John Ford’s (STAGECOACH) 1939

I am no huge fan of the pre 70’s western and even after. Being that stated I will be reviewing this film under the microscope of its technical and directing merits or lack of. To begin I must state that Ford has a way of abusing a camera shot. If he isn’t exhausting the extreme wide shot to allow the majesty of the old west wash upon the screen then he is abandoning the rules of thirds as he make use of a centered medium shot over and over again. I read that STAGECOACH was Fords first return film after he took a 13 year break and he must have not learned a thing that would expand his abilities to frame a film using more radical methodologies.

Moreover you can’t help but to notice that when he does follow the framing rules it is a bit too on the nose. I somewhat digress in that maybe his lack of experimental direction is due to him allowing the story to compel the audience and not the visual placement of the action. In saying that I also noticed that the dialog began at a machine gun pace, I suppose that was a necessity to get the story going “establishing the character personalities” in both their class and status. Speaking of which Ford uses a abundance of “flip flop” shots when dialog is heavy, maybe this is just something I am no fan of but it appears unnecessary.

While continuing to watch STAGECOACH I also made notice of Ford exhausting the lock down camera shot. It was rear is ever that the camera dollied or tracked any character or action. Speaking of characters, I must state that I did enjoy the overall acting. The roles in which were portrayed were executed well.

Fords use of rear projection was clumsy to state the least. I could not get around that fact. Also one thing that drove me crazy was the many characters use of the line “Have I seen \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ before?” This was a clear effort to arrange the mysterious histories that some the characters shared from either the past or romantic prowess.

All in all I do understand why this film has set the ground rules for a great many Western films to come. Many of the same issues I had with the direction of the camera and exploitation of cuts and expansive wide shots of the desert are what might be needed to let the audience in on the desolation and dire straits of the environment that was the west.