Re-Imagining American Communities: Hollywood, Hawks, and Ford in 1939

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Classical Hollywood cinema is a character-centered cinema; its narratives are driven by dramatic agents in pursuit of clearly defined goals; narrative progress is built around the central character encountering and overcoming a series of obstacles to those goals; and closure occurs with that character’s unambiguous attainment or failure to attain those goals (Bordwell 18). For the most part, these struggles take place within specific social formations or communities. Implicit in this struggle is the illusory notion of individual agency—that characters, through hard work, industry, skill, and perseverance, can make things happen (or not). At the same time, the social context within which these struggles take place becomes the site for another sort of myth making: that of the notion of community itself. Against a reality of individual semi-anonymity and disempowerment within an industrialized, commodified mass society, classical Hollywood narratives frequently provide an ideological alternative to the dystopic reality of individual, community, and nation. This paper seeks to examine two specific instances of the utopic re-imagining of individual, community, and nation in 1930s Hollywood and to suggest some ways in which mass culture has been instrumentalized to accomplish certain ideological projects—specifically, works of mass culture function to “manage” social and political anxieties. As Fredric Jameson suggests, “Mass culture [is] not [an] empty distraction or ‘mere’ false consciousness, but rather a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies...
which must then have some presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be ‘managed’ or repressed” (Jameson 25).

I want to begin with a basic observation made by Martin Rubin about the changing status of the individual within Hollywood narratives of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Rubin argues that the “rugged individualism” of the 1920s, as individualized in the heroic figure of Charles Lindbergh—the “Lone Eagle”—is problematized by cultural historians of the period, such as Parrington, Krutch, Dewey, and Lippman as “dangerous,” associating it with the traits of laissez-faire capitalism that led to the Wall Street crash and the Great Depression. Rubin notes the emergence of a new form of individualism (New Deal individualism) in which individual identity and agency is dependent on the regenerative powers of collective experience (Rubin 65–69). That is, through immersion in a Populist version of the collective, the individual discovers a new, non-dangerous form of individualism.

A simple comparison of the basic narratives of early and late 1930s films directed by Howard Hawks and John Ford gives some sense of this transformation in the status of the individual. In *Scarface* (1932), the gangster hero pursues what Robert Warshow calls “an individual pre-eminence.” “The gangster’s whole life is an attempt to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, and he always dies because he is an individual” (Warshow 133). Hawks’s gangster hero becomes vulnerable because he has isolated himself from others by jealously killing his best friend and, simultaneously, turning his own sister against him. He dies alone, shot down in the street by an anonymous hail of police bullets. In *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), on the other hand, the central character Geoff belongs to a group of ex-patriate American pilots who fly the mail in South America. The film is explicitly about the group and the sense of identity with a community that it provides. The film’s dramatic conflict focuses on the attempts of various characters to integrate themselves into the group, culminating with the creation of an interdependent team of fliers who accomplish the narrative’s final mission.

For Ford, a somewhat similar trajectory can be charted from *The Informer* (1935), perhaps the director’s most famous film of the early 1930s, to *Stagecoach* (1939), his signature, pre-war Western. In the former film, the central character informs on a friend (who is an IRA leader) to the British authorities, is found out, and killed by the IRA. The film documents his isolation from his fellow countrymen as he slowly realizes that he has betrayed his own community. The central characters in *Stagecoach* move through a variety of different western
The occupants of the coach, outsiders themselves from the dominant social groups depicted in the film, form a tenuous community of their own as they journey from one town to another. And the film concludes with the outlaw hero and prostitute heroine setting off into the wilderness to start anew, representing the promise of a new, better community.

The central section of my paper will examine the representation of community in both *Angels* and *Stagecoach* in terms of how each film’s central characters interact with their communities. Both films will be considered as colonialist adventure sagas—white Americans and Europeans pursuing capitalist fantasies in South America in the former, Westerners realizing manifest destiny in the Apache-ridden West in the latter. Both films chart the struggles of their communities to survive in a hostile natural environment and foreground the agency of heroic individuals in those struggles. But these stories are not simply triumphs over the Other. The terms of their struggles reveal social and political anxieties that lie at the heart of these communities—and at the basic problematic of the individual in relation to the collective. For Hawks, the issues are largely sexual issues—repression, the threat of castration, masculine stoicism, and virility—that, when properly regulated, ensure the future of global capital, not to mention healthy heterosexual union. For Ford, the issues are largely ideological—negotiating differences between races (white, Mexican American, Native American), regional identities (East, West; North/Union, South/Confederacy), and class. *Stagecoach* resolves its conflicts on the level of action—the defeat of the Apache, the cathartic gunfight that reasserts the moral code of the Old West while preparing a path for entry into the New West, the demise of the Old World (the East, Civil War bitterness) in favor of the New, and the regeneration of society by lower class outcasts.

*Only Angels Have Wings* is set in the spatially exotic and isolated locale of Barranca, a fictional port city somewhere in South America. The city and its inhabitants are themselves isolated from the surrounding world—by water on one side and by steep mountain ranges on the other. Barranca itself consists of more or less separate communities. There is the Spanish-speaking native population that inhabits the port area and the fringes of Dutchy’s, which is the bar, restaurant, and air mail business around which the main action of the narrative is structured. Dutchy’s is a space dominated by a white European (Sig Rumann) and the American pilots who work for him. The central female character, Bonnie Lee (Jean Arthur), functions as an audience surrogate introducing us to these disparate communities as she
disembarks from a boat, walks through the cluttered streets of the port area, and is escorted to Dutchy’s for a “real American steak dinner.” An outsider, Bonnie successively integrates herself into the film’s ethnically discrete spaces. From outside, she peers in to a native bar to watch an erotic dance number. She moves from the position of an observer to a participant as she joins in on the chorus of a musical number in the bar. Moments later, she enters another space, Dutchy’s, and finds a place for herself there in the fliers’ world, as Joe’s “date” for dinner. When Joe (Noah Berry, Jr.) is sent up to fly the mail, crashes, and dies, Bonnie has an emotional outburst, revealing herself to be an outsider in this world of impassive male pilots. She is literally escorted outside by Geoff (Cary Grant), the film’s hero, and told to get a grip on herself. Adapting herself to the stoic emotional code of the pilots, she soon re-enters the bar. Her re-integration into this world is celebrated musically when she joins Geoff in playing “Some of These Days” and in singing the “Peanut Vendor Song,” an action that echoes her earlier musical camaraderie with the performers in the native bar—in fact, a couple of the performers are the same ones as in the earlier scene.

This initial pattern becomes the theme and variation that structures the film’s narrative: an outsider enters the world of the film, is welcomed into it, then expelled from it, only to finally prove him or herself worthy of entry and to become fully integrated into the group. For Bonnie, the cycle continues. When she refuses to obey Geoff’s orders and leave on the next boat, he relegates her to the periphery of his world. It’s only at the very end of the film that she gains full membership in this world. Geoff’s best friend, the Kid (Thomas Mitchell), has just been killed in another crash, and Geoff gives her a two-headed coin, an object associated with the Kid.

At the beginning of the film’s second act, another outsider, a pilot named Bat MacPherson (Richard Barthelmess), arrives. As he is being welcomed into the group, Geoff recognizes him as the pilot who once bailed out of a plane, leaving his mechanic—the Kid’s younger brother—to die. Bat is immediately ostracized from the group. Desperate for pilots, Geoff keeps Bat around, giving him a series of dangerous assignments that enable Bat to prove his worth. In the third act, Bat fully redeems himself by risking his own life to rescue the Kid, who subsequently dies. The final scene with Bat in the bar celebrates his integration into the group. The dead Kid, through Geoff, “buys” him a drink. Les, another pilot, puts the drink into Bat’s bandaged hands. Pancho gives him a cigarette and Geoff holds Bat’s cigarette while he
drinks. The action is choreographed to illustrate a Hawksian maxim: it takes a village to light a cigarette and drink a drink.

The final variation in this narrative pattern involves Geoff’s own relationship to the group. An insider’s insider, Geoff is also, as leader, above the group. A super-hero of sorts, Geoff stands above and outside the group he commands. But by the end of the film, Geoff has been wounded and, like Bat, is unable to do things on his own. Critics have often spoken of Hawks’s predilection for tough, invulnerable, heroic male characters. Over the course of *Only Angels*, Hawks’s male elite fall, one by one, to the wayside. Joe dies because “he wasn’t good enough.” The Kid is grounded because of his poor eye-sight. Les breaks his arm. Geoff is shot in the shoulder; and both of Bat’s hands are burned. By the end of the film, when the pass finally clears and it’s time to fly the mail, virtually no one is left who can fly a plane. But Geoff and Les together can operate a plane. An interdependent unit, they take off together to complete the final mission. And Geoff is finally integrated into the group.

For Hawks, the process of integration into the group hinges on issues of emotional and physical vulnerability. Bonnie is exiled from the group until she learns its codes of emotional restraint; her task is to toughen herself up. Bat’s past cowardice would seem to be the result of him having once given in to unmanly emotions. His “cast iron” façade in the present functions as something of a caricature of the codes of stoic heroism adopted by professional fliers as a group. Though less of a caricature of heroic masculinity, Geoff is repeatedly associated with emotional repression—his own and that of others—in his efforts to control the potentially chaotic spaces and narrative events of the film. As I noted earlier, Hawks figures both Bat’s and Geoff’s integration into the group through the common trope of physical vulnerability. But beneath that trope lies a deeper, psycho-sexual theme—a masculine fear of the feminine, fear of being feminized.

The film’s narrative alternates between melodramatic scenes on the ground and action scenes in the air. Action sequences in the air function as outlets for the release of inter-personal tensions that develop on the ground. In the film, action sequences tread a fine line between 1) an escape from or avoidance of personal problems and 2) a means of their resolution. Depersonalization—becoming one with the machine, with the airplane—is repeatedly associated with the suppression of emotion. Joe, for example, becomes a victim of his personal desires. He violates the codes of his profession and Geoff’s orders in an attempt to land so that he can have dinner with Bonnie.
Lee. He’s “not good enough” because he gives in to personal desires, which the code of the flyers says must be held in check when they are in the air. Geoff flies off at the end of act one to do his job but also to avoid having to deal with his growing feelings for Bonnie. Similarly, at the end of the film, Tex’s radio report that the pass is clear interrupts Geoff’s answer to Bonnie’s request that he tell her that he wants her to stay. But Geoff actually has found a way of admitting and expressing his emotional needs without seeming to do so. By giving her the Kid’s coin, he tacitly tells her that he loves her.

Joe had earlier functioned as a foil for Geoff. Joe was “no good” because he gave in to personal desires. Geoff errs in the other direction. He represses the personal in favor of the professional. He eliminates the emotional from his world. Though this is perhaps necessary for survival in the world of dangerous action, Geoff’s repression of all desire is, in the larger context of the film, seen as neurotic. Geoff’s power derives, in part, from his denial of “the feminine” within himself. His emotional stoicism is essentially psychologically unhealthy. Bonnie’s function in the film is to restore his emotional health, to re-awaken his repressed feminine side. The Kid’s death reprises that of Joe. With Joe’s death, Geoff repressed his feeling. In answer to Bonnie’s appeals that he not eat the steak that Joe had ordered for himself just before crashing, Geoff replied “Who’s Joe?” effectively denying his existence. But when the Kid dies, Geoff weeps over the small bundle of the dead man’s possessions. Significantly, it is only Bonnie who sees this display of emotion. But when Geoff gives Bonnie the Kid’s coin at the end, he tells Bonnie and the audience that he’s no longer the same Geoff who callously declared “Who’s Joe?” Both she and the audience know that he now cares.

David Bordwell has observed that classical Hollywood narratives engage in “a double causal structure, two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance . . . , the line involving another sphere—work, war, a mission or quest . . .” (Bordwell 19). The “work” or professional plot in Only Angels involves capitalist enterprise. In order to secure a lucrative contract, Geoff must meet the deadlines for regular delivery of the mail for just one more week of the trial period. The heterosexual romance or personal plot interferes with the attainment of this professional goal. In a sense, capitalist enterprise is threatened by the feminine. This threat is figuratively represented in the danger that seeming weakness on the part of the male pilots poses to the attainment of that goal. But it is also quite literal, in the figure of Bonnie Lee. Her entry into the world of Barranca coincides with the arrival
of the mail and threatens to disturb the male order that is charged with its delivery to the inland regions of the country. Bonnie distracts Joe from his duties, disobeys Geoff’s orders, and finally shoots him, preventing him from flying a dangerous mission. The narrative of the film works to contain then neutralize this threat. It does so by integrating Bonnie into the “professional” plot under the unmistakable sign of capital—the phony, two-headed coin that Geoff uses to seal her membership in the community. No one knows better than Howard Hawks that money “talks” and this simple coin says a lot, appropriating the language of one plot—that of capital—to resolve another—that of heterosexual romance.

_Only Angels_ is a film that concerns itself with the formation of a single community—that of the American fliers and the Dutchman who pays their salaries. The surrounding Hispanic population exists primarily as an “outside” against which this inner community defines itself. Hawks gives glimpses of this native culture, seen in that initial dance and musical number, but does little to establish its codes and conventions as a community. In _Stagecoach_, John Ford is concerned with communities—plural. Every character in the film is identified in terms of his or her relationship to one or more communities—from the Mexican-American stagecoach stationmaster and his Apache wife to the Plummer boys, who constitute a community of three—three bad men. There is the law-abiding community of Tonto, the western town in which the film begins. In contrast, there is the lawless community of Lordsburg, the town where the journey and the film end. In between lie the worlds of the Apache, the cavalry, the stagecoach passengers, and the way-stations they encounter on the trip.

Tonto is a city of bright daylight. Its only bar is empty, save for Doc Boone (Thomas Mitchell) who begs a final drink from the bartender before he is to be forcibly ejected from the town. Tonto’s streets are patrolled by the Ladies Law and Order League who march the town’s only prostitute to the coach to make sure that she leaves town. It’s so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. Lordsburg is a city of darkness, noise, and night. We see at least two different saloons. Each is packed with thirsty men and loose women talking loudly so that they can be heard above the boisterous piano music. The town features a red light district with bawdy music emanating from a string of houses. Shots from a gunfight echo in the streets. A lawman permits an outlaw with a price on his head to escape to Mexico. The two towns and the two communities they represent could not be more different.

Those differences reflect an attempt to represent the development
of the West as that development was constructed in both fiction and history. In *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith identified a series of symbols and symbolic historical figures that frequently defined what the West meant in the popular imagination. Real and imaginary heroes, ranging from Daniel Boone, Leatherstocking, and Kit Carson to Buffalo Bill, provided archetypes for what constituted the identity of the typical Westerner. Boone became a site where civilization, in the form of Boone himself, and barbarism, in the form of a Native American antagonist, battled over possession of the landscape. What made Boone interesting was that he also resisted the very civilization that his pioneering explorations inadvertently made possible. As Smith points out, Boone repeatedly fled “westward before the advance of the agricultural frontier” and “the advance of civilization” (Smith 58–59). Buffalo Bill Cody articulated the dilemma of the western hero in more colorful terms, stating “I stood between savagery and civilization most all my early days” (Smith 119). This ambivalence towards civilization emerges as a dominant theme in *Stagecoach*.

Smith also identified two contradictory visions of the West as both garden and desert. On the one hand, the West was a wilderness, a desert, an uninhabitable space incapable of sustaining agricultural life. On the other hand, it held the potential of being transformed into a garden. Insisting that “rain follows the plough,” advocates of westward expansion embraced a myth of the West as a garden, a garden created out of the wilderness.

In Chicago, at a meeting of the American Historical Association on July 12, 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner presented a paper on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” which revolutionized traditional thinking about American history. Turner’s thesis began with a declaration that the frontier, according to the U.S. Census report of 1890, no longer existed. He argued that the existence of the frontier had played crucial role both in American expansion during the nineteenth century and in the shaping of American character as well. Turner maintained that “the peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life” (Turner I, 1 of 21). For Turner, the closing of the frontier marked an end not only to the first period of American history but also to the influence
of the frontier upon the development of American identity. Turner, however, failed to reckon with the movies (and with other popular forms of entertainment within which the Old West survived), which recreated the frontier and, with it, an experience (by proxy) of the frontier for subsequent generations of Americans.

At the frontier, the wilderness meets civilization and, as a consequence of this encounter, the wilderness disappears and is replaced by a frontier society that combines elements of both the wilderness and civilization. As Turner describes it, “gradually this society loses its primitive conditions, and assimilates itself to the type of the older social conditions of the East; but it bears within it enduring and distinguishing survivals of its frontier experience. Decade after decade, West after West, this rebirth of American society has gone on,” transforming it from a European colony into an autonomous nation whose character was determined not by the borrowing from or imitation of Old World culture but by its own unique experience of the New World (Turner VII, 1 of 9).

Turner’s notion of the West structures the communities of Tonto and Lordsburg in *Stagecoach*. Tonto is a western town that has been easternized. The forces of civilization have transformed it into a seemingly lifeless and arid space. Indeed, Tonto would seem to have lost all contact with Nature, to have gone a bit too far in its easternization. A conformist society, deviant social behavior, such as Doc’s drunkenness or Dallas’s shameful past, is not tolerated. Doc Boone and Dallas (Claire Trevor) are introduced as victims of “social prejudice,” of repressive social attitudes that drive them out of town. White, eastern, middle-class culture dominates to the seeming exclusion of other races, ethnicities, or classes. Lordsburg exemplifies the other extreme—the Wild West. Seemingly situated on the frontier, it is less a meeting place of civilization and savagery than a site where the forces of the wilderness still rule. Though a representative of the law appears briefly to arrest the corrupt banker who has embezzled his bank’s funds, this figure quickly disappears, leaving the main character, the Ringo Kid (John Wayne), to take the law into his own hands and to resolve by himself his long-standing dispute with the men who killed his younger brother and father. In the absence of law and order, individuals settle disputes through violence. Lordsburg is clearly no place for the film’s romantic couple who flee it in the last scene, driving their buckboard into the wilderness of the natural landscape outside of town and heading for an idyllic ranch in Mexico. As they drive off, the lawman Curly (George Bancroft) takes off his badge, and Doc Boone remarks, “Well, at least
they’re saved from the blessings of civilization.” Civilization exists in various forms in *Stagecoach*, but in all of its forms, it fails to find the proper balance between individual freedom and the need for order, between natural expression and unnatural repression, and between the opposing poles of Nature and Culture.

The system of difference established by the communities of Tonto and Lordsburg is further elaborated within the ad hoc community of the stagecoach passengers that makes the journey from one town to the other. The stagecoach itself, of course, is a symbol of westward expansion and development, establishing the lines of communication and commerce that tame and civilize the West. In addition to its cargo of social outcasts—Doc, Dallas, Hatfield, and the Ringo Kid—it carries a banker and a whiskey salesman. As with *Only Angels Have Wings*, *Stagecoach* is also a film about capitalist enterprise.

Within this transitory community, conflicts of national identity are played out, represented in regional differences between East and West and North and South. Differences in class intersect with these regional differences, producing a dramatic checkerboard of demographic representation. The film is set in the aftermath of the Civil War—or the “War of the Rebellion,” a term used by Doc Boone, a former member of the Union Army. But was it the “War of the Rebellion”—or the “War for the Southern Confederacy,” as Hatfield (John Carradine), the disgraced son of a southern aristocrat, prefers to put it? This past national conflict plays out in the present in which Hatfield’s chivalric concern for southern womanhood (Lucy Mallory) prompts him to rebuke Boone for smoking in her presence without first asking her permission.

Boone, Hatfield, and Mallory—and along with the banker, Gatewood, and the whiskey drummer, Peacock—are all identified with the East and its values. The other members of the community are westerners. They include the driver, Buck, the lawman, Curly, the outlaw, Ringo, and Dallas. Their differences are conveyed in their very names: the westerners are known by their first names or nicknames only; their proper names are never given. Though Mrs. Mallory is subsequently identified as “Lucy,” no one on the coach calls her by her first name. Like the other easterners, she is only referred to by her last name.

Their differences are also expressed in the modes of dress. The easterners—including Mrs. Mallory—wear suits. The westerners wear broad-brimmed hats, neckerchiefs, dark shirts, and blue jeans. As the Ringo Kid, John Wayne wears his signature army-style suspenders and a placket-front shirt with buttons running down both sides of
the front flap. Unlike Mrs. Mallory, who is dressed conservatively in black and white, Dallas wears a dress with a loud plaid pattern and a frilly petticoat.

Differences between East and West are introduced almost at the film's beginning. As Buck (Andy Devine) helps the passengers out of the coach in Tonto, he tells Mrs. Mallory, “You folks might as well stretch your legs . . . I mean your limbs, ma’am.” Buck suddenly corrects himself, realizing that an eastern lady might be offended by the word “legs.” But their next exchange solidifies the gap between East and West. When Mrs. Mallory asks, “Is there some place where I can have a cup of tea?” Buck responds automatically: “Well, ma’am, you can get a cup of coffee right there in the hotel.” Mrs. Mallory didn’t ask for coffee, she asked for tea—an easterner’s drink. Coffee is what westerner’s drink when they don’t drink whiskey.

The coach’s class divisions tend to follow regional lines with Mrs. Mallory, Hatfield, Gatewood, and (to some extent) Peacock representing middle and upper class values, while the social outcasts—Dallas, Doc Boone, and Ringo—have working class origins. Virtually every scene within the coach puts these regional and class differences into play. But though the community within the coach may be internally divided, it nonetheless functions as a unit in its efforts to reach its destination—in its common struggle against the rugged western landscape of Monument Valley and the inhabitants of the landscape—Geronimo and his band of Apaches. The film’s narrative constantly alternates between dramatic conflict within the coach, filmed in medium shots and close-ups, and long shots of the coach as it moves relentlessly through the inhospitable countryside. These long shots shift the conflict to a more epic plane—that between white culture and its supposed Manifest Destiny and the intransigence of Nature.

The transformation of this heterogeneous group of individuals in the coach into a homogeneous community may be aesthetically driven by the editing pattern that cuts from interior close-ups to exterior long shots, but it is narratively driven by the collective threat posed by Geronimo and the Apaches. At the very start of the film, Geronimo is referenced directly by name and indirectly by the presence of a troop of cavalry dispatched to escort the coach on the first leg of its journey. Midway through the film, we see their smoke signals and flashes of light from their mirror signals in the distance. At the ferry, the passengers on the coach encounter the bodies of their victims: a stationmaster and his wife. Finally, Geronimo and his men appear on a ridge above the coach, then descend to the valley below to attack
it. Here the Apaches seem to rise up out of the landscape. As in the earlier scene with the smoke and mirror signals, the Apaches are identified with the landscape itself. As a result, they emerge as a force of Nature. Like the desert and Monument Valley where they reside, they function as an obstacle that white Americans must overcome in order to build the nation. If, in his subsequent Westerns, Ford attempts to represent, albeit in a limited way, the culture of Native Americans, here they are given no cultural capital with which to establish themselves as a community. They are simply the savage Other whose chief function is to provide a catalyst for the short-term cohesive behavior of the coach’s passengers who resolve their differences under the threat of Indian attack.

The birth of Lucy Mallory’s baby figures as a crucial moment in the creation of this new cohesiveness. Birth becomes a moment for re-birth. Both Doc Boone and Dallas redeem themselves. He does so by successfully delivering the baby and reclaiming his status as a respected doctor. She does so by tending to Mrs. Mallory and caring for the newborn child. All that remains is for the outlaw Ringo to achieve a similar redemption. Once that happens, a new social order can emerge. But before that can occur, two narrative plot lines must be resolved. The threat to the nation, in the form of Geronimo and his men, is eliminated by the re-appearance of the cavalry who rescue the passengers in the coach from Indian attack. If Geronimo posed an external threat to the nation and the communities of the West, there are also internal threats that must be dealt with. With Hatfield’s death and Gatewood’s arrest, discordant voices within the community are silenced. But there is still the issue of Ringo and his revenge. He remains an outlaw and thus an outsider. It is here that the conflict between East and West reappears, and it does so in such a way that absolves Ringo of his outlaw status.

According to the codes of eastern law—the law of Tonto—Ringo is a criminal who has broken out of jail and who intends to break additional laws in avenging the deaths of his father and brother at the hands of the Plummers. But according to the codes of western law, Ringo is innocent. All the westerners, from Buck and Curly to Dallas, know that the Plummers lied when they testified that Ringo killed their foreman, and it was these lies that sent him to prison. And all of the westerners understand that in the West, certain kinds of violence are sanctioned by western codes of behavior. Sometimes, a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. The film’s chief figure of the Law—Curly—implicitly sanctions Ringo’s revenge when he gives
him his rifle in Lordsburg and lets him go off to face the Plummers. Moments later, Curly invokes western justice again when he not only lets Ringo go free but actually sets Ringo’s buckboard in motion by throwing stones at the horses’ rumps and yelling at them to giddy-up. Curly’s blessings are definitely not the blessings of civilization but rather the blessings of western justice.

By the time the film’s characters have reached Lordsburg, divisive notions of regional and class difference disappear. If the older generation remained mired in the oppressive structures of the past—the oppositional tensions between North and South, East and West, as well as the inequities of Old World social structures—Dallas and Ringo are not. Though both are clearly westerners, they belong neither to the West of Tonto nor that of Lordsburg. They belong to a West that could be possible, the West of Populist fantasy—that of the yeoman farmer whose contact with the land is regenerative, redeeming him from the corruption and decadence of urban society. Both Dallas and Ringo are orphans whose parents died violently as victims of the Old West, victims of Indians and outlaws. They are thus free to set off in pursuit of a New West, a democratic utopia rooted in the ownership of land (Ringo, for instance, has a small ranch south of the border in Mexico).

The major communities depicted in Stagecoach—that of Tonto, Lordsburg, and the coach itself—are all dystopian. Each has failed to realize the potential of what it could have been. In this, Ford echoes the ambivalence toward civilization that structures the myths of the West analyzed by Henry Nash Smith. The West is civilization’s Other, a space free of man-made laws, social strictures, and artifice. The West offered freedom, independence, regeneration—not to mention the possibility of future empire and untold wealth. Even though the “blessings of civilization” have proven themselves incapable of harvesting the gifts that the West has to offer, Ford and his central characters remain optimistic. The contact that Dallas and Ringo have had with the various communities depicted in Stagecoach has been essential to the renewal of their essential innocence as children of the West. Though this journey of renewal began in Tonto, it does not end in Lordsburg but continues as the two drive off in their buckboard into a landscape that will lead them to the “lost Eden” of populist fantasy.

As we have seen, what is at issue in both Only Angels Have Wings and Stagecoach is an essential tension that exists between individual identity and desires and the larger identity and desires of the community.
Soviet Socialist Realism celebrated the “maximum development of the individual within the collective, a concept irreconcilably opposed to bourgeois individualism” (Eisenstein 16). The individual was radically reconstituted as a socially enlightened “New Man.” Hollywood celebrated the development of bourgeois subjectivity within a populist collective, i.e. a supportive community in which individual responsibility to the community restored the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy—individual agency based on an economic stake in capitalistic enterprise (e.g., ownership of land or of small businesses). In so doing, Hollywood reaffirmed two myths—that of the individual and that of the community—that were exceedingly problematical in reality. The reality was that of an industrialized, urbanized mass society in which individuals had no agency and community existed more in the abstract than in any concrete manifestation. The production of these myths of the individual and the community helped the nation to negotiate the trauma of industrialization and urbanization and to reconcile Americans to their alienated status within mass society. In this way, it managed popular anxieties about mass culture. As a form of mass culture itself, how could it do otherwise?

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WORKS CITED


