

## ***Stagecoach***

### Essay #2 – Residual non-verbal communication after transition from silent films to those containing audible dialogue

The 1939 film, *Stagecoach*, was John Wayne's first film containing audible dialogue after the silent movie era ended. Due to the transition from silent to audible dialogue movies, certain elements of non-verbal communication are very noticeable after becoming accustomed to modern-day movies. There are some residual aspects of non-verbal communication that tell us about the transition from the silent movie era and how producers first perceived how audible dialogue films should communicate certain elements of the film to the audience.

Throughout the movie, there are often prolonged screenshots of a certain character's face without any dialogue. These pauses are most likely a residual non-verbal communication technique from the silent movie era. Pausing on the character's facial expression without dialogue implies thought or deep concentration about the preceding encounter or dialogue. An example from the film is of Banker Gatewood – after he has a brief conversation with his wife, the camera pauses on his very serious facial expression as if he is feeling bitter and planning his robbery of \$50,000 from his bank.

Similar to the above, another form of non-verbal communication more characteristic of silent films is pausing dialogue during or at the end of a scene. Often while the characters are holding a conversation in a group, the conversation pauses while the characters glance at each other, before the camera takes a different angle and the conversation continues. For example, when Gatewood has a conversation with his wife before he leaves for Lordsburg, and when the stagecoach members are discussing and voting at Dry Fork as to whether they should continue their journey. It's at these moments of pausing that in silent movies would have been the frames containing text. Also, due to the dialogue from silent movies being displayed in text, the amount of dialogue had to be minimized, and so a lot of pauses implied conversation that could be deduced and assumed by the audience.

It is also noticeable throughout the film that gestures are over exaggerated. During the era of silent movies, the films were not only silent, but of a much lower frame rate (having a lower frame rate means that more time passes between individual photos on the film). Because of the large gap between frames, actors often had to over exaggerate their gestures so that they would be captured by the film. If they moved too quickly, their gesture may occur between two frames and thus be lost in the filming. Examples from *Stagecoach* include when the male characters gesture 'ladies first' (laying out their hand in front of them and bowing slightly) and when they're shooting with their guns.

The non-verbal communication techniques used in the film *Stagecoach*, illustrate the difficulties that actors and producers had with communicating with their audience through silent films. When the film industry made the transition from silent to audible dialogue films, however, the producers and cinematographers did not fully utilize the communication capabilities of synchronized audible dialogue, and thus there are residual elements of the silent film era present in early audible dialogue- containing films.