

MYTHIC SPACE AND MONUMENT VALLEY: ANOTHER LOOK AT JOHN FORD'S *STAGECOACH*

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Leonard Engel, Quinnipiac College

“Mythic space,” according to Richard Slotkin, describes a real place that has taken on, through its historical position, larger-than-life or mythic meanings. It is space so well known by readers or viewers of the Western that it needs only “a few simple clues” or signifiers to suggest both its real identity and its symbolic meaning. For example, following General George Custer’s movement on the Indians, 19th-century Americans knew “they saw a hero at once true to life and infused with a symbolic significance only fictive heroes possess. They knew he had gone to conquer a mythic region . . . held by a dark and savage enemy with whom white Americans must fight a war . . . with the future of civilization itself as the stake.” In such a place, “Custer’s . . . face-to-face meeting with the Enemy would have seemed the fulfillment of a destiny [our Manifest Destiny] or fate, pregnant with meaning.” This “Custer Territory” has become the “landscape of Myth,” and his “Last Stand . . . part of a renewed and revised Myth of the Frontier” (Slotkin 11-12), a myth that bolted with full steam into the 20th century, initiating and powerfully sustaining the Western film genre.

Other well-known western landscapes have become closely identified with the genre and can also be defined as mythic space. The awesome visual imagery of the West has provided not only the setting for drama, but also a place for the enactment of oppositions traditionally found in the genre—that is, civilization versus savagery, community versus wilderness, culture versus nature, and, more specifically, settlers versus Indians. When we see cinematic images of stark and startling landscapes with towering peaks, deep valleys, and empty, lonely,

immense spaces, the oppositions take on dramatic immediacy. These vast wilderness spaces give a sense of wonder and sublime beauty, suggesting openness and freedom. At the same time, the vastness is empty, a wasteland, a place of both physical and spiritual testing leading either to death or redemption. Focusing on the diverse imagery of Monument Valley, John Ford has created a signature landscape that might well be understood as mythic space.

For the aficionado of Westerns, particularly Ford's Westerns, no genre landscape is so "pregnant with meaning"—both literally and mythically—as that of Monument Valley, dramatically depicted in *Stagecoach*, the first Western he filmed there. "Photographed with opulence," Tag Gallagher claims, the valley "became a defining element in Ford's harsh, stony West through nine subsequent appearances. But even this first time, the valley is not simply a valley, but a valley melodramatized; and the coach is not simply a coach, but the historic mythos of 'the West'" (146). Furthermore, the topography so perfectly embodies, according to Mark Siegel, "the complex mixture of epic grandeur and savage hostility" (159), revealing how the wilderness can break individuals down, but then subsequently can cause a regeneration in their personalities if they have the strength and courage to persevere. The way Ford manipulates the remarkable landscape of Monument Valley in relation to the people in the stage and to the themes he is treating marks him not only as a highly accomplished film director, but as one who is squarely in the American literary tradition stemming back to the early 19th century. I would like to linger on this notion briefly and then examine some key scenes from *Stagecoach*.

Similar to some of our great literary artists, Ford often fashions his plot and characters around a series of contrasts, effectively dramatized through imagery of space and openness, on one hand, and confinement and enclosure, on the other. In *Stagecoach*, as Carl Bredahl has pointed out, Ford focuses "our attention on the tiny, fragile enclosure carrying individuals of distinct social classes through a barren, threatening landscape" (149). The enclosed passengers, traversing the

vast space of that immense valley, experience at once the strictures and discomfort of confinement and the fear and terror of agoraphobia. The tiny stagecoach and the open landscape of Monument Valley juxtapose the enclosed and open space, and through such imagery, I will argue, Ford suggests the gradual regeneration of the prostitute Dallas and the escaped convict the Ringo Kid. The imagery thus heightens the allegorical nature of the trip the stage makes—from civilization to the primitive wilds, and back to civilization. In this symbolic journey into the wilderness "heart of darkness" (McDougal 314), the passengers are tested, reduced to their basic natures, and reveal their inner selves—their true identities. J.A. Place has pointed out how the:

film is a classic parable of a "journey into hell"—the hero (in this case the group) must undertake a journey that brings him face to face with mirror images of his own weaknesses and flaws, but in the form of powerful obstacles for him to overcome before he can pass through his hell and emerge, cleansed and reborn, into the light. In mythology the setting is often a real hell... The descent and ascent are actual, whereas in later literature they are symbolic. The function of myth remains the same—to affirm the value of life in the face of its own weaknesses, which lead inevitably to death. (32)

The stage's movement, then, becomes not only a struggle to survive the wilderness, but an epic journey of sorts, one that pares down the false self and moves toward revelation and true selfhood. Philip Skerry has carefully noted the changes Ford and script writer Dudley Nichols made to the Ernest Haycox short story "Stage to Lordsburg," on which the film is based. Generally these changes, Skerry writes, point to a regeneration of the characters (88), most notably, Dallas's and Ringo's. Their escape from civilization at the end of the film suggests

not only their discovery of love and a new life together, but a sense of selfhood for each not seen earlier.

In dramatizing the journey theme, Ford is tapping one of the main themes in American literature, depicted in images of enclosure and openness. Our earliest novelist, Charles Brockden Brown, writing at the end of the 18th century, recounted his coming of age story first of Arthur Mervyn (through a series of diverse enclosures), and slightly later of Edgar Huntly (through a major enclosure of a cave). In the middle of the 19th century, Melville wrote of another journey of discovery and search for identity, placing Ishmael in the confined quarters of the Pequod sailing into the unknown on that vast ocean. Still later in our literary history, Mark Twain, using a tiny raft containing Huck and Jim floating down the open Mississippi, portrayed the same theme of discovery and selfhood. And in the 20th century, William Faulkner has Ike McCaslin in *Co Down*, *Moses* immerse himself (become enclosed) in the “big woods” before he can be privileged to see the bear and become a true hunter.

These characters (and, of course, others) take a literal and spiritual journey into mythic space; they leave society, venture into the unknown, then return to society, and if they survive their ordeal, they are changed people. They have made a symbolic descent into self, have struggled with the dark night of their soul, so to speak, seeking a deeper self and acknowledging a more profound awareness. These fictional journeys have been rendered, for the most part, through the contrasting imagery of enclosure and space. John Ford, in depicting the small stage in the expanse of Monument Valley, is dramatizing mythic space in cinematic images of enclosure and openness that are part of this enduring literary tradition which has created mythic space in similar images for almost 200 years.

Edgar Allan Poe—not mentioned above but of crucial importance not only in dramatizing mythic space through enclosures but in theorizing about it as well—in an essay titled “The Philosophy of Composition,” wrote, “A close

circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incidents:—it has the force of a frame to a picture.” What Poe meant by “circumscription of space,” I believe, was simply an enclosure, any sort of physical confinement that restricts a character to a particular area and limits his freedom. That Poe intended this confinement to have a certain power over narrative action is indicated by the phrases “insulated incident” and “the force of a frame to a picture” (204). The force of a frame to a picture—I’m not sure John Ford ever read that line, but he certainly used with remarkable effect the image of the frame in many films, especially those set in Monument Valley, and most especially those scenes that juxtapose a small enclosure with vast space. One thinks of the many images in *My Darling Clementine* and *The Searchers* where the framing device is used; *Stagecoach* is filled with such images—they heighten suspense and intensify the action.

While the framing device is particularly effective during the journey sequences and dramatically emphasizes the series of contrasts between space and enclosure, the initial scenes in *Stagecoach* establish the pattern of contrast and embody the major themes of the film. The opening reveals these scenes, according to Christine Saxton’s “reading” (36-41): the coach, an image of civilization transporting goods and people across a hostile desert land; the land, dry, flat, endless, but filled with the towering, immense, perpendicular pinnacles, which dwarf both the coach in the first scene and the cavalry in the next; the cavalry, in full dress riding in formation—an organized, structured, protective force; and the Indians, fearsome, barely dressed, riding in no particular formation—the antithesis of the cavalry. Finally, the music provides yet another contrast in these first five scenes and, in fact, throughout the film. The sad “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie,” suggestive of danger and death on the harsh, primitive landscape, is heard when we first see the stage and is juxtaposed against the nostalgic poignancy of “I Dream of Jeanie,” which is heard when the cavalry appears. The sensitive, lyrical quality of this latter melody, however, also suggests

another irony about society. During the course of the film, the song will be associated with Mrs. Mallory, implying that she is one of the values society holds dear. However, the evocative, dreamy quality of the Jeanie in the song is in sharp contrast to the real Mrs. Mallory in the film, who is abrupt, judgmental, and very much a representative of the unchristian views of the law and order league in Tonto. In her treatment of Dallas, she elicits little of our sympathy until near the end.

Thus Ford, through these contrasts at the beginning, establishes the oppositions he will dramatize in the course of his narrative; the main one, of course, being the vast spaciousness of the forbidding landscape versus the slow advance of civilization symbolized by the coach. In the film, Ford will sustain this opposition through a variety of devices. However, he is not presenting civilization as perfect, or even admirable; recall that the good, Christian women of Tonto are ridding their town of the prostitute Dallas, while the tippler Doc is being forced out because he can't pay his bills. This theme of the ills of over-civilization is re-emphasized by Doc at the very end when he remarks, as Ringo and Dallas head out for the open territory, that they thus will be saved from the "blessings" of civilization. So while the stagecoach does represent encroaching civilization, there is ambivalence about that civilization. As Gallagher has noted, "contrast and ambivalence" (152) create some of the film's most dramatic and, one might add, satiric moments.

Certainly the "blessings" of civilization infect the society of Tonto where Ford's satire is clearly evident. Contrary to this society, however, the motley group he assembles on the stage is another matter; it does hold the potential for change and regeneration. Each character is depicted with deft precision. Lindsay Anderson has pointed out how Ford presents each "with a sharpness, an eye for detail and interplay of personality, which gives continual colour and variety to the steadily mounting tension of the action" (97).

This tension also comes about, as I have suggested, through Ford's use of contrast, opposition, and irony—sometimes between characters, sometimes within the same character. The most obviously contrasting characters are the highly respectable Southern gentlewoman Mrs. Mallory, married to a cavalry officer, and the woman of easy virtue, Dallas, whom nearly everyone rejects. Opposition and irony within the same character include Doc Boone, a drunken, ne'er-do-well doctor who successfully delivers Mrs. Mallory's baby under extremely difficult conditions. Gatewood, the banker who appears to be a pillar of society and utters platitudes about America, turns out to be a thief, stealing his own community's money. Peacock, a meek, little man who appears to be a minister, is, in fact, a whiskey salesman who unwittingly keeps Doc well supplied throughout the journey. Buck, the stage driver, a comic character, despite the Indian attack, manages (with help from Ringo) to bring the stage through the ordeal safely. Marshall Curly, appearing gruff, commanding, and authoritarian, insists on following democratic procedures—rational discourse and voting—to determine the course of action they will follow. Hatfield, the shady gambler with a checkered past, apparently was born into an old, respectable Virginia Family. And finally Ringo, the escaped convict intent on revenge by killing, is (along with Dallas) the most sympathetic and caring. He later performs risky, but courageous, actions for the good of the group.

Other ironies are evident: The cavalry, which the passengers thought was to accompany them to Lordsburg, is only going to protect them for part of the journey; and the telegraph, meant to bring effective communication to the frontier, is depicted as an instrument of unclear and misleading information.

It is the stage, of course, that focuses the ironies and contrasts and that emphasizes Ford's most effective visual device—that of the juxtaposition of enclosed space with open space. The stage is where this untidy group comes together and, despite their conflicts and disputes, learns to settle their differences democratically, meld their oppositions, and pull together in order to survive.

They must survive, first, the hostile indifference of the harsh landscape through which they pass. Second, they must endure (or at least Mrs. Mallory must) under frontier conditions, the stress of childbirth, which occurs in the dark, low-ceilinged rooms of the log house in Apache Wells. Finally, they must survive the fierce Indian attack, which they do without the help of the cavalry, until the end.

In the first of these phases when the stage leaves Tonto and begins its trek across the desert, heading for Lordsburg, we see the vehicle from a long angle shot, and it is tiny—virtually swallowed up by space and the monoliths. But then Ford shows the enclosed stage, focusing in close on the characters, and they are not tiny at all but have a largeness and individuality and reveal a human community inside the stage, balanced against the force of nature outside, which we are constantly reminded of through the windows. Ford has created a human landscape (within the stage) that he juxtaposes against the natural landscape we see through the windows and from distance shots while the stage traverses the valley. As the camera carefully studies each passenger—his body, face, demeanor, usually from a low angle—the persona of each begins to acquire the enduring and substantial presence of the outside monoliths. Ford shoots these interior scenes in closed form, that is, the images are rich in texture and contrast, especially light and dark; the compelling visual effects depend on balance and control and are carefully designed within the confines of the frame. Space is enclosed and self-contained rather than continuous. But, ironically, through the windows of the stage, the viewer is given the sense of open form (Giannetti 475, 481), which exploits the frame quite differently. In the necessarily limited shots of Monument Valley through the windows of the coach, space is continuous, emphasizing the continuity of the natural landscape outside the frame and, of course, reinforcing the importance of this landscape beyond the formal edges of the composition.

At first the humans appear isolated, mysterious, self-absorbed, similar to their outside counterparts, and when they speak, it is to haggle, argue, and defend

themselves. We see, in other words, evidence of the oppositions and ironies mentioned earlier. But as time passes, their defenses break down; they come together and communicate more humanly—at least some do. In fact, Ford has created two kinds of landscape: that outside the stage—indifferent, unchanging, immutable nature, signalled by Monument Valley; and that inside the stage—the human community, humans photographed with the largeness of the outside monoliths, but gradually showing not only their flexibility for survival but also their capacity for change and growth. As Place points out “through contact with the others, each character is revealed, and through his part, each helps reveal the others” (33). Thus, under the pressures of confinement in the stage, each individual’s inner nature gradually unfolds, and his true self appears. Ford’s artistic juxtaposing of this interior, enclosed, human landscape against the exterior, natural, open landscape infuses and intensifies the movement toward self-discovery.

The second phase of the coach’s journey, the time spent at the stage stop where Mrs. Mallory’s baby is born, highlights the regeneration of Doc Boone—his delivery of the baby—and Dallas—her unselfish care of Mrs. Mallory and her love for the baby. It also establishes the possibility of a union between Ringo and Dallas, with whom Ringo has begun to fall in love. Doc renounces his past, his drinking habit, at least temporarily—he literally vomits it up in order to practice the good medicine of which he is capable. In these small, shadowy, inhospitable, barely lit rooms—where one feels the constant weight of the ceiling and the pressure of diminishing space—Ford has created another interior landscape, bathed in sharp contrasts of light and shade, where people have to quell differences and settle disputes democratically. In effect, they have to put aside their weaknesses and petty concerns and work together to prepare for the birth of the baby. Ultimately, Doc and Dallas rise above their old selves and perform nobly. As he did with the scenes inside the stage, Ford balances this interior, enclosed landscape against the outside, natural landscape, which is not

revealed during this phase of the film, but, nevertheless, whose presence and power are felt, especially as the space inside the cabin diminishes. A final opposition occurs in the concluding scenes of this phase with Ringo's attempted escape, which is thwarted by his realization that there is no place to go. In the midst of this immense openness, ironically, there is nowhere to hide; space is everywhere, but escape is illusory. The Indians, part of the landscape, surround them, and the open land, which seems to offer freedom, does not.

In the last phase of the film, when the Indians attack, Ford again juxtaposes the interior of the coach with exterior space, but in a more complex way. In this final flight of the stage and the deadly struggle with the Indians that ensues, the mythic space that Ford established earlier, through the outer landscape, intrudes on the "civilized" space of the human landscape inside the coach. When the Indian arrow from outside pierces the inner space of the community and strikes the unsuspecting Peacock, the epic battle, anticipated by the initial scenes of the film—the ones featuring the landscape, the stage, the cavalry, and the Indians—is on. That the dichotomy between the enclosure of the stage and the openness of the outer landscape is severely threatened and begins to break down is clear, and the space inside the coach becomes highly vulnerable, no longer the refuge it once appeared to be. However, if outside space penetrates the coach, inside space symbolically extends outward. Ringo climbs out one of the windows onto the roof, making a better target, but also giving himself more freedom of movement to fire at the Indians. In addition, those inside who can shoot—for example, Doc Boone and Hatfield—lean out the windows in order to get better aim. However, what the dissolving of outer and inner space will ultimately lead to, we know too well, is the tragic deaths of those inside the coach. Ford's images slowly but inevitably suggest the approaching dissolution, especially as the passengers run out of ammunition and as Hatfield saves one bullet for Lucy Mallory in case the Indians capture her alive, emphasizing, again, one of the ironies of

"civilization"—Hatfield would rather kill her than have her be submitted to what he thinks the Indians will do to her.

Through the intense faces dramatically framed by the windows of the coach, Ford's cinematography continues to remind us of their desperate predicament: How will they survive and will the mythic space of the stage remain intact? The answer, of course to both questions is yes; they do survive (except for Hatfield) and the enclosure of the stage does remain intact, but not inviolable. In a sly reversal of fate, Hatfield is killed by Indian fire—an ironic gift from outside space—for if he hadn't been struck at the instant he was, he would have killed Lucy to preserve her from violation. Clearly, the more dangerous threat to her comes from inside the stage rather than outside. The Indians, in effect, have saved her life, particularly with the arrival at nearly the same time as Hatfield's death, of the cavalry, a *deus ex machine*, who drive off the Indians and escort the beleaguered passengers safely to Lordsburg—deliver them to the Lord, so to speak.

However, their entering Lordsburg constitutes yet another irony; the name, in fact, suggests salvation and is meant to represent civilization as opposed to the wild desert through which the stage has recently passed. But the images Ford shows of the town contradict the name. For example, the officious, haughty townswomen, ignoring the unselfish Dallas, usher Lucy Mallory and her baby off to safety, while Lucy, herself realizing Dallas's kindness, is completely ineffectual in her offer to return the favor. In their unchristian actions, the townswomen differ little from their starved counterparts back in Tonto.

Other images Ford shows of Lordsburg reveal it to be decadent and evil as well. The streets are narrow and twisty, enclosed by shadows and distorted buildings, and the figures are distinct and ambiguous and appear untrustworthy. The oppressive darkness is occasionally pierced by lurid streams of light flashing forth from the windows and doors of saloons. The evening silence is punctuated by raucous laughter and the strains of a honky-tonk piano, which contrasts

sharply with the symphonic orchestra heard in the chase scenes. Lordsburg appears a dramatic inversion of its name, Ford's creation of a frontier Inferno. In effect, it could be the western equivalent of the New England town that Robin—experiencing an initiation and loss of innocence—enters, searching for his kinsman in Hawthorne's fine tale, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." But while Robin, entering his underworld, merely joins in the communal ridicule of his kinsman Molineux, Ringo, who has come to Lordsburg for revenge, must contend with, and finally subdue, the forces of evil in his.

The evil in Lordsburg is Ford's most pointed irony. This town of the Lord is clearly more treacherous than the desert wilds which the stage and its passengers have just passed through, at least for Ringo, and the Plummers are more murderous than the Indians. When we see them in their habitat—the smoky, unfriendly saloon with its stifling atmosphere—we feel the imminent danger, and we realize that Ford has created a wilderness landscape within this "civilized" town. This symbolism is reinforced when the Plummers leave the enclosure of the saloon and walk into the street looking for Ringo. Once outside, however, they are not, as one might think, in open space, but are more enclosed than they were in the saloon. Ford films the shootout sequence in darkness and shadow, and the shapes of the buildings, revealed in expressionistic distortion, merely serve to reinforce the constricting enclosure in which the violence takes place. The effect is one that allows Ford to concentrate on the bodies of his characters and intensify the emotions on their faces, as he did on the faces inside the stagecoach. In short, the Plummers and Ringo become human monoliths, groping dangerously toward one another in the darkness.

The gradual tension of this darkened, frightening enclosure is finally climaxed when Ringo, approaching them slowly, haltingly, suddenly lunges to the ground, while firing, and kills all three (with three bullets!) in a single, swift motion. Although not part of the town and certainly not recognized as heroic, Ringo is Ford's hero, and ironically, the Lord's as well. For Ringo acts as an avenging

angel, bringing justice to Lordsburg where the law and its designated representatives could not. His reward for ridding the town of these murderers is a new life with Dallas. No longer considered a criminal by the marshal! (Ringo has done the Lord's work, after all), he is not returned to prison, but is allowed (with Dallas, who also leaves her old life in Lordsburg) to escape across the border to the free and open landscape on which his partially built ranch lies.

Thus, Ringo and Dallas leave their old selves behind and enter a new life—not unlike Huck Finn at the end of his narrative—outside the strictures and enclosed space of "civilized" towns. However, despite the personal benefits for Ringo and Dallas, their escape from the "blessings of civilization," as Doc has called them, should not necessarily be viewed as a happy ending in terms of Ford's own view of the West. Gallagher believes the film to be a "cynical verdict on the notion of the West as synthesis of nature and civilization" (161) contrary to the optimistic themes concerning the West that many Westerns during the 1930s were stressing.

Nevertheless, Ford has rendered this classic theme of discovering selfhood and the journey motif integral ingredients of American literature, in dramatic landscape imagery, juxtaposing the mythic enclosure of the stage with the mythic space of Monument Valley. He will use this imagery of enclosed and open space in his later, more mature Westerns, becoming much more sophisticated with the device: frames of various kinds dominate many scenes in *My Darling Clementine* and *The Searchers*. However, in *Stagecoach* his use of this imagery to reinforce his theme and character is powerfully and artistically realized and marks him not only as a highly gifted filmmaker, but as one who effectively uses the patterns and devices of our important literary artists.

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