

"The photographs are a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore."

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

Rebeca Romero Escrivá

MIGRATIONS: *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* AND THE AIMS OF THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION*

"The lost cause of cinema"

Many relationships can be established between photography and cinema. To begin with, since cinema is a direct descendant of photography, they share formative principles: the medium, their photochemical nature, the optical elements, the camera and even the same visual language for the composition and illumination of scenes. Even the spatio-temporal dimension provided by cinema, as its main difference from photography, needs twenty-four frames per second to generate the illusion of movement for the spectator. In other words, the cinematic experience would not exist without projection techniques (sequences of images) and the psychodynamics of sight (a quality of the human eye of retaining the images in the mind long enough so that the next image can fuse the separation between it and the last). From this basic

and extremely well-known principle we may conclude that we will never fully appreciate the real debt the filmic medium owes to photography without stopping the continuum of images on the screen –which would be to alter their cinematic nature. It is hard for the spectator to retain an image in his memory because the next one erases the previous one. In this sense, it could be argued that photography *cuts* a story rather than tell it. Cutting means more than capturing an instant; figuratively, it means tearing a story apart. The cut in the story is not objective since it is chosen by the photographer. In fact, due to the violence of the cut and its apparent neutrality, the photograph is likely to absorb meanings that could alter the photographer's original intention. Although the permeability of the image is a quality shared with cinema, the static nature of photographic ima-

ges contributes to the retention of the scene depicted to the spectator, who has time to contemplate it as if it were a painting. Paradoxically, cinema will animate and breathe life into the photographic image, although, as a single frame, that image is rapidly replaced. Garrett Stewart referred to this quality when he suggested that “photography might be called the lost cause of cinema, gone in projection and too soon forgotten” (STEWART, 1999). For Edward Said, a lost cause is associated with a hopeless cause, “something you support or believe in that can no longer be believed in except as something without hope of achievement” (SAID, 2002: 527). Spectators rely on the image they find credible, the one that mimics the reality they think they know or have known, although the filmmaker has overlapped a discourse, a story that might differ from the original. John Berger said that the raw materials of a photograph are light and time; light because of its power to construct space, and time because it freezes the moment (BERGER, 1982: 85). Nevertheless, although photography is considered a testimony of the moment, it offers only a fragment, a *cut* and therefore incomplete (or selective) vision of reality. For Berger, the meaning of a photograph is the connection between the picture and the history it shows.

The aim of this article is to analyse the debt cinema owes photography in films set in the depression of the 1930s, where a deliberate imitation of the composition and aesthetics of the photographs from the Farm Security Administration (FSA) becomes evident, in order to lend verisimilitude to the historical context they represent. I will begin with a well-known film from the time, *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940), in which the quality of imitation



Figure 1. America's Own Refugees: The Story behind *The Grapes of Wrath*, from *Look* magazine on the 29th of August 1939. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-USZ 62-129101/ LC-USZ 62-129102]

is phenomenological and discursive, since photography is used for its descriptive and evaluative qualities; and I will end with a contemporary film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2000), in which the use of photography responds to an iconographic criterion that separates the FSA photographs from the original purpose for which they were taken. My starting point is Alan Trachtenberg's idea that photographs taken with public objectives should be studied in terms of the *external dialogue* they have engaged in with their times, and the context in which they circulate and/or circulated (TRACHTENBERG: 1990), be it printed culture or (we might add) cinema. In fact, the media contexts in which the FSA photographs were found was not confined to their circulation in the magazines *Fortune*, *Look* or *Life*, which fall within the genre of photo-journalism, but includes hybrid works by photographers and journalists: *You*

Have Seen Their Faces (1936), by Margaret Bourke-White with texts by Erskine Caldwell, about poverty in the American South; *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), by Dorothea Lange with texts by Paul S. Taylor; or *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by Walker Evans with texts by James Agee (1941). The circle of influences or concomitances between photographers and writers became even greater from the moment a novel like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—published on the 14th of April 1939, though originally conceived during a trip with the photographer Horace Bristol in 1937 to document the immigrant camps in California for *Life* magazine—influenced the scenes photographed by the FSA immediately thereafter¹. Only a few months after the appearance of *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Look* magazine published an eight-page

report titled *America's Own Refugees: The Story behind The Grapes of Wrath*, in which FSA photographs were combined with quotations from Steinbeck's novel (see Figure 1). The idea was to show the real background of a book that had been receiving such an enthusiastic response from the American public². One year later, on the 15th of March 1940, the year when Steinbeck won the Pulitzer Prize for his acclaimed work, Ford's film *The Grapes of Wrath* premiered in the United States. The film took the exchange between reality and fiction even further than *Look* by adapting Steinbeck's novel and the FSA's photographic aesthetics.

Chronicles of the Depression

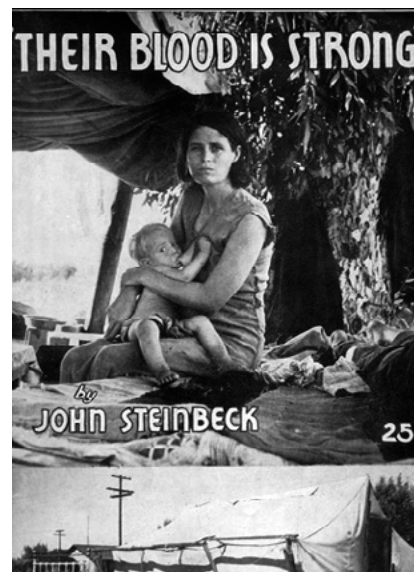
On the 4th of March 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt took office as president in the midst of a terrifying social and economic panorama: “Values have shrunk to fantastic levels; taxes have risen; our ability to pay has fallen; government

of all kinds is faced by serious curtailment of income; the means of exchange are frozen in the currents of trade; the withered leaves of industrial enterprise lie on every side; farmers find no markets for their produce; the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone. More important, a host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little return [...]. Our greatest primary task is to put people to work"³. Outside the Capitol, after admitting the ills that plagued the nation in his inaugural speech, Roosevelt pointed out the need to face them. He suggested that unemployment could be solved "if we face it wisely and courageously". In his speech, the visual language of the future president "echoes a larger cultural shift in Depression-era modes of knowledge and representation. Note Roosevelt does not ask Americans to *confront* the problems of the depression, but to *face* them implying a literal as well as metaphorical visual engagement. [...] Roosevelt's visual rhetoric curiously prefigures the decade's interest in the relationship between *seeing* and *knowing*" (FINNEGAN, 2003: xx)⁴. Curiously, this is precisely what the photographers of the FSA (originally known as the Resettlement Administration) did between 1935 and 1943 with the subjects they photographed: face them or confront them statically with the camera lens, exposing their poverty and human dignity plainly and openly, with no apparent expression on the faces of the photographed individuals who stoically posed for the camera. Funded by the US government in the context of the president's New Deal policy, the project aimed at remodelling

the rural sector. In order to achieve this, hired photographers (including Arthur Rothstein, Carl Mydans, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn and Dorothea Lange, and later on Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, Jack Delano, John Vachon and John Collier), under the direction of sociologist Roy Stryker, made a record of the wretched existence that the country's rural poor were being plunged to, documenting the life of a specific family for a period of time, in order to see the effects of Roosevelt's economic recovery programme: "The realism was deliberate, calculated, and highly stylized. [...] Stryker and his staff created a powerful portrait that communicated rural suffering in terms that an urban middle class would readily understand" (CURTIS, 1989: 6)⁵. On the 18th of April 1938, at the Grand Central Palace in New York, at the same time as the opening of the First International Photographic Exhibition, another, much simpler one was taking place, with a lower number of visitors: *How American People Live*, whose title evokes Jacob Riis' work *How the Other Half Lives*. This time what was being shown and denounced was not the wretched living conditions of immigrants

in New York slums, but the migration of the rural population: people driving dilapidated old cars down the road in search of food, lodging and employment after having left their lands⁶. In 1938, the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* was still a year away, but the press had been documenting the social problems faced by farmers and rural workers for some time. In fact, in the summer of 1936, a year before he made his trip with photographer Horace Bristol, Steinbeck covered the different facets of the conflict working as a journalist for *The San Francisco News*, commissioned by associate editor George West to write a series of seven reports –published between the 5th and the 12th of October– that told the drama of the sharecroppers who came with their families from the Midwest region devastated by droughts and dust storms to California to harvest seasonal crops. The photographer hired to illustrate Steinbeck's chronicles was Dorothea Lange. They both went separately –though they might have met up more than once– to the California fields and saw first-hand the malnourished condition of the families of dispossessed who travelled in their batte-

Figure 2. Left: photograph by Dorothea Lange taken in August 1936 and used in 1938 for the cover of John Steinbeck's *Their Blood is Strong* [right]: Drought refugees from Oklahoma camping by the roadside. They hope to work in the cotton fields. The official at the border (California-Arizona) inspection service said that on this day, August 17, 1936, twenty-three car loads and truck loads of migrant families out of the drought counties of Oklahoma and Arkansas had passed through that station entering California up to 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-DIG-fsa-8b38480]



red vehicles from Nebraska, Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas, only to end up being exploited in exchange for a paltry wage of twenty-five cents an hour: "At this season of the year, when California's great crops are coming into harvest, the heavy grapes, the prunes, the apples and lettuce and the rapidly maturing cotton, our highways swarm with the migrant workers, that shifting group of nomadic, poverty-stricken harvesters driven by hunger and the threat of hunger from crop to crop, from harvest to harvest, up and down the state and into Oregon to some extent, and into Washington a little. But it is California which has and needs the majority of these new gypsies. It is a short study of these wanderers that these articles will undertake. There are at least 150,000 homeless migrants wandering up and down the state, and that is an army large enough to make it important to every person in the state" (STEINBECK, 1996: 991). The journalistic document resulting from Steinbeck and Lange's work, *The Harvest Gypsies*, from which the previous quotation is taken, could be considered a prequel to *The Grapes of Wrath*, since during the first trip to California Steinbeck not only met the immigrants who would later become the Joad family, but also bore witness to President Roosevelt's reform programme in his visit to Weedpatch, the only reception camp in California for migrant workers from Kern County

back then, located in Arvin (another one was later built in Marysville)⁷. Weedpatch was run by Tom Collins (see Figure 3), one of the two people to whom Steinbeck dedicated *The Grapes of Wrath* – "To Carol [his wife], who willed it; to Tom, who lived it" – and who inspired him to create the character of Jim Rawley at the Wheatpatch camp (nearly a copy of the real name), the place where the Joads arrive when fleeing from their creditors. Collins, who devoted his life to social work, not only helped Steinbeck in his journalistic research, but also became the technical advisor for John Ford's film version of *The Grapes of Wrath* later on. In fact, some of the scenes were shot at the camp in Arvin and its surroundings, although it is also true that a replica of the camp and of the battered hut settlements was built at the Fox Pico Boulevard studios.

From the book to the screen

On the 26th of December 1942 James Agee wrote that, despite his respect for John Ford "as a technician and as a serious man", he regretted "ninety-nine feet in every hundred of *The Grapes of Wrath*" (AGEE, 2005: 35). His opinion is undoubtedly due to the mitigation of the intensity of the original literary work. Nunnally Johnson's script omitted the reflections in the novel about the need for an organised uprising and softened the bitter image of the American socioeconomic panorama.

John Ford's film is harsh, but Steinbeck's novel offers a much more straightforward and violent view of the Great Depression and its ending appears to leave the characters with no future. Johnson's adaptation introduced some changes to avoid censorship and offer the audience a less tumultuous ending. The most important of these changes is the inversion of the chronological order of the story. Steinbeck first pre-

sents the Joads living in a federal camp in good conditions for workers, and we witness the process of impoverishment and the break-up of the Joad family who, after migrating to California to be exploited as harvesters, end up scraping by – with no perspective of ever being able to find their home again – as starving vagrants in search of a place to take shelter from the rain. On their way, their grandparents die, babies are stillborn and Tom and his brother Al go their separate ways. However, the ending of the film does not achieve the same dramatic quality as the novel⁸. In the book, after Tom leaves to prevent his family from having to cover up his crime, the reader witnesses the process of family breakdown. The chapter where Rosasharn gives birth to a stillborn child while the men fruitlessly try to prevent a flood in the pouring rain to save their boxcars is utterly horrific. Starving and soaked to the skin, they remain in the flooded boxcar for two days, until Ma decides to leave their few remaining belongings in search of a dry place in order to prevent the convalescent Rosasharn from falling ill. After a forced march along the road, they take shelter from the rain in an abandoned barn, where they meet a little boy who lends them a dry comfort so that Rosasharn can warm up. Lying next to the boy is his father, who has not eaten anything in six days (STEINBECK, 1996: 691):

"Yeah! Says he wasn' hungry, or he jus' et. Give me the food. Now he's too weak. Can't hardly move."

The pounding of the rain decreased to a soothing swish on the roof. The gaunt man moved his lips. Ma knelt beside him and put her ear close. His lips moved again.

"Sure," Ma said. "You jus' be easy. He'll be awright. You jus' wait'll I get them wet clo'es off'n my girl."

Ma went back to the girl. "Now slip 'em off," she said. She held the comfort up to screen her from view. And when she was naked, Ma folded the comfort about her.

The boy was at her side again explaining, "I didn' know. He said he et, or he wasn' hungry. Las' night I went an' bust

Figure 3. Tom Collins, manager of Kern migrant camp, California, with migrant mother and child, by Dorothea Lange. / Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF34-009879-C].





Figure 4. Left: picture from the shooting of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Right: Photograph by Dorothea Lange (May 1937): *Former Texas Tenant Farmers Displaced by Power Farming*. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF34-To1-017265-C]

a winda an' stoled some bread. Made 'im chew 'er down. But he puked it all up, an' then he was weaker. Got to have soup or milk. You folks got money to git milk?"

Ma said, "Hush. Don' worry. We'll figger somepin out."

Suddenly the boy cried, "He's dyin', I tell you! He's starvin' to death, I tell you."

"Hush," said Ma. She looked at Pa and Uncle John standing helplessly gazing at the sick man. She looked at Rose of Sharon huddled in the comfort. Ma's eyes passed Rose of Sharon's eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl's breath came short and gasping.

She said "Yes."

Ma smiled. [...]

Rose of Sharon whispered, "Will--will you all--go out?" the rain whisked lightly on the roof. [...]

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There." Her hand moved behind his head and supported it.

In the novel, the characters manage to survive thanks to the unity of the family and the solidarity of others. The final *quid pro quo* is hair-raising: the boy saving Rosasharn's life by giving her the comfort, and her breastfeeding his father in return. In the film, however, the situations the characters have to go through are not so extreme. The film was "marked by a strained nostalgia for lost promise, rather than of anticipation of a paradise to be regained. That is why he inevitably emphasized only one element from Steinbeck's novel: the longing for the farmers' simple life which had been lost in the complexities of the modern world" (MILLICHAP, 1983: 33). The presence of the federal camp at the end of the film is

an attempt to imply that President Roosevelt's policies are the solution to the people's problems (it is no coincidence that they chose Grant Mitchell to play the role of boss due to his resemblance with the president). As Scott Eyman puts it, Ford's intention was never to produce a work of social criticism: "The film lacks the sociological sting of the novel, but it compensates by creating a feeling of uni-

versality, making the Joads archetypes of dispossession" (EYMAN, 1999: 225).

The music by prolific composer Alfred Newman also contributed to the neutralisation of the elements of social protest in the plot by adding local colouring and linking the Joads with the family model Ford presented throughout his filmography, like the Morgans in *How Green Was My Valley*, (1941), a film he directed one year after *The Grapes of Wrath*.⁹ This was demonstrated by German composer Hanns Eisler, exiled in New York, when—in the context of the Film Music Project at the New School for Social Research—he composed an alternative soundtrack for some sequences in *The Grapes of*

Figure 5. One of *The Grapes of Wrath* posters distributed in the U.S., highlighting the two main documentary resources of the film: the aesthetic of FSA photography and the novel by Steinbeck.



Wrath. His aim was to counteract the sentimentality of Newman's music – and typical of Hollywood films – and to contribute to the association of the migration of the Joad Family with the painful process of exile¹⁰.

Nevertheless, although neither Johnson's screenplay nor Newman's music emphasized the social content in Steinbeck's novel, Gregg Toland's photography and Richard Day and Mark Lee Kirk's artistic direction did, for they imitated the progressive aesthetics of the New Deal art. Fox studios provided them with a selection of photographs from the FSA's Historical Section conducted by Stryker (including the works of Dorothea Lange) and Pare Lorentz' films made for the RA, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938) (which had also influenced Steinbeck in the writing of his novel), as well as a wide range of documents linked to soil erosion, dust storms, federal camps and illegal settlements. Steinbeck himself publicly declared his satisfaction when producer Darryl F. Zanuck gave him a pre-release screening of the film. Steinbeck wrote to his agent that Zanuck did much more than keep his word, that the film was "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" (EYMAN, 2000: 226)¹¹.

Portraits of poverty: the FSA

It is evident that Ford chose a hard and truthful photography, as Steinbeck pointed out, that would be as close as possible to the FSA's cold and harsh aesthetics¹². It is well known that, in order to achieve a rougher texture, Toland used no diffusion filters on his camera and the actors did not wear any make-up¹³. Middle shots and long shots were filmed in the morning and at dusk in order to capture the slanting light, whereas close-ups were filmed at noon. Eyman remarks that Eddie Quillan, the actor who played Rosasharn's husband, recalled how precise Ford's instructions were: "At one point, Ford

directed him to 'Get your voice a little on the Southern.' Then, after another rehearsal, 'Make it stronger.' For a reaction shot of a group of men, Ford told them, 'I want everyone's eyes forward'. But Quillan had shifted his eyes downward because it struck him that the line he was reacting to would embarrass his character 'Cut,' said Ford. 'I said everybody's eyes straight ahead'" (EYMAN, 1999: 233). Indeed, the people looking ahead and in a frontal position is one of the distinctive characteristics of the FSA's photographs (see Figure 4), a style adopted from earlier photographers who had also engaged in social criticism, like Lewis Hine or Jacob Riis (ROMERO, 2013: 356-365). It is no accident that the poster released to promote the film contains two obvious marketing ploys; two "mimetic strategies" or "iconic veracity enhancers" (ZUNZUNEGUI and ZUMALDE: 2014), which appeal directly to the spectator's knowledge of the 1940s: firstly, the aesthetic of the FSA photographs, again with the staged reconstruction of the frontal position and gaze towards the camera of the subjects (characteristic features of the forms of documentary discourse); and secondly, John Steinbeck's book (another "mark of authenticity"), which had caused such a sensation (see Figure 5). On the other hand, the use of depth of field Toland chose provides the pictures, as Joseph McBride pointed out, with a feeling of *three-dimensional realism* which, along with the direct use of light, created in the film an effect that is "audacious but never arty" (McBRIDE, 2001: 35).

There are two sequences that are especially evocative of the FSA photographs for their aesthetics and the arrangement of the characters in front of the camera. The first takes place at the beginning of the film in the flashback narrated by Muley (John Qualen) to Tom and Casy (John Carradine) about how the bank took his farm and the new owners knocked down his house, condemning his family to migration (see the still frames in Figure 6). The contrast of the close-up of



Figure 6. Sequence of the flashback told by Muley to Tom and Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The background characters, placed in front of the camera (with "eyes straight ahead"), respond to the ways of representation of the FSA.



the policeman telling Muley they have to leave the place with the undaunted family listening to the conversation in the background responds to the naturalistic aesthetics of the FSA. The second sequence that most resembles the form and content of the photographic portraits of the period is probably the most elaborate scene in the whole film from a documentary point of view (see the still frames in Figure 7). Here we see the Joads arriving at the camp of unemployed labourers in Hooverville, in an elaborate subjective tracking shot that shows us the place they are arriving at through the eyes of the Joads from inside their vehicle, while they drive slowly through a starving crowd, in search for a place to camp. The drama of this long sequence shot is twofold in showing the starving people on the one hand, while on the other making the Joads aware that they are part of this crowd that surrounds them, from which it will be hard for them to escape.

Apart from these two sequences, there are also daylight scenes showing the pilgrimage of the Joads in their overloaded vehicle (first, the journey from Oklahoma to California, with their various stops to rest, buy food or change tyres on the truck; then, their comings and goings from one camp to another in search of work), whose images recollect the pictures taken by Dorothea Lange in *Highway 99*, the inside name used by the crew to refer to the film (see Figure 8).

It should however be noted that from a photographic point of view not all the scenes match up to the scale of those analysed above. The FSA's documentarian Pare Lorentz, in an article published in *McCalls* on April 1940, reproached Johnson, Toland and Ford for the beginning of the film: "Here [Nunnally Johnson] needed to think in terms of skies and brown land, and, most of all, wind. He needed only to have written 'drought' and then left it to the director to re-create the feeling of those dusty



plains tilting from Oklahoma clear up to Canada, with their miserable huts and busted windmills [just what we can see in Lorentz' documentary *The Plow that Breaks the Plains*]. In fact, he only had to have gone to the panhandle of and Texas and western Kansas and the Dakotas and eastern Colorado and say: 'Photograph this: here is where they came from' [...]; [Ford] at least might have started his picture with the Great Plains instead of with scenes that, even though they were from the book, did not give you a feeling of the land. In fact, the scenes where Granpa [Charley Grapewin] and Muley sob over handfuls of dirt and talk about the land are self-conscious, prosy and maudlin" (LORENTZ, 1940). Lorentz' criticism focuses on the fact that "Toland did not capture the dimensions of the South West or the feeling of sky and earth with his camera [...] despite the beauty of his nocturnal effects and the difficult truncated shots". It is precisely the stylised contrasts and long shadows of the nocturnal scenes –the expressionist playing with light and

Figure 7. Frames of the Joads' arrival in Hooverville. The characters who enter the frame as the camera advances reflect the calligraphy or visual morphology of the FSA photographs. Ford resorts here to a depiction with the hallmarks of the documentary style of the period: again, "everyone's eyes forward".



Figure 8. Above: photographs by Dorothea Lange (1935-1937). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF347-002470-E / LC-DIG-fsa-8b38482 / LC-DIG-fsa-8b29930 / LC-DIG-fsa-8b29843]. Below: pictures from different scenes in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

shadow that Toland carried out in the studio— that prompted Lorentz to talk about the lack of coherence and unity in the film's appearance, because they contrasted with the FSA-style naturalistic daylight scenes, which anticipated Italian neorealism, and which Lorentz did appreciate: "But stick around. Once the Joad family starts for California, you will see a tough, brutal, uncompromising picture [...]. There is a peculiar newsreel quality to all the latter part of the picture. Here is movie making" (LORENTZ, 1940).

Epilogue: from *Highway 99* to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The FSA aesthetics

Apart from *The Grapes of Wrath*, from the visual point of view, there are other fiction films that owe a lot to the FSA's photographic aesthetics, which they imitate through photography as a testimony of the era. One example for this is found in contemporary cinema. *O Brother! Where Art Thou?*, by Joel and Ethan Coen, set in Mississippi in the times of the Great Depression, com-

bines elements that suggest a rewriting of classical Hollywood cinema¹⁴. The Coens make use of images that evoke the FSA's aesthetics, even while they focus their attention on reviewing the human miseries of three histrionic fugitives: "The images and music call to mind the 'documentary' impulse so prevalent in the 1930s, and clearly situate the film initially within the same heritage as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans' Farm Securities Administration photographs, the Lomax's field recording project¹⁵ and the socially-conscious docu-dramas like *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932) and fictional fare like Preston Sturges' satire, *Sullivan's Travels* (1941)" (CLINE, 2005). There are various images that call to mind the FSA photographs (see the comparative still frames in Figure 9). In fact, the film begins with a photographic metaphor since it starts in black and white and slowly shifts into colour, and it ends the other way around, that is, shifting from colour to black and white. The first imitation of the FSA aesthetics is found at the beginning as well, with

prisoners in the background engaged in forced labour, recalling Walker Evans' picture known as *Members of a Prison Work Gang* (1935). A little later, when the three criminals escape and try to hop on a moving train, the image of the labourers looking directly at the camera without saying a word as they watch the fugitives plays with the same frontality that Ford demanded from his actors. Likewise, throughout the Coens' film we see shacks, sheds, farmers ploughing the soil, gas stations and other places typical of the era that evoke those portrayed by the FSA. Finally, at the end of the film, there is an explicit reference to the well-known photograph by Russell Lee *Hidalgo County, Texas* (1939), which shows a couple listening to the radio while sitting in their armchairs.

Why do the Coens evoke the FSA's photographs to present a comedy, if the spirit and intention that motivated the FSA to take the pictures has completely vanished? There is no room in these pages for the discussion this question deserves, but I would venture



to suggest that in this way the Coens can present their audience with a realistic portrait of the Depression within which to place their protagonists. The Coens' ability lies in inserting the frames that recall the aforementioned FSA photographs without adulterating the comedic code. The language of art, therefore, must have gone beyond the purposes of the FSA photographers. What they started transcends the goals that moved them. If their work had been a document without artistic or documentary merit, it would have remained anchored in its time, but we are witnesses to the fact that both now and then, the photographs are capable of absorbing different meanings and are still alive in another medium with diverse and renewed aspirations.¹⁶

Figure 9. Right column: photographs from different sequences in the Coens' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Left column, from top to bottom, FSA photographs: Walker Evans, *Members of a prison work gang* (1936) Walker Evans Collection, MOMA; Walker Evans, *Bud Fields and his family at home* (1935); *House, Hale County* (1935); Dorothea Lange: *Sharecropper cultivating cotton with team. Near Shreveport, Louisiana* (1937); Russell Lee: *Tenant purchase clients at home, Hidalgo County, Texas* (1939). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-DIG-ppmsc-00234 /LC-USF34-017162-C /LC-DIG-fsa-8b37079]

Notes

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1 In the summer of 1939, only a few months after Steinbeck's novel was published, an FSA photographer, Russell Lee, asked permission from Roy Stryker to digress a little from his original assignment in Texas to take photographs of a family of *real Joads*: "I've just finished reading *The Grapes of Wrath*, and it's one of the best books I ever read... I'm going to... try to take as many graphically expressive pictures as I can." Lee portrayed Elmer Thomas' family (a couple of Okies with children) near Muskogee, Oklahoma, while they were packing their belongings and loading them in their old van, saying goodbye to their friends and family and leaving for California. See letter from Russell Lee to Roy Stryker on the 11th of May 1939, in Roy Emerson Stryker Papers, series 1, reel 2, Photographic Archive, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, United States (qtd. in FINNEGAN, 2003: 2).

2 The report was illustrated by fifteen photographs (most of them by the FSA, except for some taken by Earl Thiessen, a staff photographer for *Look* magazine), and was divided into two parts. The first, titled "Why John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*", included pictures of farmers and immigrants, accompanied by quotations taken directly from the novel as photo captions; both the text and the images traced the route taken by the Joads. The second part, "California's Answer to *The Grapes of Wrath*", included pictures of immigrants in camps and a text written by the then governor of California, Culbert L. Olson, in which he tried to offer an answer to the problem: more federal intervention, and the building of more FSA government camps for immigrant workers.

3 See Franklin D. Roosevelt: "First Inaugural Address (1933)" (ANDREWS; ZAREFSKY, 1989: 436).

4 In his speech, Franklin referred to the need to *face* and *recognize* the problems, a visual inflection, as Cara A. Finnegan points out. The verb *to face* becomes a recurrent element in

his speech: "We *face* common difficulties"; "a host of unemployed citizens *face* the grim problem of existence"; "If we *face* it wisely and courageously"; "*face* the arduous days that lie before us". See Franklin D. Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address, 1933" (ANDREWS & ZAREFSKY, 1989: 436).

5 The photographers were merely one of the FSA initiatives to publicise the work the agency was doing. In fact, the FSA's Information Division had five sections devoted to raising awareness of their work. Apart from the photographers directed by Stryker in the Historical Section, there were sections for documentation (led by acclaimed director Pare Lorentz), radio, publications and an editorial section that printed daily bulletins. In this way, the government confronted the political controversies arising from the rejection of the measures implemented under the New Deal, which was promoting social policies that challenged traditional American notions of individualism.

6 It is worth mentioning that before focusing on funding the acquisition of small family farms for those farmers who had been forced to leave their lands due to natural disasters (like sandstorms and the recurrent drought) or to various economic needs, the FSA implemented a series of more wide-reaching policies (within what was then the Resettlement Administration), such as the Greenbelt projects, which provided affordable accommodation to poor citizens from slums in order to reduce overcrowding and the unsanitary conditions in the cities. In the field of agriculture, the RA's restoration and resettlement programmes included: 1) aid to pay leasings, the acquisition of farm tools and food for farmers who wanted to stay on their farms; 2) resettlement on new lands (especially for young farmer couples) that were more fertile or favourable for cultivation; 3) the creation of rural communities, sponsored by the federal government, but managed by agricultural cooperatives. This third point is reflected in the final part of John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and has been a central theme of various films of the time set in the Depression, like *Our Daily Bread* (King Vidor, 1934).

7 The association between Steinbeck's work and Lange's could still be seen in *Their Blood is Strong* (1938), a pamphlet publis-

hed by the Simon J. Lubin Society in 1938, which included the seven reports by Steinbeck in *The San Francisco News*, and whose cover was illustrated by one of the portraits the photographer took in August 1938, *Oklahoma Drought Refugees, Blythe, California*, where a woman breastfeeds her son while sitting in the shade (see Figure 2).

8 It is said that the last shot that Ford intended to use for his ending was the one that takes place right after Tom's (Henry Fonda) clandestine farewell, with the image that offers a glimpse of his silhouette in the distance against the sky, climbing up a hillside at dawn. Producer Darryl F. Zanuck added the daylight scenes that follow, in which the Joads are seen picking up their belongings from the federal camp to go in search of work in a cotton field and Ma Joad (Jane Darwell) gives her famous speech inside her vehicle (taken from an episode from the second third of the novel), closing the final version of the film: "We'll go on forever, Pa, 'cause we're the people".

9 Although the soundtrack was composed by Alfred Newman (who had previously worked for Ford in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, 1939), the film's main theme, "Red River Valley", was a musical piece by James Kerrigan, performed on the accordion by Dan Borzage (brother of director Frank Borzage), a member of Ford's Stock Company, who had lived up many of his films since *The Iron Horse* (1924).

10 Between the years 1940 and 1942 Hanns Eisler carried out practical and theoretical research in New York on the different uses and possibilities of music in films: "Is it really necessary to continue the current Hollywood practice of rewriting *original* soundtracks composed with the crumbs from Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Ravel, Richard Strauss and Stravinsky's tables? Isn't it possible to compose brand new musical material? Wouldn't that be even more useful and effective?" (VIEJO, 2004) Eisler answered all these questions with his alternative soundtrack for *The Grapes of Wrath*. Breixo Viejo's analysis of Eisler's unusual compositions in *Música moderna para un nuevo cine: Eisler, Adorno y el Film Music Project* (VIEJO, 2008), demonstrates how an intelligent use of music could intensify the aesthetics and ideological meaning of some sequences in Ford's film.

11 From among the whole network of cultural resonances generated by the novel beyond the cinema, it is worth mentioning the influence *The Grapes of Wrath* had on musicians of the time, like Woody Guthrie, who in 1937 climbed on top of a freight train with his guitar and travelled alongside vagrants and labourers to the West to contribute his particular musical vision. When he arrived in California, while working in a peach tree orchard, he composed songs he later compiled in the 1940 album *Dust Bowl Ballads*. Two of those songs were inspired by *The Grapes of Wrath*: "Blowin' Down the Road" and "Tom Joad", which summarised in a few verses the plot of Steinbeck's novel, as reflected in this verse that closes the ballad: "Tom run back where his mother was asleep; / He woke her up out of bed. / An' he kissed goodbye to the mother that he loved, / He said what Preacher Casey said. 'Ever'body might be just one big soul, / Well it looks that a-way to me. / Everywhere that you look, in the day or night, / That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma, / Wherever little children are hungry and cry, / Wherever people ain't free. / Wherever men are fightin' for their rights, / That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma". ("The Ballad of Tom Joad" can be heard at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKWGAGPy_kw_1987>.) When Guthrie saw Ford's film version of the novel, he encouraged the public to go see it in his newspaper column. Other singers and songwriters were subsequently inspired by the novel or its adaptation to the screen: Pink Floyd released the song "Sorrow" on its album *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*, the first line of which, "Sweet smell of a great sorrow lies over the land", was taken from the beginning of the novel. In 1991, Camel released the album *Dust and Dreams*; and in 1995, Bruce Springsteen drew from Ford's film to write the lyrics to "The Ghost of Tom Joad" (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uJEoeql_sY>) which includes the passage quoted from Guthrie's ballad: "Now Tom said 'Mom, wherever there's a cop beatin' a guy / Wherever a hungry newborn baby cries / Where there's a fight 'gainst the blood and hatred in the air / Look for me Mom I'll be there / Wherever there's somebody fightin' for a place to stand / Or decent job or a helpin' hand / Wherever

somebody's strugglin' to be free / Look in their eyes, Mom, you'll see me."

12 Otto Brower led a second shooting unit that filmed background material. Although little of this footage survived in the final version of the film, it is worth mentioning that Brower took the same route that the 350,000 immigrants took every year through Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, which means there was an explicit intention of documentary realism in the production of the film.

13 *The Grapes of Wrath* was the first collaboration between John Ford and Gregg Toland, who a year later was director of photography in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). Right after *The Grapes of Wrath* they worked together again in *The Long Voyage Home* (1940) and later in the documentary on the Second World War *December 7th* (1943).

14 The Coens' rewriting of classical Hollywood cinema could lead to a specific essay on the topic, for which Stanley Cavell has already provided a good deal of brilliant material (CAVELL, 2010: 119-143). It is most evident in the decision to bring a non-existent film to the screen, i.e., in its tribute to Preston Sturges' movie *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). It is not only that their film shares title with the one that Sullivan (Joel McCrea) –the protagonist in Sturges' film– intended to make. McCrea plays the role of a Hollywood director who wants to adapt a novel by Sinclair Beckstein (an allusion to the investigative journalism of Upton Sinclair and John Steinbeck). It is also the fact that the Coens are faithful to Sullivan's determination not to betray the comic spirit, as seen in the protagonist's final decision to shoot a film that would raise the audience's spirits and make them forget their problems for a moment, before reviewing the human misery caused by the Depression (a decision he makes after an eventful journey on which he poses as a vagrant in order to experience the real hardships of the poor): "I don't wanna make *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*... I wanna make a comedy... There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that's all some people have? It isn't much, but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan". The reference in *Sullivan's Travels* to *The Grapes of Wrath* is clear, especially because it was made a year after the success of Ford's film

and because Sturges' plot parodies a director who says he wants to make a film whose title is homonymous to the novel he wants to adapt, as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, which is also about the troubles faced by the poor. This is expressed by Sullivan in the initial discussion he has with the producers who are to fund his project, before they change their minds: "I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions. I want this picture to be a document... I want to hold a mirror up to life. I want this to be a picture of dignity, a true canvas of the suffering of humanity... I wanted to make you something outstanding, something you could be proud of, something that would realize the potentialities of film as the sociological and artistic medium that it is". The paradox posited by the Coens consists in creating Sullivan's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, but as a Homeric comedy, setting the film in the Great Depression and using the collective imaginary of the FSA photographs preserved in the memory of American society, as we see in Figure 9.

15 Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax devoted part of his career to recording popular songs sung by black slaves in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. The Coens' put them in the mouths of the prisoners at the beginning of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Lomax worked on the relationship between sociology and the musical corpus through cantometrics, a system he invented to analyse songs, and brought musicians like the aforementioned Woody Guthrie into the public eye.

16 For more information on the secularisation of the original meaning of photography following its circulation in different media, see "Riis, Capa, Rosenthal. Traducciones cinematográficas de la fotografía" (ROMERO, 2009: 124-135). A detailed analysis on the topic of this essay, focusing on the depiction of human affliction, can also be found in "La imagen del dolor en el inmigrante: *Las uvas de la ira*, de Steinbeck a Ford" (ROMERO: 2011: 31-42).

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