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Steinbeck, Guthrie and Zanuck: a Dust Bowl Triptych. The Intertextual Life of *The Grapes of Wrath* on Paper, Celluloid and Vinyl

Abstract. In a world where the arts have become one more target for multimedia corporations it is worth remembering the more authentic intertextuality of works which appeared around 1940, i.e. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Darryl F. Zanuck and John Ford's film of the same name, and the songs of Woody Guthrie. Never before had literature, cinema and song been so intimately and powerfully linked, and nothing since has come near to replicating this unique symbiosis.

Keywords: Dust Bowl, Great Depression, intertextuality.

Along with blatant product placement in films Hollywood accountants today build into their projects spin-offs and tie-ins, such as board games, school accessories, books of the film, clothing, and anything else that can capture the imaginations and money of the audience. In a less cynical age the process was more organic. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (published 75 years ago this April) inspired Darryl F. Zanuck and John Ford to make their great film of the same name, and Woody Guthrie to write songs celebrating its characters. As the journalist Alan Yuhas recently pointed out, "[Steinbeck] inspired Cesar Chavez and John Kennedy; Bruce Springsteen and Woody Guthrie (and [by extension Rage Against the Machine](#)); John Ford and South Park." Yunas goes on to say that *The Grapes of Wrath* "means just as much to the US now as it did in 1939, when the Dust Bowl destroyed the American west, the economy lay in tatters, a minority held the keys to the bank, and a vast migrant population wandered without homes or rights." (www.theguardian.com). The relevance of the book, the film and the songs is today undisputed, and the harmony of the intertextuality involved has never been equalled, let alone bettered.

Historical background

In the 1930s a great tragedy befell the southern plains of the United States, with Kansas, Oklahoma, Northwest Texas, New Mexico and Colorado worst affected. Vast tracts of land, exhausted by bad farming practice, simply blew away into the air, choking homesteads, farms and communities, and the people who inhabited them; thousands died of 'Dust Pneumonia' or because of the hardships suffered on the road as they escaped. The result became known as the Dust Bowl, or the Dirty Thirties, and it forced the largest peacetime migration in U.S. History; by 1940 2.5m people had left the Plains States.

Coming so soon after the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 it is perhaps too easy to blame the seemingly heartless actions of banks which foreclosed on impoverished farmers on the unregulated, *laissez faire* economic climate which had prevailed in the twenties. The fact is that a combination of events, both natural and man-made, caused the disaster. Two hundred thousand or so headed west, through New Mexico or Colorado and Arizona, to what they thought might be a better life in California. The historically unique plight of the migrants was

of course witnessed and documented by news media at the time, best illustrated by the haunting photographs of Dorothea Lange, but the fact that this disaster was forever burned into the collective psyche of Americans is because John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie and Darryl F. Zanuck produced works of art that searingly told the heartbreaking story of the Dust Bowl refugees. In literature, cinema and song their Dust Bowl triptych stands as testimony to what artists can do to raise consciousness and to change society.

The seeds of disaster

After the Civil War, the new railroad, along with the wartime *Homestead Act* of 1863, encouraged migrants to head west to the Great Plains, an area which was unsuitable for intensive agriculture because it suffered prolonged periods of drought between deceptively promising periods of good rains. At first cattle were raised, but after several harsh winters in the 1890s the settlers turned to arable farming. A period of wet years, along with increased prices for crops during WWI, further encouraged farmers to intensify production, and real estate companies coined the ludicrous slogan, "Rain follows the plow". Land was overploughed, crop rotation was not used and stubble was burned, and these abuses, coupled with more droughts, led to the atrocious conditions of the Dust Bowl.

By 1931 the over-ploughed land had lost its layer of native grasses, and was unable to resist yet another water shortage. The dust storms began: fourteen that year and nearly forty in 1932. In November 1933 a storm removed the topsoil from South Dakota farmland, and in one of the worst storms, in May, 1934, the dust blew for two days and blew away the topsoil over vast areas of the Great Plains. Worse was yet to come. On "Black Sunday", April 14, 1935, as many as twenty dust storms raged across the plains. Woody Guthrie remembered that day in an interview with Alan Lomax for the U.S. Library of Congress archive in 1940:

It got so black when that thing hit we all run into the house, and all the neighbors had congregated...We sat there in a little old room and it got so dark you couldn't see your hand before your face. You couldn't see anybody in the room. You could turn on...a good strong electric lightbulb in a little room...and that electric lightbulb hanging in the room looked just about like a cigarette a'burning. (Lomax, Library of Congress interview.)

The Dust Bowl left homes and farms uninhabitable, and the suffering was appalling, with already impoverished people, many heavily in debt, having to fight an unequal battle with the relentless and merciless dust. It was hopeless, and at last they faced up to the inevitable and hit the road. It should be noted that not all the migrants were farmers. As farms became unworkable and uninhabitable, so did towns, and about a third of those that left the Dust Bowl area were white collar workers, although the majority who chose to head west to California were, naturally enough, farming folk.

On their way west these migrants, perhaps understandably, met with hostility in the areas they passed through. These were hard times for everybody, and the Great Depression hardened hearts which might otherwise have been welcoming. There was simply not enough work for everyone. The conditions on the road were miserable. People stopped where they were allowed to and set up squalid makeshift camps. The sanitary conditions and the hardship can only be imagined. The misery, degradation and exploitation would continue, to greater or lesser degrees, throughout the thirties, only partly alleviated by Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives (most farm relief went to farmers; those who hit the road had lost their land).

Hindsight is, of course, always 20/20, and we now know that the Dust Bowl was the result of greed and folly, but it seems that the lessons of the past are inconvenient to the powerful of the present. There is so much money to be made that it seems foolish to some not to reap the short term benefits. As Alan Yunas argues: "Today, megafarms and meat companies carve out sections of the market, divide and conquer farmers with debt, and control the food industry; the culprits include Cargill for corn, Tyson for meat, and Monsanto for its infamously creative genetics." (www.guardian.com)

The artists

Woody Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma in 1912. Raised in a fairly prosperous family whose fortunes swiftly declined amid great personal suffering and tragedy, Guthrie left school early and began making a living by signwriting and with his guitar, playing traditional American folk songs, as well as English and Scottish tunes. Guthrie describes Okemah in his semi-autobiographical novel *Bound for glory*:

Okemah was an Oklahoma farming town since the early days, and it had about an equal number of Indians, Negroes, and whites doing their trading there. [...] Ours was just another of those little towns, I guess, about a thousand or so people, where everybody knows everybody else; and on your way to the post office, you'd nod and speak to so many friends that your neck would be rubbed raw when you went in to get your mail if there was any. (Guthrie, *Bound For Glory*. p.37)

Married at 19, Guthrie moved with others from the Plains States when the dust came. His music was earthy, accessible, and immediately resonated with the people whose lives he shared. One of Guthrie's many 'Dust Bowl Ballads' is '*Dust Can't Kill Me*':

That old dust storm killed my baby but it can't kill me, Lord
And it can't kill me
That old dust storm killed my family but it can't kill me, Lord
And it can't kill me
That old landlord and he got my homestead but he can't get me, Lord
And he can't get me
That old dry spell killed my crop, boys, but it can't kill me, Lord
And it can't kill me (Guthrie, *Dust Bowl Ballads*.)

John Steinbeck, ten years Guthrie's senior, was brought up in a rural Californian town, and although his family was established and well-off he was well aware of the hardships of migrant workers. It was these hardships, along with Steinbeck's increasingly radical politics, that inspired him to expand on seven articles he had written for the San Francisco News in 1936 on migrant workers. Their suffering angered him, and he took the opportunity to vent his considerable spleen in '*The Grapes of Wrath*', which, as well as winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1940, was banned from libraries and schools, and ritually burned in California. The following quote shows the depth of Steinbeck's feelings, and where he thought the blame should lie:

I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this. [the Great Depression and its effects]. (Steinbeck, in Benson 1990: 371)

In a later interview for Albany University, New York, Steinbeck seems more understanding of the residents of California and the towns along the way, whose often unfriendly reception of the migrants saddened and angered many of those on the road:

When I wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* I was filled, naturally, with certain angers at people who were doing injustices to other people, so I thought. I realise now that everyone was caught in the same trap. If you remember, we had had a depression at that time. The depression caught us without the ability to take care of it. It took a long time for us to develop the agencies to take care of such economic difficulties.

When the dust came people were starving and they had no place to go, and naturally they went in a direction in which they would not suffer from cold; they went toward California. They came in their thousands to California. And what did they meet? They met a people who were terrified of depression, and were horrified at the idea that great numbers of indigent people were being poured on them to be taken care of. They could only be taken care of by taxation. Taxes were already high and there wasn't much money about. They reacted perfectly normally: they became angry. And when you become angry you fight what you are angry at. They were angry at the newcomers. (Albany University interview.)

John Steinbeck was aware of Guthrie's work, and recognised that the plain words Guthrie used were in keeping with the lives of plain people with extraordinary problems:

Harsh voiced and nasal . . . there is nothing sweet about Woody, and there is nothing sweet about the songs he sings. But there is something more important for those who will listen. There is the will of the people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit. (Klein 1981: 160)

In *The Grapes of Wrath* the Joad family, made homeless by the effects of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, head out to California along with thousands of others in search of work. On their travels they encounter the highly politicized hostility prevalent among farmers and farm owners, as well as their henchmen, the police and their often hastily sworn-in deputies, often little more than thugs who acted as strike-breakers and *agents-provocateurs*. Politically aware people in the thirties would have recent memories of violence against workers. In 1914 a tent colony of striking miners in Ludlow, Colorado was brutally attacked by the Colorado National Guard. Two women and eleven children were burned to death in a tent set on fire by National Guardsmen. This incident became known as *The Ludlow Massacre* (commemorated in a song by Guthrie). The strike saw perhaps two hundred dead in total. This incident, along with many others, politicized some and terrified more American working people.

Just a year after the book's publication the film producer **Darryl F. Zanuck** put it on the screen, with **John Ford** directing and **Henry Fonda** playing the main character, Tom Joad. Before production started, the politically conservative Zanuck sent people out to California to see whether Steinbeck had exaggerated the migrants' conditions. They reported back that he hadn't. In fact, Eleanor Roosevelt, no less, defended Steinbeck's accuracy. (Shillinglaw). Steinbeck himself said that, if anything, he had underplayed the suffering so as not to demand too much of his readers' credibility. The result was a film of great honesty and power, with John Ford's masterful direction and **Gregg Toland's** inspired cinematography doing justice to a superb cast lead by Fonda.

In the film we see an agricultural labour agent challenged by migrants who have become aware of the underhand tricks of the big landowners. The edited text below is from screenwriter **Nunnally Johnson**'s screenplay:

AGENT: You men want to work?

PA: Sure we wanta work. Where's it at?

AGENT: Tulare County. Fruit's opening up. Need a lot of pickers.

FIRST MAN: What you payin'?

AGENT: Well, can't tell exactly, yet. 'Bout thirty cents, I guess.

FLOYD (quietly): All right, mister. I'll go. You just show your license to contract, an' then you make out a order, where an' when an' how much you gonna pay, an' you sign it an' we'll go.

AGENT (ominously): You trying to tell me how to run my own business?

FLOYD: 'F we're workin' for you, it's our business too.

AGENT (tough): Listen, Smart Guy. I'll run my business my own way

(The squatting men have risen one by one.)

FLOYD: Twicet now I've fell for that line. Maybe he needs a thousan' men. So he get's five thousan' there, an' he'll pay fifteen cents a hour. An' you guys'll have to take it 'cause you'll be hungry.

AGENT (turning): Joe!

(The other man gets out of the coupe. He wears riding breeches and laced boots, carries a pistol and cartridge belt, and there is a deputy sheriff's star on his brown shirt)

DEPUTY (entering): What's the trouble?

AGENT (pointing at Floyd): Ever see this guy before?

DEPUTY: What'd he do?

AGENT: He's agitatin'.

DEPUTY: Hmmm. (Giving Floyd a looking over) Seems like I have. Seems like I seen him hangin' around that used car lot that was busted into. (Sharply) Get in that car.

TOM: You got nothin' on him.

DEPUTY: Open your trap again and you'll go too.

AGENT (to the men): You fellas don't wanta lissen to troublemakers.

DEPUTY: Might be a good idea to do what he says. Too many of you Okies aroun' here already. Folks beginnin' to figger it ain't maybe "safe". Might start a epidemic or sump'n. (After a pause) Wouldn't like a bunch a guys down here with pick handles tonight, would you? (www.dailyscript.com)

Local people, scared for their own jobs, were easily convinced that the migrant workers were communists. The following passage from the book is a report of a landowner's take on the politico-economic nuances of the situation:

...Well, he's all a time talkin' about "them goddamn reds". "Goddamn reds is drivin' the country to ruin," he says, an' "We got to drive these here red bastards out". Well, there were a young fella jus' come out west here, an' he's listenin' one day. He kinda scratched his head an' he says: "Mr Hines, I ain't been here long. What is these goddamn reds?" Well, sir, Hines says: "A red is any son-of-a-bitch that wants thirty cents an hour when we're payin' twenty-five! (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 349)

Despite what some have said, including Guthrie's great admirer Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie was not a communist. He wrote for communist papers and sang at communist meetings, but he was never cut out to be a doctrinaire political animal. He was a true man of the people, and a faithful chronicler of the Dust Bowl in song. Not apolitical, just too

independent to take part in the labyrinthine machinations of communist politics; anyway the intelligentsia bored him. But Guthrie knew all about the sherrifs and their thuggish deputies who enforced the landowners' interpretation of the law. Guthrie's song, *Vigilante Man*, asks why poor people are willing to oppress other poor people in order to support their common oppressor. The song mentions perhaps the most important character from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Jim Casy, a former preacher who has lost his faith in the God of his fathers, but seems to have found a new, somewhat mystical faith in man:

Preacher Casy was just a workin' man,
And he said, "Unite all you working men."
Killed him in the river some strange man.
Was that a vigilante man?
Oh, why does a vigilante man,
Why does a vigilante man
Carry that sawed-off shot-gun in his hand?
Would he shoot his brother and sister down? (Guthrie, *Dust Bowl Ballads*)

In a broadcast on WNYC radio in 1940 Guthrie talked about being inspired by the film to write *The Ballad of Tom Joad*:

Here's a song that has to do with a book and a motion picture that come out here a while back by the name of *The Grapes of Wrath*, wrote down by a man, John Steinbeck, that threw a pack on his back and went right out among the people to see just what is going on in the United States, and it just so happened that he hit a jackpot because he knew where he was going, he knew what he was writing about. So, I didn't read the book but then I seen the picture three times, and I come home, I sat down, I wrote up a little piece about it. The name of this is *The Ballad of Tom Joad*. (Yurchenco.)

Tom Joad's farewell to his mother must have deeply affected the cinema-going Guthrie, as this extract from the song shows:

Tom run back where his mother was asleep
He woke her up out of bed
And he kissed goodbye to the mother that he loved
Said what Preacher Casy said, Tom Joad,
He said what Preacher Casy said:
Everybody might be just one big soul
Well it looks that way to me,
Everywhere that you look in the day or night
That's where I'm agonna be, Ma
That's where I'm agonna be.
Where every little children are hungry and cryin'
Wherever people ain't free,
Wherever men are fightin' for their rights
That's where I'm agonna be, Ma
That's where I'm agonna be (Yurchenco.)

Ma Joad, according to Susan Shillinglaw of San Jose State University, is "...a feminist — feisty, strong, loving, resilient — and the kind of leader, then and now, who might guide the nation's jalopy through difficult times." Shillinglaw goes on to argue that "America needs

a Ma Joad in the White House[...]President Ma Joad wouldn't cut food stamps. She wouldn't deny education to immigrant children. She wouldn't trim funds for the homeless. She would remind each American that lending a hand to those at the bottom is a quality of the species, *Homo sapiens*.

Preacher Casy, the Christ-like figure in *The Grapes of Wrath*, played by John Carradine in the movie, is ultimately killed by vigilante men, but leaves behind a spiritual legacy that is deeply human and affecting. His theology is more Sermon on the Mount than Pauline dogma; more Thomas Paine than Karl Marx; more Christian, perhaps, than Christianity. Casy saw God in everyman, and held everyman responsible for his conduct towards everyone else. Tom Joad has to leave his family after killing a deputy, and his last speech to his mother encapsulates this almost pantheistic mysticism. Nunnally Johnson quotes the book almost verbatim in the film version:

Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where - wherever you can look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' - I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build - why, I'll be there. See? God, I'm talkin' like Casy. Comes of thinkin' about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes. (Steinbeck, GOW, p.494)

Seventy-five years ago migrant workers were treated abominably, but has much really changed? Alan Yunas states that:

The Obama administration has deported more people ([about 2m](#) – nearly four times the documented population of Wyoming) than any other American government, and a congressional mandate to the Border Patrol requires they hold 34,000 undocumented migrants in custody every day. Authorities chase farmers without papers through forests and across deserts, splitting families and deporting lifelong residents. Nor do Steinbeck's stories of police abuse seem out of place in a country where local law enforcement sometimes merits federal inquiry (www.theguardian.com).

In 1962 John Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his acceptance speech Steinbeck seems to say much the same thing his characters had said over twenty years before. In his closing remarks he starts by referring to the detonation of the atom bomb, before subverting a scriptural passage in order to highlight man's own responsibility for his actions:

Less than fifty years after his [Alfred Nobel's] death the door of nature was unlocked, and we were offered a dreadful burden of choice. We have usurped many of the powers we once ascribed to God. Fearful and unprepared, we have assumed leadership over the life or death of the whole world, of all living things. The danger and the glory and the choice rest finally in man. The test of his perfectibility is at hand. Having taken God-like power, we must seek in ourselves for the responsibility and the wisdom we once prayed some deity might have. Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope. So that today St. John the apostle may well be paraphrased:
"In the end is the word, and the word is Man, and the word is with men." (Steinbeck, Nobel Speech.)

Many books have been adapted for the screen, and many famous songs are associated with the films in which they were used, but there has ever been intertextual symbiosis to the

extent that we have seen between John Steinbeck's great novel, Woody Guthrie's evocative music, and Zanuck and Ford's heart-rending film. That all of them are highly relevant to today's world is both testimony to their power, and a reason to feel sadness and shame.

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