

From Prose to Picture: Critical Reflections on the Road and the Journey in John Steinbeck's and John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Abstract. Since its release in 1940, John Ford's adaptation of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* has sustained significant popular interest. However, the film adaptation has been more frequently analyzed for its thematic content than appreciated for its visual aesthetics, likely due to its connection with Ford's established cinematic legacy and its alignment with the broader corpus of works addressing the socio-economic struggles of Depression-era America. The aim of this article is to critically examine the visual significance of the road and the archetypal myth of the highway in Ford's interpretation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The analysis begins by exploring the theme of the journey as represented in Steinbeck's novel, and then narrowing the focus to the portrayal of this motif in Ford's cinematic adaptation. Within the literary text, the journey serves as a metaphor for dispossession, whereas in the film, the motifs of the "road" and "travel" substantiate the film's alignment with the road movie genre. Ultimately, this article argues that Steinbeck's novel was instrumental in shaping Hollywood's enduring fascination with the journey and the road, themes which would later be re-elaborated in the road movie, a cinematic reworking of the road narrative.

Keywords: road movie, road narrative, Ford, Steinbeck, adaptation, road myth.

Įš prozos į filmą: kelio ir kelionės tropai Johno Steinbecko ir Johno Fordo *Rūstybės kekėse*

Santrauka. Amerikiečių režisieriaus Johno Fordo 1940 m. pristatyta Johno Steinbecko romano *Rūstybės kekės* adaptacija niekada nestokojo žiūrovų dėmesio, tačiau kritinėje filmo recepcijoje, atsispiriant nuo režisieriaus kinematografinio palikimo ir Didžiosios depresijos estetinių interpretacijų įvairovės kine, daugiausia dėmesio visada buvo skiriama teminei kinematografinio pasakojimo dimensijai, o ne vizualinei estetikai. Straipsnyje analizuojama vizualinė kelio metafora Fordo adaptacijoje ir jos sąsajos su kultūriniu amerikietiškosios svajonės mitu. Pirmiausia kelionės tematika nagrinėjama Steinbecko romane, išskiriant kelionės kaip tremties metaforą, vėliau atskleidžiama, kaip kelio ir kelionės tropai filme pagrindžia kelio filmo žanrinę logiką. Straipsnyje akcentuojama, kad Steinbecko romanas iš esmės prisidėjo prie kelio ir kelionės tropų įamžinimo amerikiečių literatūroje ir Holivudo kinematografinėje atmintyje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: kelio filmas, kelionės pasakojimas, Johnas Fordas, Johnas Steinbeckas, adaptacija, kelio mitas.

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Introduction

John Steinbeck's landmark novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) has recently gained renewed attention in light of its continued relevance to contemporary issues, particularly migration, human displacement, and economic instability within the American context. (Chougrani, 2023; Konrad, 2021). In a similar vein, John Ford's acclaimed film adaptation of Steinbeck's novel is widely regarded as Hollywood's most critical cinematic representation of the Great Depression.¹ Examined from several critical perspectives, "*The Grapes of Wrath* has been more frequently looked *into* than looked *at*. Its visual surfaces have been hardly explored and mapped, its texture and tone have been rarely considered as functions of its imagery, and its dominant thematic emphasis has been only minimally related to its visual style" (Sobchack, 1979, p. 596).

Within the field of adaptation studies, scholars have explored the relationship between novel and film, examining both the intersecting and diverging characteristics of these two mediums. In the case of a film like *The Grapes of Wrath*, the comparative approach has been the most straightforward. However, the visual importance of the film and Ford's emphasis on the visuality of the road through the use of cinematographic techniques have received minimal attention thus far and will be the final and focal point of this study. Analysis of Ford's film has seen the predominance of content over imagery, mostly considering Ford's deletions or additions, so much so that the significance and importance of visuality has been often ignored. Limiting this analysis to Ford's film and its faithfulness to Steinbeck's novel, in what follows I will examine the film's visual style, with a specific focus on the visual importance of the road.

To do so, this article will first examine the use of the journey motif in Steinbeck's novel and its adherence to the "road narrative" genre. The analysis will then shift its focus onto the cinematic adaptation and Ford's visual transformation of one of the novel's thematic tropes into a "road movie." Examining the adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* through the lens of visuality reveals Ford's conception of the road and travel as some of the most enduring, readily identifiable, and quintessentially American myths (Boczowska, 2023, p. 1). Any comprehensive study of an adaptation should begin with an examination of the source material, including its form and content. As such, a preliminary analysis of the novel's thematic concerns will constitute the first phase of this analysis.

America's Road Myth and the Journey Motif

American culture is replete with stories employing mobility and the journey as powerful tropes to represent a physical and emotional challenge. In American culture, mobility is a constant, so much so that the United States is more about routes than roots (Cresswell, 2006,

¹ Despite the undeniable popularity of the film, the production process was challenging due to the controversial nature of the novel. While filming on location in Oklahoma and Texas, the crew presented the project to the local authorities as a film titled *Highway 66* (Alonge, 2014, p. 149). In general, Ford's adaptation was positively greeted by the audience and the film industry, earning Ford seven Oscar nominations and two awards including best director.

pp. 1-2), and the road has become an emblem of the symbolic achievement of freedom. Indeed, travel is such a recurrent theme in the United States that its presence has been consistent across the earliest examples of American fiction. As Janis Stout points out, “The American literary tradition has been characterized to a remarkable and peculiar degree, by narratives and images of journeys” (1983, p.3).² Critical studies have also established how “As both a country and a concept, America was founded on movement [...] so that travel within the continent played a significant role” (Cox, 2005, p.1). If spatial movement and nomadism have been some of the primary expressions of American life, “travel has been one of the defining characteristics of American people” (Primeau, 1996, p.5).³

Scholars and public intellectuals argue that, in the context in which Steinbeck set the novel, “racial oppression was central to the exploration of farm labor including Dust Bowl migrants” (Wald, 2009, p.481). As Americans tamed the “vanishing” frontier and shaped a new image of the American West, the experience of white migration inevitably involved the removal of Native people. As Grant Foreman maintained, “Emigration of white settlers in the early part of the nineteenth-century into the territory now forming the central and Southern states”—including Steinbeck’s Oklahoma—“found the country occupied by tribes of American Indians who had lived there from time immemorial” (Foreman, 1972, p.5).⁴

Steinbeck’s novel appears to overlook the racial dimension of American migration. In this sense, “race has largely been assumed to be marginal to the major themes of Steinbeck’s novel” (Wald, 2009, p. 481). That said, any analysis or consideration of American migration in *The Grapes of Wrath* must inevitably depend upon Steinbeck’s emphasis on whiteness. In Ford’s adaptation, which respected the spirit of Steinbeck’s novel, the approach to migration and travel must be assessed from a de-racialized perspective that inevitably prioritizes the white context as both novel and film associate migration with whiteness.

In the American scene, the question of traveling has often been associated with the “road myth,” especially since the 1920s and thanks also to the development of the automo-

² For a fuller discussion on this theme in American literature, which I cannot hope to address in a short essay, see Janis Stout’s *The Journey Narrative in American Literature* (1983). Evidently, the journey theme existed long before the birth of American literature and culture and has always been a longstanding recurrent fictional form. For more, see Scholes and Kellogg’s book *The Nature of Narrative* (1966).

³ Any discussion concerning travel and migration in the United States invariably encompasses the experience of minorities and their displacement, including that of the Natives and African-Americans. Scholars have noted that African-American history in the United States encompasses experiences of migration, voyage, and enslavement. Additionally, Michael Hall points out that travel and mobility constitute foundational aspects of the African American experience (Hall and Shon, 2022).

⁴ In a short essay and also considering Steinbeck’s perspective, I cannot do justice to the complexity of the wider issues of race and migration. For more on Native and African-American migration and displacement see Erin Battat’s, *Ain’t got no house: America’s Great Migration and the making of an interracial left* (2014) and Michael Hall’s *Freedom Beyond Confinement. Travel and Imagination in African-American Cultural History and Letters* (2022). In the context of Native American representation, it is important to acknowledge the recent cinematic portrayal of the Osage community in Martin Scorsese’s latest film, *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023). The film is an adaptation of David Grann’s book and portrays the murder and tragic displacement of the Osage Nation in the 1920s from their lands in Oklahoma.

bile, which led many Americans to travel in search of a better future or to cover distances seeking new destinations. As Ronald Primeau has noted, “The automobile soon entered the long tradition of American travel literature and added its unique merging of the frontier spirit and the worship of the machine as a complex icon” (1996, p.5). In addition to the physical and personal escape provided by the automobile, studies of road narratives have established how “Americans have treated the highway as a sacred space. Roads and cars have long gone beyond simple transportation to become places of exhilarating motion, speed, and solitude” (*ibid.*, p.1).

As the road became synonymous with nomadism, it would be easy to argue that any critical discourse concerning the journey motif in the US reflects, as David Laderman has shown, “an ideology of expansionism and imperialism (in the strictly literal sense of asserting one’s self elsewhere)” (1996, p. 41). From this purely American interest in the road and the journey as compelling motifs arose a genre that became extremely popular in the 1920s and 1930s when the sense of wandering merged with the novelty of the automobile and was illustrated in the texts labeled under the definition of American road narratives. Outlining the essential features of this literary genre, road narratives can be generically classified as texts whose structures follow “the sequence of a journey from preparation to departure, routing, decisions about goals and modes of transport, the arrival, return or reentry” (Primeau, 1996, p.1).

Importantly, it was only with Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) that the American road narrative gained official recognition and began defining its main features. However, earlier examples, like Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), stimulated an interest in the concept of travel and the image of the road, as themes later used by Hollywood in its development of cinematic attention to camera technology and the automobile, which ultimately became a setting for a whole new type of picture. Indeed, as Tatiana Konrad has stated, “Steinbeck’s novel comments profoundly on (auto)mobility” (2021, p. 137).

In American culture, the road has multiple meanings. Jean Baudrillard has best defined its potential by claiming that the road in America is a “vanishing point,” an essential simulacrum of American culture (1988, p. 1). David Orgeron further emphasizes the road as a transformative force in American culture, describing it as “a mythological space for working out American problems” (2000, p. v). Road narratives, including road novels and road movies, serve as emblematic representations of American culture, reflecting the nation’s fascination with travel and the freedom it embodies.⁵ Over time, the traditional road myth evolved into the widely known legend of the hitchhiker. As a consequence of the development of the highway, representations of the road and the highway began to populate the fictional space of novels and films.

⁵ If the Western genre is credited for introducing the cinematic portrayal of the road on the screen, it concurrently propagated a distorted representation of Native Americans. As a consequence, Native Americans have faced the arduous task of addressing the detrimental impact of the Western genre, which not only eroded their dignity but also resulted in the exploitation of their lands and in final dispossession (Mariani, 2008, p.57). As Stefano Rosso maintains, after the decline in production during the 1960s, there was a resurgence of Western films, attributed to the emergence of “Spaghetti Westerns” and movies influenced by the Civil Rights movement (2008, p. 9), a culture-blending genre to be considered in international contexts, in which the West becomes a transatlantic meeting space.

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as a Road Narrative

Steinbeck's fascination with the road situates him within a long-standing tradition of American wanderers. Much of the writer's work reflects an interest in the quest of the open road, as seen through the inner experiences of his fictional travelers. In addition to Steinbeck's bleak portrayal of the hardships of the Great Depression, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a narrative of a human journey as the characters become the protagonists of a tragic exodus. Beyond the straightforward plot, rich with raw and realistic images of survival and despair, Steinbeck delves into the journey of the Joad family as they are forced to leave the dry expanses of the Midwest to undertake a grueling expedition from Oklahoma through Route 66. The story begins with Tom Joad's release from prison. Upon his return home, he discovers that his family was forced to leave their home and seek a new life in West California. In the novel, Route 66, "the mother road, the road of flight" (Steinbeck, 2000, p. 22), inflames the passion and myth of traveling America's highways. Steinbeck's troping of Route 66 as a road of flight emphasizes its importance for the migrants fleeing the Dust Bowl.⁶

In effect, Steinbeck's novel challenges the American myths of travel and the open road. The narrative's emphasis on the expedition of displaced individuals imbues the journey with symbolic significance. It is pertinent to note that Steinbeck himself was an ardent traveler, and his experiences touring across America profoundly influenced his literary endeavors. Although *The Grapes of Wrath* is rich with biblical allusions and explores the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, one theme undeniably tied to the narrative of travel is migration. Indeed, Steinbeck presents the road as a modern embodiment of that tragic journey. According to Brian Yazell, "John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* has exerted a powerful influence on the discourse on migration politics since its publication in 1939" (2017, p. 502). However, Steinbeck implicitly reminds the reader how travelers are exclusively "white" migrants, pointing at an economic logic wherein "racial discourse seems to introduce white figures as a form of labor sufficiently exploitable and durable to be worth the state's investment" (*ibid.*, p. 503). Considering migrancy from this perspective, without delving further into the political aspects that are outside the scope of this analysis, one can also read the novel as a depiction of the possibilities inherent in westward migration. This is indeed an understandable interest if one considers that, as a Californian, Steinbeck experienced firsthand the tremendous western migration in the wake of the wave of severe sandstorms, known as the "Dust Bowl," which hit the U.S. in the 1930s, sweeping from Texas to Nebraska and providing inspiration for *The Grapes of Wrath*.⁷

⁶ For a fuller discussion of the thematic similarities between Steinbeck and Kerouac see Spangler, J., 2008. "We're on a Road to Nowhere: Steinbeck, Kerouac and the Legacy of the Great Depression." *Studies in Novel* 40 (3), pp. 308-327.

⁷ For a detailed account of the "Dust Bowl" see Timothy Egan's *The Worst Hard Time* (2006). In the book, Egan meticulously recounts the tragic stories of settlers in the Dust Bowl era. He elucidates the cognitive processes of individuals who opted to endure hardship rather than seek migration, providing insight into the mental framework of those residing in presently volatile and environmentally devastated regions.

In examining the novel's portrayal of the migrant cause, the journey embarked upon by the Joads symbolizes a forced departure, characterized as "a travel of desperation" (Primeau 1996, p.9); an escape to a promised land that is laden with the promise of a prosperous future.⁸ Scholarly readings have rightly pointed out that "The different stages of travel—departure, voyage, encounters on the road and return—provide any story with a temporal structure that raises certain expectations on things to happen" (Mikkonen, 2017, p. 286). As a symbolic trope, the journey enriches linearity and provides a structure that supports the plot. Kai Mikkonen's study on the travel metaphor in fiction underlines that "the chronotope of the road and the journey always serve as powerful masterplots of literary narratives" (2017, p. 286). This perspective is highly relevant in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where the journey serves as a structural tool for Steinbeck, guiding the reader through the Joads' hardships and their constructed flight towards greater life expectations. Despite the arduous path delineated in the narrative and the absence of exploration and adventure for the sake of flight and desperation, *The Grapes of Wrath* could be aligned with the genre of road narratives, where travel is crucial to enhancing narrativity through the characters' tangible physical and emotional quests. As Stout has judiciously observed, "Part of the distinctiveness of American journey narrative is the insistence with which the journey occurs in American literature" (1983, pp. 17-18). Nonetheless, since the nineteenth century, canonical texts of American literature have exhibited a recurring interest in the theme of escape. Building upon these insights, Robert DeMott argues that Steinbeck's masterpiece can be viewed as a combination of naturalistic epic, jeremiad, *road novel*, and transcendental gospel (2000, p. xiv). Primeau additionally points out that "Road protagonists in American road narratives leave home with many diverse goals in mind, and narrative structures reflect these differences in motivation and perspective" (1996, p. 9).

As Steinbeck's characters experience a mental and physical challenge in their voyage, a parallel issue to that of travel is the question of dispossession that, in my view, represents the most significant aspect of traveling, and it is the determining element that forces the protagonists to migrate and also undertake an inner journey. In a recent study, Carla Francellini read the novel as a narrative of dispossession, suggesting that "Steinbeck outlines an archetypal paradigmatic account of a dangerous journey" (2023, p. 294). As she further notes, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, "Steinbeck teaches the chronicle of the dispossessed Joads." (Francellini, 2023, p. 296). Indeed, Steinbeck describes his characters as "[w]aves of the dispossessed and the homeless, hardened, intent and dangerous" (Steinbeck, 2000, p. 397). By closely inspecting the plot, we can see how motion and nomadism merge with the expropriation of assets such as land, property, and other belongings. This is the argument also made by DeMott, who considers the novel a disclosure of "the powerlessness, poverty, victimization, and the fear of *nomadic* American immigrants" (2000, p. 30). Seen in this light, the trajectory taken by Steinbeck shows how the journey and the road symbolically

⁸ It is noteworthy that the depiction of the Joads' migration shares similarities with other tragic literary expeditions, such as those described by William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* (1930), particularly in its recurrent use of biblical metaphors. In Steinbeck's case, the theme of travel in the narrative possesses a dual nature, emanating from necessity, on one hand, and depending on human struggle, on the other.

signify dispossession by becoming the thresholds between the past and the future, the promise of something new and the loss of material goods such as the house, the land, and the working tools, all things the Joads will sell off as a symbol of the renunciation of rural life as well as their past. Upon closer inspection, *Grapes of Wrath* is a narrative of denial as it chronicles the plight of the “Oakies.” As Steinbeck’s narrator remarks:

The dispossessed were drawn west—from Kansas to Oaklaoma, Texas, New Mexico; from Nevada and Arkansas families, tribes, dusted out, tractored out. Carloads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. (2000, pp. 396-397; emphasis mine)

Steinbeck portrays the juxtaposition between the journey and the adverse ramifications of dispossession by skillfully immersing the reader in the arduous challenges and difficult travel conditions experienced by migrant workers. Stout additionally posits that American literary works since the nineteenth century have consistently exhibited a notable preoccupation with the theme of escape, which has evolved into a recurring motif in American travel narratives. For her, “The prototypical theme of escape is a motivational buildup leading to the climactic act of emancipation” (1996, p. 32). Looking at it in more detail, the question of travel in Steinbeck’s novel becomes charged with a dual nature, drawing its meaning from a need to escape that derives from displacement and deprivation. Following Stout, it can be suggested that in the novel finding a home grows out of the initial journey of escape (*ibid.*, p. 53).

In a more significant sense, however, the journey takes shape through an equally important trope of the road as an image of the American sense of freedom. In their rejection of work and land, the Joads have no choice but to hit the road in a run-down truck pulling out on Route 66. From a pioneering pathway to a paved road in 1926, serving as the first footbridge to celebrate the triumph of the automobile, Route 66—as Steinbeck tells us—served all those nomadic souls who crossed it from East to North with the hope of reaching the promised land, the last frontier: California. While Route 66 has undoubtedly been America’s most celebrated road, which in the collective imagination has always represented the American dream, the image Steinbeck conveys in his novel is one of its most bitter depictions. In the narrative, the two great American myths, the road and the journey, are charged with tragic political meaning in that it recounts the flight of thousands of people from the central parts of the United States to California. Steinbeck describes the route as follows:

66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership [...] From all of these the people are in flight, and they come into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight. (2000, p. 229)

This is evidence of how the road, which represents the essence and hope of the American dream, becomes a place of toil and suffering, a place of struggle for survival, where only those who do not give up on hope for a better life will endure. Besides the negative

meaning of the journey, made even more complicated by the terrible travel conditions, Steinbeck offers a positive conclusion in which the road also becomes a place of sharing, a site of encounter with others and with one's self as suggested by the lengthy monologues that alternate with the short lyrical sections of the novel. On a narrative level, the significance of the journey lies in its persistence (Stout, 1996, p. 174). As *The Grapes of Wrath* "laments the price of existence paid by the individual in modern America" (Spangler, 2008, p. 309), Steinbeck uses the trope of the journey to uncover the unfulfillment of the American dream, a fantasy that is consecrated by the crossing of the road.

The Road Movie: The Cinematic Visuality of the Road in Ford's Adaptation

Equally significant is the way cinema has reinterpreted the themes of travel and the visual representation of the road that Steinbeck emphasizes in the novel. In this regard, Steinbeck can be seen as a key literary influence on the early development of the American road movie genre (the official classification of the genre arose in the 1950s).

In any road movie, the road becomes the primary and privileged setting. Much like its role in the film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Route 66 has served as a prominent setting in a variety of road movies, encompassing diverse genres, including Westerns and detective stories. Within the context of each road movie, the road has assumed distinct roles: serving as an escape route, providing a backdrop for inner journeys, or simply setting the stage for pivotal events in the narrative. Letizia Regolino stresses how the road movie frequently transitions between moments of rest and movement. Movement embodies the fundamental nature of the journey, as the actors are consistently followed by the camera, with alternating close-up shots and sequences both inside and outside the vehicle. These moments are interspersed with scenes in which the perspective retreats to present the viewer with the surrounding scenery that frames the journey (Regolino, 2012, p. 43). Then the journey interrupts, there are stops, and characters deal with their own thoughts and the surrounding landscape. As we shall see, all these aspects will fall within Ford's cinematic rendition of the journey in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Hollywood chose to make a film version of *The Grapes of Wrath* shortly after Steinbeck published his most famous work. However, the social consciousness of Steinbeck's novel evoked both interest and concern within the Hollywood community.⁹ John Ford's prowess as a director was marked by his adeptness at integrating visual storytelling and fluid filming techniques and, notably, in Steinbeck's case, capturing the documentarist essence of the novel (Gallagher, 1986, p. 177). Ford is widely regarded as the master of the cinematic Western genre, which revolves around the theme of the frontier, with the road being a prominent element of cinematography.

⁹ Despite its potential for success on the big screen, the novel's sharp economic critique puzzled many conservative figures in the movie industry. Darryl Zanuck, who held the position of head of production at 20th Century Fox and was known for his strong liberal views, recognized the cinematic potential of the novel, which was already replete with explicitly cinematic episodes.

Fordian cinema is known for portraying the western expansion of the American frontier. For this reason, critical reception agrees that “If the true essence of the genre is to tell the story of the journey of a civilization that builds its identity in the wilderness in confrontation/conflict with the wild, [Ford’s] films such as *The Iron Horse* (1924) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) fall squarely within the ranks of Western cinema” (Laquidara, 2019, p. 4). Ford’s critics have also frequently emphasized that the entirety of his filmography is filmed on the edge, with the threshold as a visual and structural theme. As Andrea Laquidara argues, the film depends upon the wilderness—the degree-zero of civilization—and, according to the Turnerian interpretation, is seen as a meeting point between nature and culture, from which the American man draws nourishment. (*ibid.*, p.4). With a prevailing interest in location shooting, Ford directed *The Grapes of Wrath* mostly with a documentarist approach, and with a variety of critical frames (literary, documentary, and social consciousness) that contributed to placing the film among Hollywood’s masterworks (Gallagher 1986, p. 176).

Despite cuts and slight variations, Steinbeck considered Ford’s film a visual improvement on the novel. The film presents its case with a notable balance in its construction through its division of the narrative into two parts: the first section shows Tom Joad’s return home and the hasty travel preparations for California, whereas the second focuses on the family’s struggle for survival in the tent cities among thousands of displaced Americans. Steinbeck played a pivotal role in ensuring that the film aligned closely with the novel, and adaptations of his novels significantly endorsed the success of Steinbeck as an author in films, further solidifying his literary acclaim.

Overall, the film encapsulated the novel’s essence, presenting a courageous cinematic depiction of the Great Depression on the screen. However, the political and social intent of the novel, a denunciation of the conditions of workers oppressed by the contradictions of the American system during the Great Depression, was one of the first difficulties the production faced. Despite Ford’s ability to meet Steinbeck’s expectations, the film somewhat deviates from the original novel. On the content level, the movie retained most of the novel’s seminal aspects, such as its political critique and sexual references. For Gaime Alonge, the most evident differences between novel and film were shaped by three factors: the classical Hollywood mode of representation, the censorship rules of the production company (which did not allow for the adaptation of the novel’s most poignant moments), and Ford’s cinematographic taste (2014, pp. 150-151). In his endeavor, Ford deliberately challenged Hollywood’s norms, and the film’s raw, unpolished nature stood out as particularly remarkable for a major studio production (*ibid.*, p. 154). However, as I indicated earlier, the predominant focus of adaptation criticism often centers on evaluating films such as *The Grapes of Wrath* primarily through the lens of their adherence to the literary structures that shape their storytelling, characters, and themes. Key critical works in this field, including George Bluestone’s influential *Novels into Film* and Warren French’s film guide to Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, consider the film’s alignment with or deviation from Steinbeck’s original work in terms of dialogue selection, scene cuts or additions, retained, abandoned or combined characters, and the structural arrangement of narrative activity.

As Vivian Sobchack explains, this analytical approach tends to undervalue the significance of visual imagery in favor of dissecting the events depicted on the screen (1979, p. 597). Fidelity to the source material is often regarded as essential in cinematic adaptations, leading to a tendency to view the visual elements as secondary to the novel's primary themes. While Ford's adaptation has been praised for its realism and cultural relevance in depicting the Great Depression, my argument is that the film should be analyzed not only for its narrative, but for its distinctive focus on the setting—primarily the road—and Ford's visual portrayal of the highway as an archetypal universe. The film's visually-oriented attention to the road as a purely American myth takes its characters across the desolate wasteland of the Midwest and heads through the frontier of self-discovery, portraying the ontological shift experienced by American travelers. Ford's adaptation takes place almost entirely on the road. In contrast, for Steinbeck, the road condenses the dramatic consequences of a tragic dispossession, bearing hope and comfort to the Joads as they depart to seek a better future in West California. In Ford's picture, the road is more visually striking, becoming a graphic metaphor for American resilience.

If the classification of cinema genres is challenging due to the complexity of defining their characteristics and the tendency for genres to evolve, the road movie exemplifies these difficulties, as its definition remains contested. It is often considered a hybrid genre, borrowing elements from Westerns, film noir, musicals, and journey narratives, which further complicates its classification. Road movies typically use the road as a metaphor for personal journeys, societal tensions, and cultural ideals, reflecting the historical and social context of their production (Cohan and Hark, 1997, p. 3). The genre emerged with the automobile's rise as a symbol of individuality and mobility, blending narratives of freedom and expansionism with critiques of societal norms.

Road films explore the intersection of memory, time, space, and storytelling, often highlighting American ideals and anxieties. Though the term "road movie" gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, earlier examples existed, including *The Grapes of Wrath*. The genre's versatility allows it to incorporate diverse styles, such as comedy, thriller, drama, and science fiction, unified by the central theme of travel and its mythological significance. Yet, as David Laderman posits, the birth of the road film seems to reflect two interrelated phenomena: the advent of the automobile as a fundamental expression of individuality and the emergence of voyaging as a combination of the ideology of expansionism and the interest for mobility (1996, p. 41). That said, the term "road movie" became popular in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s, though such films, like Ford's adaptation, had appeared earlier.

Ford's treatment of travel in the Steinbeck adaptation can unquestionably place the film within this genre. The film explores the question of travel as a narrative framework by taking the viewer on a journey, on the road with the Joads, making the audience travel with them on dusty Route 66. Moreover, the director's interest in documenting travel can be seen in the numerous shots in which the road appears as the background of the scenes. The aesthetic techniques Ford uses to convey to the audience the importance of the road and travelling are some of the most compelling and traditional features of road movies.

As the Joads pile into the truck, which will soon become overcrowded, Ford positions the movie camera outside the automobile to record motion and evoke in the viewer the sense of being on the road.

The theme of the journey is introduced in the very first sequence in which Tom Joad (Henry Fonda) is framed from behind in one of the film's very few long shots, where he is at the center of a paved Oklahoma highway, in broad daylight. As French Warren has observed, "This conventional opening scene instantly places the film in the road genre" (1979, p. 38). The strikingly flat, windswept, and desolate landscape features a distinct division between the gray earth and the ominous sky. A tall, slender figure traverses this ethereal terrain, pauses to observe, and then continues onward. As the protagonist, Tom, makes his way homeward, the depiction of his figure set against the backdrop of a backlit, cloudy sky serves as a recurring stylistic element across the narrative and in the film's finale.

In Ford's film adaptation, the visual language of representation and the use of color are elements that drive the narrative itself. The recurrent and distinct separation between dark earth and gray sky is both striking and gloomy. The characters frequently disrupt this landscape by stepping into this harsh geometry and crossing a threshold that splits the scene into distinct lines, guiding the viewer to visually focus on specific elements. In this geometrical subdivision, the visual scene creates a sense of enclosure that limits the perception of freedom and space due to Ford's use of objects and rigid margins for framing. The opening sequence, with the road prominently positioned at the center of the shot, highlights Ford's deliberate visual emphasis. In the opening sequence, Ford's geometrical construction uses the rule of thirds¹⁰ to create a stark division between the sky and the ground, drawing the viewer's eye to the main focal point of the scene: the road.

In this particular scene, one can discern Ford's profound comprehension of the American landscape. In this film, as in others, Ford saw the land as both a setting and character. His emphasis on the landscape, like the one in *The Grapes of Wrath*, helped define the visual and emotional essence of the Western, rooting it deeply in the mythos of the American experience. The visual prominence of the road in such sequences heightens Steinbeck's inherently cinematic narration, specifically accentuating his portrayal of the road as a metaphor for social resilience. Rather than utilizing the road as a mere backdrop, Ford employs chiaroscuro to visually manifest the interplay between darkness and light, a prominent thematic motif even in the novel's central chapters. The dichotomy between light and darkness runs throughout the narrative and is reflected in the thematic portrayal of the characters, such as Steinbeck's recurring reference to "Tom's restless dark eyes" (Steinbeck, 2000, p. 331-411). This contrast is also evident in the alternating scenes on Route 66, which shift between darkness and daylight. The use of black and white in the film (credit to Gregg Toland's cinematography)¹¹ serves to emphasize the arid, dusty

¹⁰ In film composition, the rule of thirds consists in creating vertical and horizontal lines to place points of interest through the insertion of interesting elements, such as objects (the light poles and the sky in this case), people and bright spots, in the scene.

¹¹ Most of the film's honest and documentarist cinematography has been favorably compared to the authenticity of Dorothea Lang and her famous Depression photography.

landscape spanning from Oklahoma to California. This approach effectively places the road at the forefront of the film, endowing it with an unparalleled visual expansiveness. The choice of color suggests how the road, Oklahoma's dusty soil ravaged by draught, keeps no other shade than the grayness of dust.¹²

These lyrical depictions of the environment are woven into the visual narrative, slowing its pace to capture a distinctive quality of light. For instance, the twilight on red earth enhances the depth of the scene, offering a vivid clarity reminiscent of Steinbeck's detailed descriptions of landscapes and road travel. When Ford's visual choices are well-integrated into the film, there is minimal dialogue and the use of light and color accentuate the sense of melancholy that the film evokes in the audience.

As the journey begins, the movement of the camera and the shots of the road stress the rupture of the man/nature relationship—well illustrated by Steinbeck— by abandoning outdoor scenes and focusing mainly on the interior of the wagon, where we move from wide-open shots to dark, tightly confined spaces, seeing the characters helpless in the face of fate and at the same time embracing nomadism not as a choice but as an obligation.

Ford's critics stressed how "Classical Ford was deceptively simple in technique. He had a fondness for the medium shot, he tended to cut from set-up to set-up rather than move his camera and when he did move his camera it was generally as unobtrusively as possible—he favored dynamic pace cutting" (Richards, 2020, p. 5). Yet, the film's cinematic portrayal and dramatic storytelling are further emphasized by limited camera movement, which keeps the actors mostly stationary, even during dialogue, creating a sense of almost oppressive stillness in the shots. The film's only real sense of movement is provided by the montage sequences, in which the Joads become one with the landscape.

In this sense, the second part of the film follows the Joads' expedition, which revolves around the theme of travel and begins with their journey on the road in a half-broken truck. The vehicle becomes the new moving element that unites the family despite growing hardships due to shortages of supplies, money, and privacy. As the trail and the asphalt become symbols of a people on the run, it is in the night scenes that Ford condenses all the sense of community that shines through the novel and helps lighten the tragic fate of the journey. In addition to the use of black and white, the night scenes and poor lighting contribute to the film's dramatic effect. If we consider that *The Grapes of Wrath* mostly takes place at night, trim or almost no lighting in night scenes visually emphasize the story's dark tone to the point where "everything is submerged within a heavy shadowed mood" (Gallagher, 1986, p.180). For the night scenes, Ford makes the setting even bleaker by using ambient light (a candle, a flashlight, and so on) while simultaneously focusing on the actors' sense of humanity and compassion through a recurrent emphasis on visual expressions.¹³ Henceforth, the latter part of the film abridges the ultimate sequence of

¹² The significance of the land is profound for Ford, as he consistently incorporates visuals that highlight direct interaction with the earth. A pivotal moment occurs when Muley stoops to gather soil from the ground, prompting a contemplation of the earth's value. If the ever-recurrent presence of the land and its loss serve as a common thread, Ford's emphasis on the road and the landscape can be seen as entirely justified.

¹³ Another effective use of light is the use of reflection that combines with the ambient light Ford uses to give scenic depth to the sequences.

the journey described in the book, particularly the situations in the camps, which Ford compresses into cuts that preserve the strong imagery of the original.¹⁴

Tom's final exit from the scene closes the cinematic circularity and the visual treatment of the journey and the road that opened his arrival in the first sequence. Once again, in a long shot and through a movement in the opposite direction from the camera, the protagonist drifts away against the light. This scene condenses the full circularity of the story: we see a lonely man at a road junction who flees from his past at the beginning of the film and returns to being alone at the end of the story, as he is, once more, on the road and on the move. Here Ford utilizes the surface division technique to establish a visible separation within the frame. In this instance, the road serves to produce a split-screen scene, which is distinctly divided by the horizontal presence of the street at the juncture between the sky and the soil.

The significance of the journey and the road is visually emphasized by Ford's use of wide shots, framing the protagonist in expansive fields to convey a sense of his wandering. In staging the cinematic journey, Ford transposes Steinbeck's pages with annihilating visual effectiveness to visibly accentuate the importance of the road and journey as essential American myths. Yet it is within the film's tropological logic that the full depth of Ford's visual poetics emerges: the journey serves as a metaphor for human life, symbolizing the quest for meaning.

In a cinematic equivalent to the themes presented by Steinbeck, Ford's adaptation provides an image of the journey and the road through an insistence on its visual emphasis. Indeed, what seems relevant to both novel and film is the thematic and aesthetic interest Ford devotes to the vastness of the Old West and America's unfulfilled sense of wandering. The scenes where there is minimal dialogue and silence is interrupted only by extradiegetic sounds (such as the wind blowing) convey a sense of desolation and demonstrate Ford's skill in visual language developed through simplicity. Building on the aforementioned observations, the film demonstrates a distinct visual crescendo, wherein the director prioritizes the visual representation of the journey and the road. This emphasis on imagery surpasses Steinbeck's prose, making it necessary for the adaptation to align with the structural logic of cinema.

Conclusion

Whether undertaken in solitude or with others, the journey in film provides a deep exploration of the human experience, with the road serving as a symbol of a companion that fluctuates between offering support and expressing hostility. (Regolino, 2012, p. 7). Despite its adaptable nature across genres, such as science fiction and thriller, the road movie has consistently revolved around two core themes: the taming of the road and the sense of

¹⁴ The novel's adaptation, in compliance with the Hays code in force at the time, cut several scenes (if not entire episodes) that were present in Steinbeck's pages. Not surprisingly, the novel suffered several censorship, and one of the harshest condemnations concerned the final scene in which Tom's sister breastfeeds a starving man.

wandering. Informed by revisions and displacements, scholars have recently argued that the presence of the road movie in American film history and culture is constant, and the genre's appeal lies in its continuous pursuit of questions related to identity, self and other, travel and movement (Boczkowska, 2023, p. 1).

While the significance of road movies as a fundamental aspect of contemporary American culture is clear, *The Grapes of Wrath* predates the visual emphasis on the journey and the road in American culture. In this context, the barren and endless landscape of the West is a poignant portrayal of the protagonists' desperation, extreme isolation, and the disintegration of the American dream, particularly in Ford's work. As the visual work of the adaptation shows, travel and road are Ford's trademarks, a powerful display of two pivotal American myths of family and community. To this end, *The Grapes of Wrath* is indeed a cinematographic example of a travel narrative in which the importance of the road becomes the setting of the failure of the American dream, whose symbolic value is developed through themes such as nomadism, migration, and displacement. The thread connecting Steinbeck and Ford lies in their use of the road, travel, and journey, as relevant tropes that led to the development of the road narrative in literature and film. Through these shared analogies, the novel and its film version shed light on the journey as a powerful trope encompassing two great American symbols: its sense of freedom and its endless fascination with mobility.

Both Steinbeck's novel and Ford's film utilize the road and the journey as potent symbols of resilience, injustice, and the pursuit of the American Dream. However, Ford's visual interpretation amplifies the emotional and thematic depth of the journey, providing a more immediate and visceral realization of Steinbeck's social and political critique. Through cinematic techniques, Ford enhances the symbolic significance of the journey, translating the novel's complex themes into a visual language that intensifies the impact of the narrative and the broader socio-political commentary embedded in the original text. Indeed, the novel and its film version are even more relevant today and call attention to issues and realities beyond the United States.

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