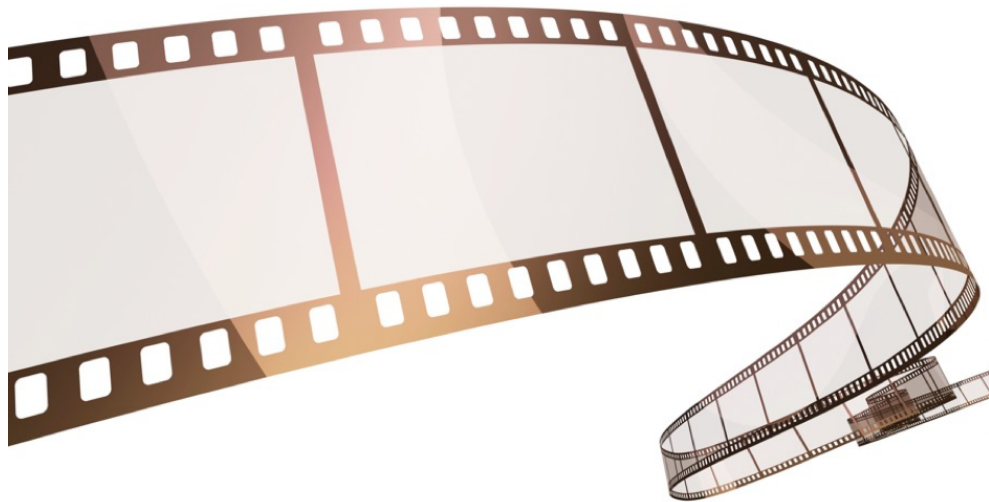


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Emerson's Vision of America in John Ford's *Stagecoach*

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Abstract: When Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) addressed the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1837 at Harvard College, his directives included the establishment of an American literary tradition derived from the unique experience of his fellow citizens in a new context that included a wild frontier. He sought to establish a different moral foundation built on a romantic sense of spiritual attachment to nature. This essay extends the new American grain and grounds Emerson's directives in a truly original and unique American artistic genre—the western film. My thesis is simply that John Ford's elevation of the western film to artistic status with 1939's *Stagecoach* is a uniquely appropriate fulfilment of Emerson's call in the 'American

Scholar' for genre elevation, literary nationalism, romantic moral sentiment, and ultimately for confirming an American mythology that articulated and reinforced a native self-identity.

When Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) addressed the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1837 at Harvard College, his directives included the establishment of an American literary tradition derived from the unique experience of his fellow citizens in a wild frontier. He sought a different moral foundation built on a romantic sense of spiritual attachment to nature. I will argue that the most fitting aesthetic development of Emerson's call for a unique American artistic and philosophical expression is found in the much later appearance of the western film, which answers the call for a unique literary and philosophical need. We can grasp how Emerson's call for the new American scholar can be met in a genre that he never imagined. The value runs both ways: we can broaden the application of Emerson's ideas to the western film, and those interested in film can trace an important line of development to sources in antebellum America. My thesis is that John Ford's elevation of the western film to artistic status with 1939's *Stagecoach* is a uniquely appropriate fulfilment of Emerson's call in the 'American Scholar' for genre elevation, literary nationalism, romantic moral sentiment, and ultimately for confirming an American mythology that articulated and reinforced a native self-identity.

I. 'IMITATION IS SUICIDE': THE ENDURING APPEAL OF EMERSON'S DEMOCRATIC PSYCHOLOGY

The aristocratically born French bureaucrat, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), recognised a tension in the democratic psychology of the typical American. Each American thought himself or herself to be an autonomous individual making rational decisions from their own minds, and yet each American also was startlingly conformist. This insight helps us to understand the background from which Ralph Waldo Emerson emerges as the voice of the new American psyche. The twin pressures on the democratic consciousness of individuality and egalitarianism created the illusion that one could claim an authentic individuality by blocking awareness of one's deep conformity to social roles and expectations. Emerson's writings would grow to symbolise the intellectual confidence of the new nation, and this ideal would be visualised in Ford's classic Western film.

Emerson's enduring intellectual impact clusters around a series of important essays published from 1836 through 1841 that helped to define crucial elements of American self-identity. His essay length book, *Nature*, published in 1836, announced nearly all the themes that Emerson would develop in the next few years. In particular, his desire to overcome the dominance of the

past which has a claim on the present to the extent that our immediate experience must always be interpreted primarily by the categories and stories of another land and another time. The very opening of *Nature* declares that

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face, we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?¹

The past is a limiter, a controller, a way in which my experience is dominated by another – even one far away in space and in time. But there is an antidote to the power of the past – it lies in one's immediate relationship to nature. Emerson continues by valorising the role of the human being feeling the currents of the environment:

Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature . . . The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.²

Not only does nature teach us, but it also taught ancient scholars. And the clincher is in the very last lines of the quotation above: there are new lands and people, and they require new works and worship. It was time for this new people in this new land to establish their own literary and philosophical national culture.

The year after publishing *Nature*, Emerson issued his intellectual declaration of independence in his 'American Scholar' address at Harvard College. In 1776, the members of the Continental Congress, with no authority but their own arrogance and little hope of success, simply declared the colonies to be separated from British rule and politically sovereign. In like fashion, Emerson, with no authority but his own arrogance and little promise for success, declared the American intellectual world to be separated from Europe and intellectually sovereign – despite still being mentally colonised by the European intellectual tradition. Americans had no literary and philosophical tradition to speak of, so scholarship in America ossified into allegiance to the great works of the European past. Emerson declared that an American tradition in scholarship was a requirement that the new nation could no longer do without. 'Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close' Emerson declared. 'The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests.'³

The deepest claim in the essay is that experience is the ground for authentic scholarship, and therefore others cannot give us the terms to interpret

our experience if they do not share in our everyday world. How can the engagement with a new country be properly understood by categories derived from an old country? Emerson's call was to bring forth a genuine scholarship built on the unique American experiment. We would now describe Emerson's project as *historicising* the project of literature and philosophy, a project that was – and often still is – thought to be universally applicable and culturally transferable. The tragic mistake is to transfer the power of the writers' active unifications to the dead letter of their writings. Once that disconnect occurs, the literature that was once a powerful vision of a poet or philosopher – that was once an articulate response to historical problems of living – becomes a dry manual of prescriptions for times and places quite alien to the fundamental experiences that called them forth. The transference from author to text, and from revelation as an experience to revelation as a document, achieves its height in the unequivocally binding and ahistorical uses of biblical texts.

The call to scholarship in Emerson's address brings out the peculiar character of American literary nationalism. For Emerson, key features of the American scholar would be the democratic sensibility that could define itself not only by engagement with nature and common people but also in contrast to the hierarchical societies of Europe. In this way, Emerson's vision of literary nationalism could embed a populist social program as its defining ethos:

Instead of the sublime and beautiful; the near, the low, the common was explored and poetised. . . . The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time.⁴

Emerson thus collapses high and low culture and recognises the divine in places we were not trained to see it: 'I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.'⁵ While Emerson might never have been able to imagine it, the advent of western films would provide a perfect medium and context to poeticise the common and the low.

The doctrine most closely associated with Emerson, and that which would be adapted to western film, is the individualism of the essay 'Self-reliance'. The view is typically misunderstood, and we will treat that briefly below. For Emerson, however, 'self-reliance' was reliance on the life-giving elements of nature for the romantic sense of the self.⁶ It was the underlying sense of psychic expansion that bubbled through the essay *Nature*. It was the foundation of the call for native independence in 'The American Scholar'. If we could break our dependence on foreign – and therefore contaminating – influences then we could generate all the resources necessary for our poetry, philosophy and artistic freedoms. That self-reliance also fit the frontier ethic and the political individualism of self-sufficiency in the literature, politics, ethics and films of the western ideal is one of the reasons that we still read and debate Emerson's essay.

While self-reliance was grounded in virtues of nature – honesty, generosity, kindness – the negative sense of his moral viewpoint focused on the ways that conformity and consistency crushed the individual. If the ideal people of the self-reliant doctrine are the men and women who forge themselves by their strong wills and moral self-expression, the degenerate type is represented by those who have traded their uniqueness for the benefits of fitting in and conforming to social expectations. Emerson's view of society is harsh and unrelentingly negative in this essay:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.⁷

Emerson genders the moment by making it a matter of one's 'manhood' thus likening social conformity to a form of castration. This binary of self-sufficient individualism against social conformity runs deep in American culture and connects to one of the key parallel binary relations of the western genre and Ford's film in particular: the wilderness against civilisation. In Emerson's sense of social ethics, there is a clear but unstated tension between the class-ridden social capitulations that Americans typically identify with Europe and the frontier ideal of the rugged western lifestyle that Emerson became familiar with on lecture tours and readings. The east is the disease that only the new western man and woman can remedy, or escape. The difference between conforming to social expectations and following the dictates of the heart in westerns came to typify a context for American moral self-identity and expression.⁸ This is most apparent in *Stagecoach* in the contrast between the characters Dallas and Lucy Mallory, and finally the contrast between Hatfield and Ringo. If Emerson were a progenitor of the American mythology, its most vivid representation would be in the new medium of film in the native genre of the western.

II. THE HUMBLE GENRE OF THE AMERICAN WESTERN

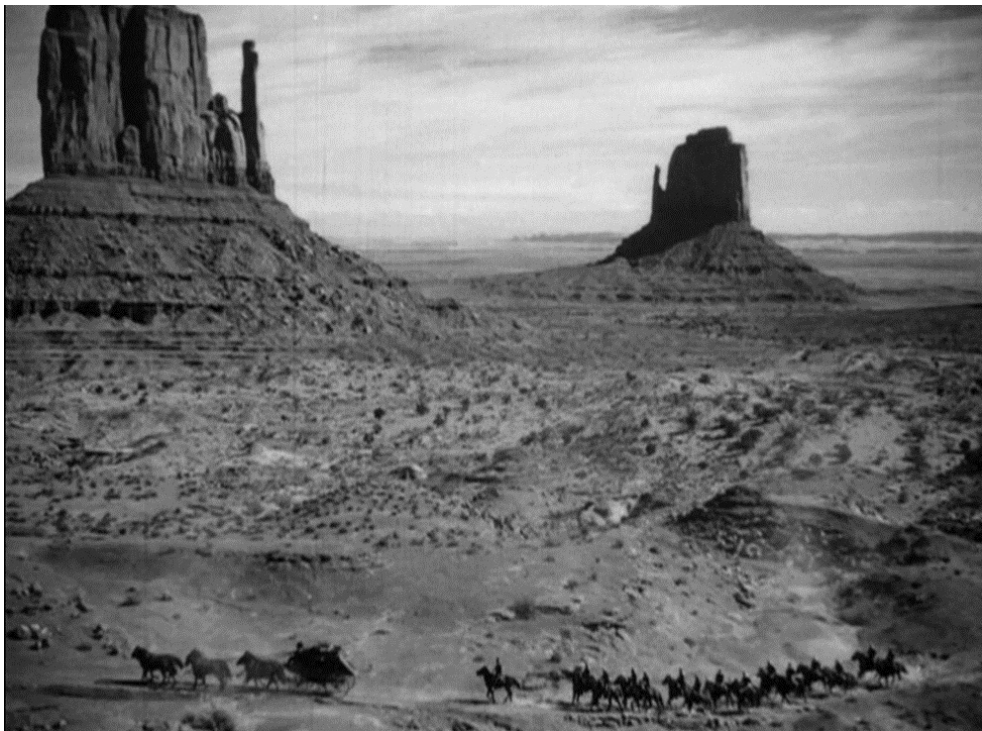
There is very little of the written western literary genre that has passed into higher culture. Most was pulp fiction. The subject itself – the vast west with its wide-open spaces, big sky, and promise of freedom, translated directly into the new medium of film. According to the French film critic and founder of the influential film journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, André Bazin (1918-1958),

it is easy to say that because the cinema is movement the western is cinema *par excellence*. . . . Those formal attributes by which

one normally recognises the western are simply signs or symbols of its profound reality, namely the myth. The western was born of an encounter between a mythology and a means of expression.⁹

Western films, from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) onwards have captured the attention of film audiences. But then, especially from the Great Crash until the late 30's, the vast majority of westerns were 'B' films – low budget films or serials with stock characters, weak scripts and predictable plots. They were short fillers to give moviegoers extra value, helping to lure a population with limited income back to the theaters. It is not at all true, as some have believed, that *Stagecoach* was the first 'A' Western, but in retrospect, its critical acclaim was a powerful force legitimating the genre.¹⁰ In the language of standard coffee table expositions, it was 'the most significant sound Western ever.'¹¹ For Bazin, *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 scène*.¹²



John Ford's favourite film location ... (See figure 1, 290)



Figure 1: John Ford's favourite film location in Monument Valley, Utah. The stagecoach, that representative vessel of civilisation, heads into the vast western wilderness. Shots such as these propelled the western into prominence fuelling the American ethos of re-creating oneself in the new, boundless and unwritten nation. Film as a medium captured this sensibility so well that it superseded all other media for the western genre.

In short, it was a medium perfectly fitted to represent Emerson's mythologies of the American national psyche. *Stagecoach* is the central classic western because it combined all these features for an enduring work of art, morality and philosophy – that is, it articulated a representation of the kind of people that we thought that we could be.

III. JOHN FORD AND *STAGECOACH*

After a very successful start as a director in both silent and sound films, John Ford (1894-1973) had risen to the upper echelons of Hollywood film direction.¹³ After reading a western short story, 'Stage to Lordsburg' in *Colliers* by Ernest Haycock in 1937, Ford purchased the rights to the story for \$2,500 and worked to get it made into a film.¹⁴ Part of the legend that *Stagecoach* was the first 'A' western is due to the story of Ford trying to convince David O. Selznick, the premier producer of the era, to make the film. Selznick did not particularly like westerns and *he thought they were just 'B' fodder* so he only conceded to make the film if it would star Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich. Ford passed on that. He had already promised the lead roles to John Wayne and Claire Trevor, minor actors with far less audience pull. Ford finally got funding from producer Walter Wanger at United Artists, in part because it was a low risk project. There were no big stars to pay, and Ford had a reputation for bringing films in under budget. The low confidence in the project – a western without big stars – is the reason that the studio would not pay to have the film shot in color.¹⁵

Before I begin to draw out the Emersonian elements from *Stagecoach*, it helps us to point out that Ford was not particularly ideological about film. He did not seem to care what genre the film was and made films across the spectrum of genres and budgets. According to his biographer, Ford mostly just wanted to keep working and preferred if he could do so out of doors.¹⁶ While Ford was not a film ideologue, he was certainly domineering, ruling his cast and crew absolutely and often through fear and bullying.¹⁷

Ford's cinematic non-ideology should not blind us to the ideology embedded in the film itself. For the purposes of this paper, I am arguing that the deeper mythological, moral and cultural psychology articulated by Emerson for the future new American is all right there in Ford's film. According to Scott Eyman, 'America's human idealism gave him [Ford] his themes and his best films are energised by his recognition of his country's internal conflicts.'¹⁸ There are certainly other ideological elements in *Stagecoach* that I will not treat here much or at all, since they do not immediately connect to Emerson's themes. Many of them should be palpable to viewers of the film and readers of this essay. They include Ford's own left-leaning social democracy and New Deal politics, the typical western film reinforcement of American patriarchy in its limited portrayal of women, the racial erasure of African-Americans in the west, and the stereotyping, vilification and degradation of Native Ameri-

cans and Mexicans. In this, the western film and *Stagecoach* were not unique. In fact, part of my argument is that the film is deeply representative of American culture. It both represents it and reinforces it by what it includes and what it excludes.



Figure 2: Shot in black and white, and using stock characters, Ford's film is a classic because it used all the elements of standard low budget Westerns but with high quality shots, scripts, acting and direction. The shot at left, Ringo watching Dallas, is one of the great stills in film history.

IV. DOC BOONE TO DALLAS: 'CHILD, WHO AM I TO TELL YOU WHAT'S RIGHT AND WRONG?' *STAGECOACH'S* DEMOCRATIC ETHOS

Stagecoach is a traditional Western based on a fairly simple construction of stock characters. Each are quickly and effectively portrayed in an early scene. After an opening that announces the threat of Geronimo and his rogue band of Apache warriors, the narrative quickly turns to the bustling center of Tonto. We quickly are confronted by the forces of social control as the town enforces its moral standards on two deviants – a prostitute, Miss Dallas (played by Claire Trevor) and a chronically alcoholic medical professional,

Doc Boone (played by Thomas Mitchell).¹⁹ Each is being run out by the local women. Doc Boone by his landlady for lack of payment and Dallas by the Law and Order League – an organised and badge displaying group of sour faced social enforcers. Doc Boone shows himself to be an almost absurdly literate alcoholic professional – quoting Marlowe and exhibiting theatrical stage manners to mark himself off as simultaneously intellectually superior and vice ridden. Doc Boone will frequently, although sometimes in comic Falstaffian fashion, be the voice of truth, moral sanity and courage at crucial moments. When Dallas pleads with him to oppose the powers expelling her from the town, he replies in affected seriousness, ‘We are the victims of a foul disease called social prejudice, my child. These dear ladies of the Law and Order League are scouring out the dregs of the town.’²⁰ By this time we have already met two coach passengers who have arrived from the previous stage in Bisbee. First, the Virginia establishment lady Mrs. Lucy Mallory (played by Louise Platt) who functions as the main foil for Dallas, and then the properly unacknowledged whiskey salesman, Mr. Peacock (played by Samuel Meek). We are then introduced to the bluff banker Henry Gatewood (played by Burton Churchill) and the rakish Southern aristocrat Hatfield (played by John Carradine). The coach is driven by Buck (played comically by Andy Devine) and Marshal Curly Wilcox (played by George Bancroft) rides shotgun as he looks for the Ringo Kid (played by John Wayne), a recently escaped convict who we are told is heading for Lordsburg and revenge (a non-Emersonian element) against Luke Plummer, who killed Ringo’s father and younger brother. The opening scenes thus establish the two main narratives of the film – the journey narrative of the stagecoach traveling through dangerous wilderness between outposts (stages) of civilisation (from Tonto to Dry Fork, Apache Wells, Lee’s Ferry and finally to the ironically named Lordsburg) and the revenge narrative that requires Ringo to face the Plummers at the end of the journey in Lordsburg. It has also established the social positions of the main characters – including the Ringo Kid, who after escaping prison is wandering in the desert after his horse goes lame. Ringo is ‘arrested’ by the Marshal and crams into the coach thus completing all the characters to establish a social hierarchy within the coach based on the moral assessment of each character *from the point of view of the town*. This initial starting point represents the power not of moral authority *in Emerson’s view*, but of the authority gained by those who have psychologically acquiesced by conformity to an already established moral code embedded in hierarchy, what Emerson viewed as the very opposite of moral authority.

In *Stagecoach*, social positions established by the town confers authority, and therefore dignity and respect based on social background. As a western, the town represents civilisation and therefore it symbolises various degrees of social repression.²¹ At the pinnacle of authority and power stands Henry Gatewood, the President of the Miners’ & Cattlemen’s Bank. Gatewood’s bellicose pronouncements establish him as a man used to bullying his way

through the world. He is a standard conservative windbag.²² By the time Gatewood arrives in the coach at the edge of town, viewers recognise that he has stolen \$50,000 of the mining company's payroll. The social standing of Mrs. Lucy Mallory is established by her relationships to the men in her life. Presently, we find that she is the wife of a Captain in the US Army whom we are expecting to meet with the cavalry at the first stage in Dry Fork. We learn, through her conversation with Hatfield, that she was the daughter of a General in the Confederate Army. Hatfield served under her father, feels beholden to her and seeks to protect her as a manifestation of southern chivalry, a pre-established moral code shared by both which they carry into the new west. Mrs. Mallory is established by social position – itself derivative of the social positions of the men who define her life. In the last place of social approval, we have the mixed character of Hatfield. He comes from an aristocratic family in the south, but despite the clothing and manners of a gentleman, he lives as a gambler and exhibits the various dishonours that come with a rakish life. Smack in the middle of the social positioning is the nonentity Peacock, whom the various characters mistake for a minister and amusingly flub his name. Peacock appears to symbolise the nondescript average soul terrified by risk but also possessing a genial if bland kindness. Descending through the order of social disapproval, we recognise that Doc Boone, like Hatfield, has a mixed character. He is a professional and an educated man, but has fallen from this social status by his compulsive drinking.²³ Far lower, we have Dallas who appears to be the very bottom of society – a prostitute and expelled from the town, that is until the coach picks up Ringo. An escaped convict, Ringo represents not only social and legal censure but a wild and uncontrollable danger that threatens the very idea of civilisation. As we will see, there is some reason to associate him with the Apaches who are also depicted as dangerous killers beyond the scope of law and the protections of civilisation. The moral analysis of the stagecoach as a vessel – a microcosm of the country or of civilisation – is now complete from the point of view of the town. It awaits its total moral reversal, its moral inversion, as the coach journeys away from town and into progressively wilder country and the Emersonian self-reliance in nature.

However, when the coach pulls into Dry Fork, the first stage stop after Bisbee, the film re-enforces the social hierarchy with visual and dramatic clarity. Our focus is on the contrast between Dallas and Mrs. Mallory. The table scene at Dry Fork visualises Emerson's conformity thesis in the most literal way 'the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, . . . [i]t loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.'²⁴ The group exit the coach and enter a dining room set up for lunch. As Mrs. Mallory and Dallas both approach the table, Dallas recognises that she does not belong and recedes to a chair by the door, literally marginalised, as Mrs. Mallory takes her place at the head of the table.



Dallas sits in shadow by the door . . . (See figure 3, 296)



Figure 3: Dallas sits in shadow by the door with Ringo. Mrs. Mallory and Hatfield sit at the head of the table. The group discusses going on without military escort. The Marshal elicits the votes of the members beginning with Mrs. Mallory. When he skips Dallas – not worthy of consulting – Ringo corrects his ‘manners’.

After the vote, Ringo, in complete ignorance of social protocol, prepares for the meal by pulling out a seat for Dallas, next to Mrs. Mallory. Torn by her affection for Ringo’s advances but her fear of being further ostracised, Dallas reluctantly sits in the chair that Ringo offers. (See figure 4, 297). At this point, Ford cuts from his long shots that capture the room’s dynamics for a medium close up of Lucy Mallory and a [cropped] two shot of Dallas clarifying the violation that has occurred.²⁵ (See figure 5, 298).

Countering Ringo’s egalitarian move, Hatfield enforces the code of a southern gentleman and protects the aristocratic Mrs. Mallory from social defilement by proximity to a prostitute. Hatfield pointedly but courteously suggests that Mrs. Mallory might prefer another seat because ‘It’s cooler by the window.’²⁶ She accepts, rises and leaves, occasioning a complete rearrangement of the seating based on social hierarchy with Dallas and Ringo physically separated and isolated at the end of the table. (See figure 6, 299).

As if to exemplify the socially naïve self-reliant Emersonian hero, Ringo misinterprets the group’s disdain for Dallas as their disdain of himself, an escaped convict. Either Ringo is willfully ignoring the group’s obvious disregard for Dallas or he is completely naïve.²⁷ Both interpretations fit for the romantic natural westerner, for in each case he operates on a set of values that lay outside the established norms of the town. The central ethical struggle is between the established Virginia code and the new Western code, highlighted by the contrast of the two rival couples for supremacy in the American ideal. Ford establishes the parallel at the table scene by placing a series of two shots



Figure 4: Dallas reluctantly accepts Ringo's socially ignorant offer.



Figure 5: Notice the dominance and hostility of Lucy Mallory's gaze, as Dallas lowers her eyes in submission to social authority.



Figure 6: The table scene after Lucy Mallory moves from one end to the other to avoid Dallas. Ringo and Dallas are now isolated from the group, separating the proper members of society from its outcasts. Lucy Mallory has her gaze at eye level, dominating the table from its head. Dallas has her gaze downward in submission and humiliation. Ringo is clueless.

with each couple. (See figure 7, 300). Mallory notes Hatfield's courtesy and discovers he served in her father's regiment. She should, but cannot, remember his name. It is clear that 'Hatfield' is not his actual family name. He is hiding his past. The interchange is formal, cold, disconnected, dominated by their backgrounds.

Immediately after comes a two shot of Dallas and Ringo. Although the conversations parallels the identical difficulty of finding out the background of the other, the exchange is warm, kind, affectionate, lacking formal barriers, with two people relating directly, unmediated by the past. This contrast is central to the film's ethos and enacts the Emersonian ideal perfectly in its contrast between the warm self-reliant couple who have no useable past or family connections, and the cold, conformist couple dominated by the confining ethos of another land. Even the order of presentation in the two shots shows the film supplanting the old order by the new order.

As the stop at Dry Forks reinforced town morality and social hierarchy, the next stop at Apache Wells occasions the inversion of hierarchy in terms of Emersonian authority. This is the moral and dramatic turning point of the film. It establishes the leadership of Dallas and Ringo based on their actions and moral uprightness. Indications of the reversal begin immediately upon



Figure 7: The successive two shots that embody the mythic argument of the film. The cold, formal hierarchy of the old southern code is replaced by the new, warm, western heroes.

embarking from the coach, as the loss of the military accompaniment at Dry Fork pulls off the veil from Gatewood's egoism. He pompously threatens the military officer who decorously upholds his assignment and puts Gatewood in his place. By the time they reach Apache Wells, Mrs. Mallory has found out that not only has her husband's regiment left, but that he has been injured and carried off. As Mrs. Mallory reels from the news – and loss of male support, she collapses and the group discovers that she is in an advanced state of pregnancy. The hiding of the pregnancy itself is a glaring sign of her status as a society lady. Her fidelity to the social code prevents her from acknowledging the natural state of her body. Her new motherliness enhances her at the same time that the biological reality has to be erased. As Mrs. Mallory can no longer care for herself, she depends on the help of Dallas and the drunken Doc Boone. They deliver the baby and Dallas takes over the care of the child for the rest of the journey. While surely it is true that Lucy Mallory is tired from childbirth, it is clear that she has no power outside of the social roles that define her.²⁸ The physical effort of childbirth leaves her so spent that she never recovers. She never cares for the child. Her own life and the life of the child, are given over to Dallas who not only cares for them, but all the others. (See figure 8, 302). As with western films generally, it is a confining view of women – restricted here literally to the roles of mother and prostitute. But as we focus on the portrayals of Dallas and Lucy Mallory, we recognise the shift in power and authority.

As Dallas and Ringo develop their affections, they each reveal that they lost their families and are alone in the world. Their abandonment by society has led Dallas to prostitution and Ringo to prison and escape, because as Dallas laconically asserts 'You have to live, no matter what happens.'²⁹ To solidify the moral leadership of both Dallas and Ringo, they also shelve their plan to run off together to Ringo's half-built ranch across the border. Dallas forgoes what may be her last chance to escape a life of prostitution because she has to care for Lucy Mallory and her baby as they travel into Lordsburg. She convinces Ringo to escape the Marshal by heading across the border to wait for her, but he stops in his tracks as he sees the Apache 'war signals'. The audience is aware of his self-sacrifice, trading in his freedom to protect a group that he reckons will not survive without him. The recognition of the couples' moral worthiness, generosity and sacrifice contrasts to the bondage that the couple is permanently subjected to by the enforcers of civilisation. The moral authority has shifted so dramatically that the Marshal's insistence on cuffing Ringo becomes an offensive indignity to the audience.

V. 'A LITTLE BIT SAVAGE'

The scene at Apache Wells also highlights racial dynamics that help us to understand the position of Ringo and Dallas, in the Western drama about the nature of civilisation. As the group arrives, Chris (a Mexican, played



Figure 8: After childbirth, Dallas braids Lucy Mallory's hair and cares for the baby. Mallory sees Dallas for the first time, a revelation of Dallas herself and a clear film evocation of the prostitute as Christ figure.

by Chris Pin-Martin) greets them and brings them into his cantina with his Apache wife, Yakima (played by Elvira Rios). As Peacock sees Yakima, he screams 'Savages!' and recoils in horror with Gatewood. Chris reassures them that it is his wife. 'But she's . . . a savage!' Peacock shouts. Chris, responds, 'Si Senor, she's a little bit savage . . . I think.'³⁰ It is a fantastic moment, and helps to pillory the racism of the easterners. Overall, the film trades in racial stereotypes, including Chris. There are several interesting clues from Ford and Dudley Nichols that alert us to a more nuanced sensitivity to race than a single viewing might reveal. Certainly, the role of the Apache warriors is generally one of stereotypical threat. In the history of film, Ford carried that element from B movies and unfortunately elevated it along with the western. But there are crucial clues that connect the plight of the Apache with the plight of Ringo and Dallas. The first clue is the use of the reservation. It's clear that the reservation parallels the prison as a cage for wild and untamed individuals – both the Apaches and Ringo – and that each have 'busted out of the pen' in order to exact revenge against those who have killed their family members. Ringo's situation applies equally to the Apaches. In the ethical

code written out by Emerson and upheld by the western, the masculinity of these wild individuals is at stake. They each would prefer to die fighting their enemies and revenging their loved ones than to trade away their freedom and dignity to stay alive. In Emerson's words quoted above, 'Society is a joint stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater.'³¹ The connection is not merely one of parallels. While the group settles down at Chris's place in Apache Wells, Marshal Curly tells Ringo that he needs to 'stick close to the reservation'.³² The reference establishes the parallel as intentional. Indeed it is a painful one, since Ringo's whiteness allows him to evade the law and we are aware that no such lenience will be allowed to Geronimo and the Apaches. This portrayal sets the romantic ending within a tragic racialised context: Ringo and Dallas's eventual escape have 'saved them the blessings of civilisation'³³ but the Apaches will not be so fortunate.³⁴ The second parallel is between Dallas and Yakima, both of whom are 'a little bit savage'. Yakima sings a song outside the cantina. The song is in Spanish and tells of a nostalgic longing for a lost home that will never return. It is a poignant homage to the peoples displaced by colonial expansion, largely going over the heads of the coach group and film audiences that do not know the meaning of the Spanish lyrics. Yakima then betrays the group and arranges for their extra horses to be stolen. She leaves, exacting some small revenge on those who have stolen her land. As an outsider, ostracised and marginalised, she parallels Dallas who also dreams of a long lost home. As a prostitute, the group no doubt thinks she is a little bit savage as well.

In the case of Dallas and Mrs. Mallory, the clarity of the contrast between moral authority and social authority reaches its climax as the stagecoach enters the chase scene with the Apaches and then safely enters Lordsburg. Mallory has not cared for her child since leaving Apache Wells. During the chase scene, as the Apaches attack the stagecoach, she prayed for her rescue while Dallas protected her child. (See figure 9, 304).

The reception at Lordsburg reinforces social authority immediately. Lucy Mallory is carried from the coach as an invalid on a litter. Immediately surrounded by minders and caregivers, she returns to the privilege that her social position and ancestry afford. The crowd asks where the baby is, but she has no clue of the whereabouts of her own newborn.³⁵

Dallas emerges with the baby and the child is quickly taken from her, as if the child must be protected from the egalitarian implications and social mixing of the new west. Lucy Mallory seals her moral failure as she fails to express gratitude to the person most responsible for ensuring her family's welfare. At least the look on Lucy Mallory's face betrays her own bitter awareness of her moral cowardice.³⁶ As the moral reversal completes itself, we could even argue that the roles of mother and prostitute have reversed as well. As Ford shows Dallas to be a vision of motherhood holding the new



Figure 9: In the desperate moments of the attack, Hatfield saves his last bullet to shoot Lucy Mallory and spare ‘a lady’ from violation by the Apaches. Lucy prays for divine help while Dallas cares for the child. Hatfield is shot, just as the cavalry arrive to save the coach. They seemed unconcerned that Dallas might be similarly violated.

baby (see figure 12, 307), he shows Mrs. Mallory as selling her better self to society for her place at a more refined table.

Back in Lordsburg, the Emersonian moral standing of the group recedes and the legal and social powers re-assert their grip over the individuals who have just proven themselves to be stronger and kinder than their fellow passengers. The law appears and, while they have arrived to arrest Ringo, they discover Gatewood on the coach and arrest him for stealing the payroll due the mining company’s employees.³⁷ In this sense, Ford asserts his New Deal political morality and makes a show of the hypocrisy and greed of the banker. But Ringo and Dallas, the moral centers of the coach companions, are now under threat. Ringo is to be arrested for escaping prison. Dallas will have to return to the whorehouse, thus revealing her status to Ringo and losing her chance to escape her life.

Facing their fears and humiliation, Dallas and Ringo gain an outcome based on Emersonian moral desert. Despite a lifetime of cold justice doled out from the ‘foul disease of social prejudice’, Ringo does not reject her. They walk through Lordsburg so Ringo can see where to find Dallas after his shootout, and Dallas trembles at the revelation of her secret. According to Peter Stowell, ‘the existing examples of civilisation, the frontier towns of Tonto and Lordsburg, are pest holes of bigotry and debauchery.’³⁸ When he



Figure 10: Script: LUCY: *'If there's ever anything I can do for ...'* she falters, lowers her eyes and looks away.



Figure 11: Script: Dallas looks down at Lucy sympathetically. DALLAS: *'I know'*.

follows her into the raucous area filled with cathouses that reveals her secret, Ringo seems unfazed. His earlier statement to Curly 'this is no place for a lady like her' is absolutely true from the Emersonian point of view, although from the town view, it is exactly the place for her. After Ringo exacts his revenge by killing the three Plummer brothers, he returns to reunite with Dallas before he heads to jail. The ending however, gives the audience what we want. Marshal Curly and Doc Boone release the two, and Ringo and Dallas ride off into the distance to live across the border. It is interesting that, as Ford and Dudley Nichols work out the ending, there is no change in social standards. There is no awareness or acknowledgement from the town of the damage done to or the worth of these virtuous people. The entire conclusion occurs outside the law, outside respectable society, as Doc Boone pronounces on their eventual escape together 'Well, that's saved them the blessings of civilisation.'³⁹ Befitting an Emersonian ethic – right or wrong – the social transformation can only occur by redeemed individuals displaying a self-reliant power and generosity. Just as there is no sense in Emerson that one might undertake a social revolution by transforming the economic and social structures that enable Gatewood to plunder and Dallas to suffer. So the western, and Emerson, veers away from any but an individualistic and virtue based model of slow social change through individual moral conversion.



Figure 12: Dallas transformed into the vision of motherhood. Note the second shot in which she glows and catches Ringo's [out of the frame] stare.

The outcomes of each character follows an Emersonian vision for the new America. Dallas and Ringo, rewarded for their morality, courage and sacrifice are spared further confinement and released to live together 'across the border', free from social control and artificial standards. It also conveys the underlying suspicion of civilisation that runs just under the surface of both Emerson and Ford. At the other end of the spectrum, Gatewood is arrested and Lucy Mallory returns to her privilege but with the awareness of her failings and her unpayable debt to a prostitute. Peacock, an Eastern nonentity, survives, wounded. Of the two males who vie for supremacy in the new America, only Ringo can continue. Hatfield was killed off in the Apache attack. Hatfield represents the hierarchical social code of the old South – the nearest corollary in America to the rigid class division of Europe. He cannot survive in Emerson's America and must be left behind, in the past. Only Ringo and Dallas are fit to play the role Emerson has laid out for the country. When Ringo and Dallas ride off, leaving their pasts as blanks, unencumbered by tradition, they will live the new American life that is all future. Although for now, in its corrupted state, they have to reside outside the reach of law and civilisation. This is their proper moral location as they are the natural man and woman free of social prejudice and living in accordance with the Emersonian laws of nature.

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NOTES

- ¹Emerson 2003, 35.
- ²Emerson 2003, 35.
- ³'The American Scholar' in Emerson 2003, 83.
- ⁴Emerson 2003, 101-102.
- ⁵Emerson 2003, 102.
- ⁶For example, see Richardson 1995, 100 ff.
- ⁷'Self-reliance' in Emerson 2003, 178.
- ⁸For some historical background to the frontier ideals used in Westerns, see especially Slotkin 1992.
- ⁹André Bazin, 'The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence' (1953) in Bazin et al. 2005.
- ¹⁰For further reading see, Thomas Schatz, '*Stagecoach* and Hollywood's A Western Renaissance' in Grant 2003, 21-47.
- ¹¹Hardy 1984, 97. See also Sennett 1990, 61: 'In due time, however, *Stagecoach* took on a special significance beyond its initial release, winning an honored place as the Western film that redefined and revitalised the genre.'
- ¹²André Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Western' (1955) in Bazin et al. 2005, 149.
- ¹³For background on John Ford, one of the great directors in the history of film, see, *inter alia*, Gallagher 1986; Stowell 1986; Eyman 2015.
- ¹⁴Gallagher 1986, 145.
- ¹⁵Buscombe 1992, 13-17.
- ¹⁶Eyman 2015, 324, in which he also notes that Ford liked Westerns mostly because he got outside and away from the smog of Los Angeles. Also, Eyman, 'Commentary', *Stagecoach* DVD.
- ¹⁷See Gallagher 1986, 38: 'Ford would castigate mercilessly for days on end. Of-

ten the whipping boy was a buddy, like [Ward] Bond or [John] Wayne. [...] Big men like Victor McGlagon or Wayne would break down and cry like children, and Ford would jibe deeper’.

¹⁸Eyman 2015, 7.

¹⁹It is never explicitly stated that Dallas is a prostitute – likely to avoid censorship, but all characters seem to be immediately and obviously aware of it – with the important possible exception of Ringo.

²⁰Ford, John. *Stagecoach*. 2 DVD set, Castle Hill Production, 2006. 6:45-6:52 min. In the published script – Nichols and Ford 1984, 42. Hereafter as Script. Note: The script is a great tool but it is wildly at odds with what occurs in the film. In general, when I quote dialogue from the film, I will try to follow what is in the movie.

²¹Another standard trope of western film is the equation of wilderness with being natural and free and its opposite, the equation of the town with being confined, controlled and unnatural. For an excellent contemporary example of this, see Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) in which expansive natural exteriors set the visual context for personal and sexual freedom. The characters’ unhappy marriages are depicted in confined, cramped interior scenes.

²²Gatewood represents the greedy right-wing financial establishment lampooned by Ford’s left wing political sensibilities.

²³Drunks were stock characters in westerns, but held a special place for Ford. Often his drunks, such as Doc Boone in *Stagecoach* and the newspaper publisher Dutton Peabody in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), are also highly educated. According to Buscombe, ‘there is also for Ford an association between drinking and having an education, as if the mere fact of being educated in the west is productive of an alienation that can only be anaesthetised by drink.’ Many professors would agree. Buscombe 1992, 33.

²⁴Emerson, ‘Self-reliance’ in Emerson 2003, 178.

²⁵For a more extensive discussion of Ford’s cutting and the gaze-levels of the two women, see Gallagher 1986, 152-159.

²⁶Nichols and Ford 1984, 65.

²⁷Minutes before, Ringo had chastised

Curly for not inquiring about Dallas’s vote to go back to Tonto or to push forward to the next stage at Apache Wells. This device allows Ringo, who represents the proper morality of natural sentiment, to correct the established, official representative of the state and its prejudiced laws.

²⁸In my analysis of Lucy Mallory, I diverge from the more genial view of her given by Tag Gallagher who finds her ‘ultimately elusive ... the films only person who really relates to the land ... [with] passion and determination’. Gallagher 1986, 151-152. Gallagher’s analysis of the character is brief. I portray her as the negative foil for Dallas.

²⁹Nichols and Ford 1984, 94.

³⁰Nichols and Ford 1984, 88.

³¹Emerson, Self-reliance, in Emerson 2003, 178.

³²Nichols and Ford 1984, 95.

³³Nichols and Ford 1984, 143.

³⁴For further reflections on this theme, see J.P. Telotte, ‘A Little Bit Savage: *Stagecoach* and Racial Representation’ in Grant 2003, 113-131.

³⁵Script: ‘LUCY: *If there’s ever anything I can do for ...* She falters, lowers her eyes and looks away. Dallas looks down at Lucy sympathetically. DALLAS: *I know.*’ Nichols and Ford 1984, 131.

³⁶Here I also diverge from the view of William Rothman, in ‘Stagecoach and the Quest for Selfhood’ in Grant 2003, 158-177, who finds Lucy’s broken sentence ‘one of the most mysterious moments in the film’ (175). Rothman does not place any importance in this analysis on Lucy’s return to town and to the moral code that controls her. Without that, the inability to express full rapport might be mysterious, but it is perfectly explicable in the context of the analysis given above.

³⁷Many have pointed out the logical gaps in *Stagecoach*. The sheriff in Lordsburg has come to arrest Ringo, but how did he know that Ringo was picked up by the coach? When he meets Gatewood, he arrests him and announces ‘Oh, you didn’t think that they would fix the telegraph line did ya?’ But Gatewood never knew that the line was cut when he fled.

³⁸Stowell 1986, 27.

³⁹Nichols and Ford 1984, 143.

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