative comes from the mixing of numerous characters with separate, sometimes contradictory goals. The rapid resolutions of the characters' goals on the arrival at Lordsburg give a strong sense of closure. Lucy learns that her husband, reported to have been wounded by Indians, is safe; Peacock survives his wound; Gatefield is arrested. Thus most of the strongly positive and negative characters are taken care of.

Other characters have had to prove their worth in the course of the action. Hatfield is a notorious gambler but proves himself to be a "gentleman" by protecting Lucy and dying in the battle with the Indians. Doc Boone has sobered up in order to deliver Lucy's baby; he also stands up to the Plummers in the tavern before the shoot-out. Indeed, at the end of the film the marshal offers Boone a drink. He replies, "Just one," suggesting that even he has been somewhat changed by his experiences on the trip.

The last section of the narrative focuses primarily on the fates of Dallas and Ringo. Of all the passengers Ringo was the last to enter the action. Now his goal of revenge determines the last portion of the plot, after most of the other characters have gone their ways. Dallas, who had no definite goal of her own, has gained one in her love for Ringo. His victory over the Plummers and the marshal's decision not to send him back to jail lead to the final resolution. Both Dallas and Ringo go free to start their new life together. The final long shot of their wagon moving along the road through Monument Valley recalls the beginning and the many long shots of the coach.

The style of *Stagecoach* helps create the repetitions and variations of this narrative action. We have indicated the repeated pattern of establishing long shots of the coach, interspersed with closer shots within the coach; these latter shots pick up the eyelines and gestures of the characters' conversations. We have already analyzed one outstanding use of offscreen sound in *Stagecoach*, in Chapter 8 (p. 309); you might examine other uses of sound in the film, along with their functions.

The film's use of deep space and deep focus is particularly outstanding. As we shall see in more detail in Chapter 11, the style of filming in Hollywood during the 1930s was generally a "shallow-" or "soft-focus" style. A few American films in the late 1930s began to experiment with deep focus, and *Stagecoach* was one of them. A number of shots in the second stage-stop sequence use deep focus along the corridor outside Lucy's room, as when Ringo watches Dallas go out into the yard (Fig. 10.1) or outside when he follows her (Fig. 10.2). Welles claimed to have watched *Stagecoach* many times before making *Citizen Kane*, the film usually credited with having introduced deep-focus photography; the similarities of lighting, mise-en-scene, and camera manipulations are apparent from these stills. Ford's cinematographer used wide-angle lenses to keep several planes in focus and to exaggerate perspective. The deep-focus shots make use of strong backlighting, which picks out Dallas and Ringo in the dark hallway and yard. The lighting is very different from the flat lighting used in most other scenes. This pattern of patches of light in darkness returns again in

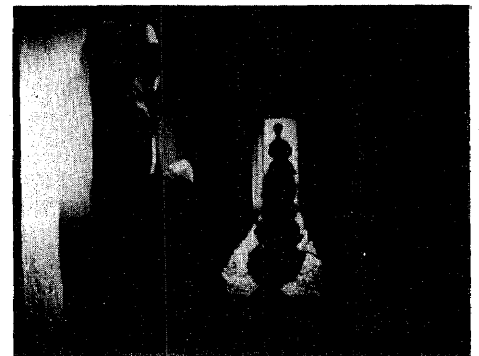


Fig. 10.1



Fig. 10.2



Fig. 10.3



Fig. 10.4

the Lordsburg sequence, when the plans the couple has made at the stage stop are finally made possible.

On the whole, Ford's editing style remains within the Hollywood continuity system. But it is worth noting that *Stagecoach's* editing is not always as "perfectly classical" as Bazin maintains. For example, the Indian attack violates screen direction. At times the coach and Indians move across the screen from left to right. At others they move right to left. Sometimes Ford uses a heads-on or tails-on shot to cross the line, in the accepted manner, but at other times he does not. At one point, Ringo starts to leap down onto the horses' backs to retrieve a lost rein. His leap begins in medium long shot, from right to left (Fig. 10.3). In the next shot he is moving left to right (Fig. 10.4).

These deviations show that violations of continuity rules do not always confuse the audience. The narrative context tells us that there is only one coach and one band of Indians chasing it in a straight line across a flat desert. As long as the filmmaker has sufficiently established the space and the moving elements, changes in screen direction should not be perplexing. It is usually only when we are uncertain about who is present and where the figures are in relation to one another that the violation of screen direction becomes confusing.

In spite of such lapses, *Stagecoach* remains an outstanding example of that classical unity of form and style that Bazin identified with 1930s Hollywood. Our discussions of *North by Northwest*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, and *Desperately Seeking Susan* will show that this tendency has continued to the present.

■ NORTH BY NORTHWEST

1959. MGM. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Script by Ernest Lehman. Photographed by Robert Burks. Edited by George Tomasini. Music composed by Bernard Hermann. With Cary Grant, Eva Marie Saint, James Mason, Leo G. Carroll, Jesse Royce Landis.

Hitchcock long insisted that he made thrillers, not mystery films. For him, creating a puzzle was less important than generating suspense and surprise. While there are important mystery elements in films like *Notorious* (1946), *Stage Fright* (1950), and *Psycho* (1960), *North by Northwest* stands as almost a pure example of Hitchcock's belief that the mystery element can serve as merely a pretext for intriguing the audience. The film's tight causal unity enables Hitchcock to create an engrossing plot that obeys the norms of classical filmmaking. This plot is presented through a narration that continually emphasizes suspense and surprise.

Like most spy films, *North by Northwest* has a complex plot, involving two major lines of action. In one line, a gang of spies mistakes advertising-agency executive Roger Thornhill for an American agent, George Kaplan. Although the spies fail to kill him, he becomes the chief suspect in a murder which the gang commits. He must flee the police while trying to track down the real George Kaplan. Unfortunately, Kaplan does not exist; he is only a decoy invented by the United States Intelligence Agency (USIA). Thornhill's