

THE GRAPES OF WRATH
Filming a Controversial Novel in 1940s Hollywood

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Director John Ford's Academy Award-winning film, *The Grapes of Wrath*, is an enduring visual document of the American Great Depression. Like the John Steinbeck best-selling novel from which it was adapted, the movie vividly captures the harsh and demeaning circumstances faced by migrant farmers when they are forced to leave their farms and move westward, driven by the desperate belief they would find work in California. Many of the novel's more controversial elements, however, are downplayed or altered in the film. Steinbeck's indictment of California agribusiness as a contributor to the migrant problem along with his belief that the way for migrant farmers to protect themselves against unfair labor practices was to band together and unionize were shaded or minimized in the film version. As Robert Silberman notes in his essay on Ford in Gary Crowds' *The Political Companion to American Film*, "Ford's version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, as has many times been pointed out, is less radical than the book."¹

The changes that soften the film from the novel illustrate the influences of the personal visions of the filmmakers and as well as the realities of dealing with a controversial subject in 1940s Hollywood. Ford and perhaps more significantly, Darryl F. Zanuck who produced and edited the film, each had their own vision of how to turn such a story into a film that would move, entertain, and ultimately appeal to a broad American audience. What was – or wasn't – presented and how it was presented in the film was also affected by the very active power of the Hollywood censors during this era which made it difficult to show any American institution in a less than favorable light.²

As a novelist, Steinbeck didn't face that problem. His novel gave a human face to the realities faced by thousands of small migrant farmers while also informing and educating readers about the unfair position the migrants found themselves in once they reached California. In his heart, Steinbeck was a novelist who, according to Charles J. Shindo in *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination*, "withdrew into the realm of

¹ Robert Silberman, "John Ford," *The Political Companion to American Film*, ed. Gary Crowds, with a foreword by Edward Asner (n.p. Lakeview Press, 1994), 148.

² George F. Custen, *Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood* (n.p. BasicBooks, Perseus Books, L.L.C., 1997), 149.

literature to express his concerns and ideas about the migrants.”³ In his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in 1962, Steinbeck spoke of the “ancient commission of the writer” in “exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement.”⁴ *The Grapes of Wrath* reflects the seriousness of his purpose.

Steinbeck’s novel chronicles the struggles of one migrant family, the Joads, after they are forced by natural disasters, mechanization, and big business to leave their land and home in Oklahoma to search for work in California. When they reach California, they enjoy a brief period of hope after they enter a federal government camp where they are treated with respect and given help and education in self-government. Yet, Steinbeck has them leave the camp to find work. More hardships follow as they are hired as strikebreakers at a peach factory. The Joads’ oldest son, Tom, kills a man in self-defense. His sister, Rose-of-Sharon, gives birth to a stillborn baby.

Although Tom leaves the family to avoid bringing trouble upon them, he has been awakened to the idea that by working with others of like mind, he has a chance to make a difference in improving conditions for the downtrodden. The lesson of Steinbeck’s novel as Shindo sees it, is that “the unity of the migrants is the key to regaining their dignity, their proper place in society.”⁵ While Tom’s new-found sense of calling gives a feeling of hope – however slight – that life may someday be better for the migrants, Steinbeck’s final words leave a sense of uneasiness around the Joads’ future. The novel ends with a disturbing image of Rose-of-Sharon giving her childless breast to a dying man. It is not an uplifting ending, but an uncertain and unsettling one.

After *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in October 1939, it became an instant bestseller, despite or perhaps because of the immediacy of its troublesome subject matter and the realistic, yet humanistic way in which it was presented. Almost immediately, Darryl Zanuck knew he wanted to make a film of the controversial novel. In insisting on filming *The Grapes of Wrath*, Zanuck realized “he was taking a gamble. He was told people ‘wanted to see the brighter side of life on the screen, particularly in a period of economic

³ Charles J. Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1997), 66.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

gloom.”⁶ Zanuck also realized that he had to contend with the Hollywood censors – the Production Code Administration (PCA) – and their “suggestions” on what was acceptable.

In spite of the obstacles, Zanuck, along with director John Ford and scriptwriter Nunnally Johnson, proceeded to bring the novel to life on the screen. One of their challenges was to recreate the harshness of the Joads’ struggle. As George F. Custen notes in *Twentieth Century’s Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood*:

The studio offered up something even Steinbeck could never deliver: the look and the sound of the Joads’ world. John Ford’s supreme visual sense was given life by cinematographer Gregg Toland’s magnificent black-and-white cinematography. The film’s score was made up largely of sparingly used American folk songs, most memorably “Red River Valley.”⁷

By creating a realistic feeling of the brutal circumstances faced by the Joads and others like them – their anger and bewilderment at being forced from their land and farms; their precarious migration westward with their meager possessions crammed aboard a broken-down old truck; their sense of powerlessness and shame as they were demeaned by others of more wealth and power; their stoic acceptance of death along their journey; the faces of helplessness found in squalid camps where children were driven to beg for food – Ford managed to movingly show the bleakness and relentless hardships of the migrants. In fact, after being allowed by Zanuck to view the completed film before it opened, Steinbeck told his agent: “Zanuck has more than kept his word. He has a hard, straight picture in which the actors are submerged so completely that it looks and feels like a documentary film and certainly it has a hard, truthful ring. No punches are pulled.”⁸

However, in other notable ways, Ford’s vision of the rugged American individual – as well as Zanuck’s ideas of what would be acceptable to the PCA censors and what would ultimately sell movies to the American public – was also responsible for crucial changes that contributed to the often-remarked criticism that movie was less honest and critical than the novel. John Ford had already created a well-recognized body of work by the time he directed *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ford was a storyteller, and he used the relatively modern medium of film as a way to reach out to the popular masses and tell stories with a

⁶ Custen, 229.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

straightforward, heartfelt message. According to Shindo, “his technique bordered on the innovative, yet his stories centered on such traditional values as American individualism, frontier democracy, and the fight of good people against corrupting institutions.”⁹

Although later in life Ford’s optimistic vision of America darkened, the triumph of the spirit of the rugged individual over adversity was reflected in his films before and after *The Grapes of Wrath*, including *Stagecoach* and *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941).¹⁰ According to Robert A. Rosenstone in *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, this viewpoint was typical of Hollywood’s approach to radicalism in the 1930s.

The thirties brought forth a number of films in which common people were downtrodden and oppressed by rich businessmen or bankers [...] any revolutionary thrust dissolved into a sentimental insistence upon the Christian virtues of ‘little people’ banding together, caring for one another, indulging in brotherly love, and hoping for the future.¹¹

Because he shared that vision of the American character, Ford imparted a sense of grace and dignity to the Joads. In Steinbeck’s novel, the suffering family seemed somehow less capable of rising above their problems by themselves.¹² Ford, however, portrayed them as strong, sympathetic survivors, even in their ignorance and poverty and discouragement. He filmed their migration westward as an epic journey to reach a better life, a theme he often turned to especially his earlier westerns. Indeed, Silberman feels that “no filmmaker was more important in representing American history, American myths, and American values than John Ford - and not just because he made John Wayne a major star and Monument Valley the archetypal Western landscape.”¹³

Behind Ford’s contribution to a kinder, gentler *Grapes of Wrath*, however, are the less well-known actions of Darryl Zanuck. Zanuck first used his role as producer to help influence the script even before it was written by Johnson and later edited the final cut of the movie after filming was completed by Ford. Zanuck was a realist, and while he felt he

⁸ Rudy Behlmer, *Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck: The Golden Years at Twentieth Century-Fox* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 35; quoted in George F. Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood* (New York: BasicBooks, Perseus Books, L.L.C., 1997), 231.

⁹ Shindo, 148

¹⁰ Silberman, 147, 152.

¹¹ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1995), 87-88.

¹² Shindo, 73.

¹³ Silberman, 147.

could address the same issues as Steinbeck's novel, he knew that to get *The Grapes of Wrath* past the PCA censors and also to create a movie that would appeal to the general public, there would have to be trade-offs to avoid angering different institutions or appear to be lecturing American moviegoers.¹⁴

To achieve those ends, Zanuck avoided emphasizing a major controversial theme of Steinbeck's novel – the idea of organizing labor – and instead, as noted by George F. Custen in *Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood*, “was content to suggest something as vague as that the American spirit would overcome the Depression.”¹⁵ To head off possible lawsuits from California agribusiness, Zanuck also took the advice of the studio's Publicity Department to give the impression it was trouble-making, fly-by-night labor contractors who were distributing thousands of flyers to the migrants announcing work for everyone (when in fact there were only enough jobs for a few hundred workers) to avoid suggesting that big growers in California were helping to create the worsening situation there.¹⁶

In order to present a more optimistic slant than the novel, Zanuck also changed the order of two significant scenes. He moved the exploitative scenes of the Joads being taken advantage of when they are hired as strikebreakers and which results in Casy's death and Tom's subsequent killing of Casy's murderer to *before* their warm welcome at the government's camp.¹⁷ It is a subtle way to not have the good feelings of the government camp shattered by the brutality of the murders.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the novel and the film, however, is the change in the ending, something Zanuck voiced concerns over but did nothing about during the shooting. In early conversations with Steinbeck, he brought up the fact that the PCA would censor certain sections, such the ending with Rose-of-Sharon, and also pointed out that Hollywood audiences might find the ending too unsatisfying or inconclusive.¹⁸ Yet, it wasn't until filming was complete and John Ford was in Honolulu that Zanuck made the final editing cuts to the film. At that point, he took an earlier scene

¹⁴ Custen, 233.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

of Ma Joad speaking and, according to Custen, “rewrote it so it became not just the ending he was looking for, but a scene that served as a valedictory for the entire film.”¹⁹

Instead of Steinbeck’s final uncertain and unsettling image of Rose-of-Sharon giving her breast to a dying man after her baby was stillborn, the film ends with Ma’s quiet, yet forceful speech and the swelling strains of “Red River Valley” in the background:

Rich fellas come up and they die. And their kids ain’t no good and they die out. But we keep a comin’. We’re the people that live. They can’t wipe us out, they can’t lick us. We’ll go on forever, Pa, ‘cause we’re the people.

The Grapes of Wrath premiered on January 24, 1940, and like the novel on which it was based, became an instant success. Frank Nugent’s glowing review in the New York Times of January 25 stated that the film “is just about as good as any picture has a right to be.”²⁰ Perhaps Zanuck and Ford could have fought to retain more of the radicalism of Steinbeck’s novel. Yet, in doing so they would not have been as true to their own vision of the film they wanted to make, for personal - or practical - reasons. And in the end, despite the compromises and alterations that it underwent in its adaptation from novel to film, “even its author acknowledged that *The Grapes of Wrath* reached the screen with his novel’s spirit, mood, and feeling intact.”²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 237.

²⁰ Pare Lorentz, *FDR’s Moviemaker: Memoirs & Scripts* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1992), 139.

²¹ Ibid., 238.

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