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## THE WESTERN: "STAGECOACH" AS AN ADVANCE IN THE GENRE

Sema Zafer SÜMER \*

### ÖZET

Kendine özgü biçim ve oluşturulma tarzları ile Amerikan mitosunun ve öncülük ruhunun yansıması haline dönüşen klasik western sinemasının ilk örneklerinden Posta Arabası (Stagecoach) adlı filmin okunması ve Batının ikonlaşan yalnız kahramanının filmdeki geleneksel rolü ve yolculuğunun analizi bu çalışmanın ana konusunu oluşturur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Western Sineması, Amerikan Öncülük Ruhu, Yalnız kahraman, Posta Arabası

### ABSTRACT

Western stories are the American mythology. The rich folktales and myths of the Wild West fueled the true American film genre. Westerns are action. It weaves moral tales of good and bad, played out against the sweeping landscape of the American Frontier. In this study, one of the classics of this genre, "Stagecoach" is read and a western icon, the Loner Hero and his traditional role in the classic western story are analyzed.

**Keywords:** Western Movies, The American Frontier, The Loner Hero, Stagecoach.

The Western is without question the richest and most enduring genre of Hollywood's repertoire. It is the only genre whose origins are almost identical with those of the cinema itself and which is as alive as ever after almost half a century of uninterrupted success. Western films are America's the one and only contribution to the body of mythic lore which most of people all around the world are familiar to. As Jim Kitses, a film scholar and director of critical studies at the American Film Institute, says "there is nothing more familiar in the movies than this little scene":

*A deserted street in the old West. Two men at opposite ends of town step out from the boardwalk and face each other. Their hands suspended above the six-guns strapped to their hips, they walk forward, coldly eyeing each other. "That's far enough" one shouts, and then they stand. There is complete silence and no movement; then they go for their guns, shots ring out, and a man lies dead. Curious townspeople now appear to gawk at the body ... (1)*

The Western films consist of stories and character types as rich and fascinating and as susceptible of near infinite variation as the medieval tales of King Arthur and his knights. The Western film genre, as George N. Fenin wrote, makes "a universal appeal to the universal imagination. It is the only aspect of the American cinema that is really understood in Rome, Moscow, Tokyo, Bangkok, Sydney, Cairo, and Buenos Aires." (2).

One of the famous star of the Western films, John Wayne, comments on the subject by saying:

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*Every country in the world loved the folklore of the West, the music, the dress, the excitement, everything that was associated with the opening of a new territory: It took everybody out of their own little world. The cowboy lasted a hundred years, created more songs and prose and poetry than any other folk figure .. (3)*

Most of American scholars who studies the subject of the Western films, generally have a tendency to consider the Westerns' function as that of the epics: they translate national experience into popular images. The famous French critic Andre Bazin says that "we found at the source of the epic and even of tragedy. The western is in the epic category because of the superhuman level of its heroes and the legendary magnitude of their feats of valor." (4)

Not only Andre Bazin but also I. C. Jarvie, another scholar and film critic, while examining the question "what is a western?" stresses the same fact:

*... traditionally, the first western film has always been said to be Edwin S. Porter's "The Great Train Robbery". A simple crime story (the robbery of a train), it is a western because of its setting, the American West. But the western is more than its setting: it is also the issues and the kind of men to be found facing the issues ... Westerns form far and away the greatest single genre of film output: they seem to exercise a permanent fascination for writers, directors, actors and audience alike. (5)*

And also James Kitses has demonstrated in his study of the western, **Horizon West**, "...the western is not so much of a matter of good vs evil as wilderness vs civilization within those extremes are three others: the individual vs the community, nature vs. culture, West vs. East." (6) If we want to understand the Western as an artistic language, we must attend to what we actually see in Western movies. In seeing these films, one picks up an enormous amount of knowledge about sociology of the West, as it was, and as it is interpreted by film makers: For example, the deep conflicts about the Indian wars and about fencing in the range. Another thing one learns is that the establishment of law and order in new territories was a slow and hazardous business. One also learns that the cattle farmers needed vast spreads and unrestricted access to water holes and no wire against which cattle could hurt themselves. And in a situation where a man was alone against the world, the imputation of his honour was something that could not be allowed, and a man without cattle was ruined, a man without a horse was helpless. Just as a trivial theft like rustling or horse stealing was punishable by death, because it so disrupted the economy and the society. One can learn that the whole tradition of drawing one's gun against another was a substitute for law and order and disputes had to be settled and the easiest and cleanest way was to shoot it out. And also one can learn from western film a great deal about how the United States reneged on its reservation deals with the Indians, how the reservations were reduced, how armed whites were allowed to trap them.

So, there has been a lot to be learned from watching the western film that gave way to the impulse to exploit the past as means of examining the values

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and attitudes of contemporary America. But, we see that although its life span has been as long and carried as Hollywood's own, the early westerns tended to be simple, and not especially western. They were about the hunters and tappers who explored the West, the wagon trainers who tried to cross it, and the cattlemen who ranched it. And the themes of them tended mainly to centre on man versus nature: his natural hardships, including the country itself, and the marauding Indians.

During the Depression, as Hollywood moved into the sound era, the historical epics, which had dominated mainstream Western film productions in the teens and "20s" faded from the screen, and the genre survived primarily in the form of low-budget "B" productions. These films rounded out the newly introduced double features and also served to provide John Wayne, who made dozens of these "B" Westerns, with considerable acting experience. Occasional Westerns like "The Virginian" (1929), "Cimarron" (1930), and "The Plainsman" (1936) attracted the attention of mass audiences, but both the technical restriction of early "talkies" and Hollywood's preoccupation during the '30s with contemporary urban themes effectively pushed the Western out of mainstream production.

The Western returned to widespread popularity in the late 1930s. The growing historical distance from the actual West along with developments in film technology, especially a quieter, more mobile camera and more sophisticated sound recording techniques gave the genre new life. In 1939, **Stagecoach** which was directed by John Ford –one of America's greatest directors who dominates the genre...- became a milestone in Hollywood film production and raised Westerns to a higher artistic level and became both a critical and a popular success. An outstanding early Western, **Stagecoach** was really different from the earlier silent Westerns and their later low-budget counterparts with the understanding of the logic of sending the Westerner "into the sunset" after the requisite showdown. As Andre Bazin wrote:

*Stagecoach is the ideal example of the maturity of a style brought to classic perfection. John Ford struck the ideal balance between social myth, historical reconstruction, psychological truth, and the traditional theme of the western mise en scene. None of these elements dominated any other. Stagecoach is like a wheel, so perfectly made that it remains in equilibrium on its axis in any position. (7)*

John Ford's **Stagecoach** opens with a shot of Monument Valley –the genre's most familiar icon that awe some stone formations reach up to the gods but the desolate soil around them is scarcely suitable for the rural-agricultural bounty which provided America's socioeconomic foundation. It marks the debut of Monument Valley in the Western genre, a fitting arena for the most engaging and thematically complex of all prewar Westerns. Eventually we hear two riders approaching from across the desert and then see them coming toward us. As the riders move toward the cavalry camp, its tents, flagstaves, and soldiers are seen on the screen. They gallop into the camp, dismount, and rush into the post. In the next shot, a group of uniformed men huddle around a

telegraph machine. Just before the lines go dead, the telegraph emits a single coded word. "Gerenimo". As some of the critics said; this sequence not only sets the thematic and visual tone for Ford's film with economy of action and in striking visual terms, but also reflects the basic cultural and physical conflicts which traditionally have characterized the Western form. As Fenin and Eversone wrote:

*In Hollywood's version the West is a vast wilderness dotted with occasional oases- frontier towns, cavalry posts, isolated compounds, and so forth- which are linked with one another and with the civilized East by the railroad, the stagecoach, the telegraph: society's tentacles of progress. Each oasis is a virtual society in microcosm, plagued by conflicts both with the external, threatening wilderness and also with the anarchic or socially corrupt members of its own community. (8)*

Ford's **Stagecoach** is journeying to Lordsburg through hostile Indian country. The coach is loaded with passengers of various social classes, who have to get along with each other in tight and tense quarters. John Wayne (Ringo) plays an escaped prisoner seeking revenge on the man who killed his father and brother. Claire Trevor (Dallas) is an apparent prostitute, and is shunned by the other passengers. John Carradine is a notorious gambler who is risking his life to serve as escort for proud Louise Pratt, who is traveling to meet her officer husband. There is also an alcoholic doctor, Doc Boone, (Thomas Mitchell, who won Best Supporting Actor), an unlucky liquor salesman, Donald Meek, and an aging banker, Berton Churchill, who is skipping town with the embezzled deposits.

As some of the critics said; in this film, as in the Western generally, the conflicts within the community reflect and intensify those between the community and its savage surroundings. The dramatic intensity in **Stagecoach** only marginally relates to disposition of the hero, whose antisocial status is not basic to his character but results from society's lack of effective order and justice. Wayne portrays the Ringo Kid as a naive, moral man of the earth who takes upon himself the task of righting that social and moral imbalance. He is also living manifestation of the Western's basic conflicts. Like the sheriff who bends the law to suit the situation, the banker who steals from his own bank, the kindly whore, or the timid moralizer who sells whisky. Ringo must find his own way through an environment of contrary and ambiguous demands.

The passengers in **Stagecoach** representative. Because of their ambiguous social status, they are on the periphery of the community and somehow are in contrast with its value system. Each of the three central figures of **Stagecoach** -Ringo, Doc Boone, and Dallas- is an outcast who has violated society's precepts in order to survive: Ringo is an accused murderer and escaped convict sworn to take the law into his own hands, while Doc Boone has turned to alcohol and Dallas to prostitution to survive on the frontier.

In the film, we are introduced to Dallas and Doc Boone as they are being driven out of town by the ladies, a group of puritanical, civic minded women dedicated to upholding community standards. According to some film critics;

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this scene is played for both comic and dramatic effect, but it does establish conformity and Victorian moralizing as elements of a well ordered society. According to Fenin and Eversome.

*Ford establishes both his characters and his dominant themes by tracing the travelers reactions to a variety of familiar events that emphasize many of society's values: the democratic balloting to decide whether to press on in the face of Indian attacks; a group meal in which seating arrangements and body language indicate the social status and attitudes of the participants; the unexpected birth of a baby to one of the travelers..." (9)*

In the film, **Stagecoach**, the childbirth sequence is really important although it is complicating the journey's progress. During the childbirth, the characters- Ringo, Doc Boone and Dallas- add a moral and humanistic dimension to the stagecoach's world by trying to do their best -Doc Boone sobers up and successfully delivers the baby. Dallas cares for the mother and child through the night- as if they are verifying their heroic credentials. As Andre Bazin wrote:

*John Ford's Stagecoach, which is a fine dramatic illustration of the parable of the pharisee and the publican, demonstrates that a prostitute can be more respectable than the narrow-minded people who drove her out of town and just as respectable as an officer's wife; that a dissolute gambler knows how to die with all the dignity of an aristocrat; that an alcoholic doctor can practice his profession with competence and devotion; that an outlaw who is being sought for the payment of past and possibly future debts can show loyalty, generosity, courage, and refinement. whereas a banker of considerable standing and reputation runs off with the cashbox, (10)*

In the film, as Dallas shows the newborn child the group, we come across a silent union which is formed by Dallas and Ringo. As some of the critics said; with this silent exchange. Ford isolates Ringo, Dallas, and the child as a veritable "holy family" of the frontier. At the end of the film, after taking his revenge, Ringo and Dallas are finally allowed by the sheriff to flee to Ringo's ranch across the border. As the two ride away to begin a new life together, Ford again stresses the same subject; the family that brings together Westerner (the uncivilized outlaw hero) and women (practicing society's oldest profession) and offers the promise of an ideal frontier community, (the American West's new world) with the utterance of Doc Boone: "Well, they're saved from the blessings of civilization". (11)

Though **Stagecoach** often criticized as being clichéd or conventional, today it is considered among Hollywood's greatest Western with its Western hero and his particular role within the Western community. As Howard Rushmore, a film critic of The Daily Worker, states that Ford has done wonders with the material in the script. And he adds that there isn't anything new about a motley array of humans in a bus or airplane or stagecoach having a lot of trouble together, but

as in “It Happened One Night” the result is perfect drama. And each character is a vivid one, sharply etched under the masterful Ford directional chisel.

So, Ford’s arrangement of community’s complex, contradictory valves renders **Stagecoach** a truly distinctive film, setting it apart both dramatically from earlier Westerns. And also its skillful characterizations and relationship between the characters which is the heart of the film gives John Ford, its director, a running start at his audience. As Jim Kitses says:

*We, the audience can only hope that these men (directors like John Ford and the others who follow) will continue to do so, that this vigorous artistic tradition that began so long ago with the Great Train Robbery will remain a dependable source of entertaining and enriching experiences” (12)*

In short, **Stagecoach**, an epic of The Old West is a powerful good motion picture and it will be long remembered with its vivid characters who project idealized national images for Americans of 1939.

#### NOTES

- (1) Stoples, “The American Cinema”, p. 311.
- (2) Graham “Western Movies”. P.10.
- (3) Wayne, “America, Why I Love Her”, p. Internet.
- (4) Bazin, “What is cinema?”, vol.II, p. 147.
- (5) Jarvie, “Movies and Society”, p. 156.
- (6) Dick, “Anatomy of film”, p. 89.
- (7) Bazin, “What is Cinema?”, Vol.II, p. 149.
- (8) Fenin and Eversone, “The Western; ....”, p. 49.
- (9) Ibid, p. 67.
- (10) Bazin, “What is Cinema?”, Vol.II, p. 146.
- (11) Dick, “Anatomy of film?”, p. 90
- (12) Staples, “The American Cinema”, p. 325.

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