The Grapes of Wrath

John Steinbeck’s magnificent novel was brought to the screen with great care by the studio’s head of production Darryl Zanuck. Some scenes of the book could not be filmed and the ending is more upbeat than the novel, but generally the adaptation was a faithful one and Steinbeck approved of it.

John Ford was an inspired choice to direct and if you are familiar with his style you will recognise that mothers were often pivotal figures in his films. Jane Darwell’s character of Ma Joad is one of the greatest mother figures the screen has given us. A lifetime of hard work, sorrow and compassion are etched on her face. She manages to convey mercy and kindness with very few words and her performance won her ‘Best Supporting Actress’ in 1940. Look out for the scene where she tries on a pair of earrings, smiling slightly at a fond memory from when she was young, and you will be watching one of cinema’s most indelible moments.

Also of importance is the cinematography of Gregg Toland, who in the following year would work with Orson Welles on ‘Citizen Kane’. Toland used natural lighting at a time when Hollywood films were brightly lit and many resulting images of migratory farm workers are reminiscent of the famous depression era photographs of Dorothea Lange.

We finally come to Henry Fonda’s performance as Tom Joad, which must rank as one of his finest; his loping gait, steady gaze and flat Midwestern inflections are so appropriate, and he is served well by the innate honesty and decency of his persona.

There is an anger in this film, a deep resentment of the social injustice and misery which America allowed to be visited upon its people of the land. The golden promises of America’s pioneer days had since withered away in the dust storms of the 1930s. It was thus a brave and liberal picture to make at a time when the Un-American Activities Committee was already trying to sniff out Communists working in the entertainment industry.
The Grapes of Wrath

Directed by John Ford (1940)

Based on the 1939 novel by John Steinbeck

Principal cast:
Henry Fonda as Tom Joad
Jane Darwell as Ma Joad
John Carradine as John Casy
Russell Simpson as Pa Joad
Charlie Grapewin as Grandpa Joad
John Qualen as Muley Graves

Film fact: The title of this film is taken from the Battle Hymn of the Republic.
“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,
He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.
He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword,
His truth is marching on.”

Question 1>> [Tom Joad tries to hitch a ride with a company truck]
Driver: Can’t you see that sticker?
Tom: Sure I see it. But a good guy don’t pay no attention to what some heel makes him stick on his truck.

? How does this opening dialogue establish his character?

? What happens next in this scene to skew our initial perception of Tom?

Tom: You’re about to bust a gut to know what I’ve done... I ain’t going to let you down: homicide!

Film trivia: Henry Fonda holds the record for the longest gap between Oscar nominations; His first being for ‘Grapes of wrath’ in 1940 and then 41 years later for ‘On Golden Pond’ in 1981. This final film being his only win for Best Actor.

Question 2>> [Casey and Tom hear the sorrowful tale of Muley; ‘the graveyard ghost’. A flashback re-enacts the eviction of his family]
Agent: After what them dusters done to the land, the tenant system don’t work no more... one man and a tractor can handle 12 or 14 of these places... I got my orders, they told me to tell you to get off.
Muley: You mean get off my own land?...Whose fault is it?
Agent: You know who owns the land; the Shawnee land and Cattle Company
Muley: And who’s the Shawnee land and cattle company?
Agent: It ain’t nobody, it’s a company.
Muley’s son: They got a president...somebody who knows what a shotgun’s for?
Agent: Oh son, it ain’t his fault, because the bank tells him what to do.
Muley’s son: All right, where’s the bank?
Agent: Tulsa. But what’s the use of pickin’ on him? He ain’t anything but the manager and he’s half crazy trying to keep up with orders from the East.
Muley: Then who do we shoot?
Agent: Brother...I just don’t know who’s to blame.

Where lays the twisted brilliance to this argument?
No-body can be found to blame for the evictions.
Close to but not a true catch-22 circular logic, but everyone eventually answers to some unknown entity “from the East”.

Who do you think is really to blame?
The combined forces of unrestrained capitalism and government negligence.

A great scene: A pre dawn candle lit scene has Ma Joad sorting through a box of mementos and souvenirs she has gathered over the years. Wordlessly and nostalgically she decides what she cannot take with her, giving up parts of her past that are now irretrievably lost. In a scene of tremendous visual power she holds up two earrings to her face and wistfully looks back at her reflection, thinking back to some long past moment of pleasure.

Question 3>> [Grandpa Joad is the first to die and the family buries him by the side of the road. Tom writes a note to explain the old man’s death; “Nobody kilt him. Jus a stroke and he dyed” to allay suspicions of foul play]
Tom: It looks like a lotta times the gov’ment got more interest in a dead man than a live one.

Is this still true today?
Why must this be so?
Bureaucratic process and investigative justice is better designed to deal with a corpse than sort out the complex social problems of living humans!

Film trivia: Henry Fonda was seeking to establish himself as a big Hollywood star but wanted to avoid signing a studio contract which would prevent him freely choosing his own film projects. The producer knew Fonda desperately wanted the part of Tom Joad and so let it be known that he was going to offer the part to Tyrone Power. Fonda was pressured into signing an eight year picture deal with 20th Century-Fox to secure the role, thus losing his freedom to independently manage his career.

Question 4>> [The Joads stay the night at a migrant campground and hear the disturbing testimony of a man returning from California]
Migrant: All right, the man wants 800 men so he prints 5,000 handbills and maybe 20,000 people see ‘em. And maybe 3,000 people start west on account of that handbill... 3000 people that are crazy with worry headin’ out for 800 jobs. Now does that make sense?

? Some audience members may find this dialogue ‘preachy’ but do you perhaps prefer this style of clear film dialogue over the impressionistic mumblings of some modern American films?

Modern audiences are more sophisticated at ‘reading’ a film through more than spoken dialogue. Perhaps atmospheric impression is more important than clear explanations of purpose and fact. Not all of you would agree I’m sure!

Film trivia: The truck used in the film is a 1926 Hudson ‘Super six’.

This film was banned in the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin because it showed that even the poorest of Americans could still afford to own a car!

Question 5>> [The Joad’s dilapidated truck leaves for the night desert crossing from the ‘Last Chance’ service station. The two uniformed attendants talk contemptuously about them as they share gum and throw their litter on the ground]

Gas man 1: Holy Moses, what a hard looking outfit.
Gas man 2: All them Oakies is hard looking.
Gas 1: Boy, I’d hate to hit that desert in a jalopy like that. You and me got sense. Them Oakies got no sense and no feelings... a human being couldn’t stand to be so miserable.
Gas 2: Just don’t know any better, I guess.

COMPARE WITH
Al: What a place! How’d ya like to walk across it?
Tom: People done it. They could. We could.
Al: Lots must have died too.

Where do director John Ford’s sympathies rest?
Clearly with the down to earth Joads who are well aware of the risks but face it with determination.

Film trivia: Almost one half of the film’s length is contained in the 3 contrasting camp experiences: the Hooverville (14 minutes), the Keene Ranch (22 minutes) and the Wheat Patch government camp (25 minutes).

Prior to filming, the producer Darryl Zanuck sent investigators out to the migrant camps to see if Steinbeck had exaggerated the squalor and unfair treatment portrayed in the novel. He was disturbed to discover that Steinbeck had actually downplayed the worst of what went on in the labour camps.
**Question 6>>** After being pushed on from the town, the Joads arrive the Hooverville Transient Migrant camp. Tim Dirks writing in www.filmsite.org describes the scene: “In a memorably effective subjective camera view through the Joad’s windshield...they realise the camp is crowded with other hungry, starving, jobless and desperate travellers. The jalopy slowly and uneasily makes its careful way through the rutted dirt road between the huts and around the camp’s haunted-faced inhabitants, who move as if in slow motion and size up the new arrivals. Their first exposure to this human junkyard is truly despairing.”

**Why is this such an effective scene?**

**What makes it memorable for you?**

Looking through the windshield you actually feel like you are watching a secret camera filming real people in a real migrant camp. It is masterful cinema. Reminds me of the 1930s photographs of Dorothea Lange (and 9 others) who were commissioned by the government to make a visual reportage of the plight of Mid-western farmers because of the 4 year drought and takeover by big farming industries. When these pictures were published they achieved their goal to stir up public opinion and convince voters to support their government’s charitable actions.

**Film trivia:** Banks and the large farming corporations that controlled most Californian farms were not keen on the original novel (it was banned in some states and counties in California) and even less thrilled that a film was being made of it. The Associated Farmers of California called for a boycott of all 20th Century-Fox films and John Steinbeck received death threats. The pro-union stance of the film led to John Steinbeck and John Ford being investigated by Congress during the McCarthy “Red Scare” era for alleged pro-communist leanings.

**Question 7>>** [Tom and the preacher knock down a policeman trying to shoot an ‘agitator’. More police arrive in patrol cars. The preacher takes the blame]

Casy: *This man of yours, he got tough so I hit him. Then he started shooting, shot that woman, so I hit him again.*

Police: *What did you do in the first place?*

Casy: *I talked back.*

**Why is the ex-preacher so cheerfully willing to take all responsibility?**

Having “lost the Spirit” he feels the need to work for another just cause. No doubt the sacrificial nature of his actions felt righteous to him. He was protecting Tom from a parole violation.

**Question 8>>** [We learn that Rosasharn’s husband Connie has deserted the Joads and his pregnant wife. Tom hears that locals are going to burn down the camp that night]

Tom: *Ma, there comes a time when a man gets mad.*

Ma: *You told me! You promised not to...*
Tom: I know Ma... if there was a law that was working with me, maybe we could take it but it ain’t the law! They’re working away at our spirits, working on our decency.

Ma: You gotta keep clear of the law! The family’s breaking up!

Ma Joad refers to the “family breaking up”, have you noticed the unmentioned disappearance of another family member besides Connie?

Noah Joad simply vanishes off the screen after the men swim in the Colorado River. In the book, Noah tells his brother Tom that he has decided to stay by the river and not burden the family. In the film his disappearance is never explained.

Film trivia: Dorris Bowden (Rose of Sharon) was married to screenwriter Nunnally Johnson.

Question 9>> [The Joads are offered work picking peaches “about 40 miles, just this side of Pixley”. As they approach the ranch they pass through a gauntlet of police, striking farmers and parked migrant trucks.

Contractor: Wanna work?
Tom: Sure, but what is this?
Contractor: None of your business. Name? Can you all work?...House 63. Wages 5 cents a box. No bruised fruit. You can go to work right away.

[Later, a surly bookkeeper checks their license plate]
Bookkeeper: Oklahoma EL 204. Don’t check. (To Tom) Now we don’t want no trouble with you. Just do your own work and mind your business and you’ll be alright.

[Later, Tom hears a new arriving family being offered two and half cents per box]

?Do any of you know about the town of Pixley and what happened there?
It was a town in Tulate County, California, notorious for its ill treatment of migrant workers. In 1933 Pixley was one of the towns involved in the San Joaquin cotton strike. A violent clash between strikers and growers left 2 dead and 8 wounded. Five thousand workers gathered for the dead strikers’ funerals. Eight cotton growers were indicted in the violence against the strikers but were later acquitted.

Question 10>> [Tom kills a ‘tin seal’ man after Casy is struck down and hides in the cabin]
Tom: I’m goin’ away tonight. Can’t go putting this on you folks.
Ma: You going away ain’t going to ease us. There was a time we was on the land. There was a boundary to us then. Old folks died and little fellas come... we was the family. Kind of whole and clear. But we ain’t clear no more... Uncle John’s just dragging himself around. Your Pa’s lost his place, he ain’t the head no more. We’re crackin’ up. We ain’t no family now.

? What favourite theme of the director is becoming clear now?
? Is this to distract us from the divisive politics of the situation?
By film’s end this theme of the family “We’re the people that live, they can’t wipe us out” offers an upbeat ending that American audiences were more comfortable with.
Question 11>> [the Joads find rest in their exodus by coming into a ‘promised land’ of the Farm workers’ Wheat Patch Government Camp]
Caretaker: You’re on number 4 sanitary unit...camp committee will call on you in the morning...no cops. People here elect their own cops. The Ladies’ committee will call on you ma’am, tell you about the schools.
Tom: What’s this committee you’re talkin’ about?
Caretaker: We have 5 sanitary units. Each one elects a central committee man. They make the laws and what they say goes.
Tom: You aiming to tell me the fellas running the camp are just ordinary fellas camping here?...Tell me who runs this place?
Caretaker: The government.

? Why would many Americans be uncomfortable with this ideology?
Many would rather have market forces satisfy social needs: If the people cause enough trouble something would eventually be done to cure the problem in the interests of social cohesion and order. Too much government control is Socialism.
The director is gently introducing his audience to a ‘red’ political ideology.
With Hitler’s fascists conquering Europe at this time, Communism would enjoy a brief respite from American demonology!

Question 12>> [After the camp dance riot is averted, Tom sees deputies checking the family’s licence plate and realise they will be back soon with an arrest warrant, he will now be pursued as a fugitive who has violated his parole. In a famous scene (and to the sad tune of ‘Red River Valley’) he bids farewell to his mother]
Ma: But what are you going to do?
Tom: I’ve been thinking about Casy, about what he said, what he done and how he died...I’ve been thinking about one guy with a million acres and 10,000 farmers starving...if all our folks got together and yelled...
Ma: No! They’d drag you out and cut you down!
Tom: They’re gonna get me sooner or later...maybe I can find out what’s wrong and if something can be done about it.
Ma: How am I going to hear about you Tommy? They could kill you and I’d never know.
Tom: It’s like Casy says: A fella ain’t got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul that belongs to everybody...I’ll be everywhere...where there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there...
[Tom walks off, last seen as a tiny image walking up a distant hill]

? What is this dream of One Big Union?
? Is this transcendentalism meets Marxism?
? Do these spiritual / political ideals work for you as a conclusion?
The novel ends differently with a famous scene that stunned its readers, as Rose of Sharon, having lost her stillborn baby, offers her milk-filled breast to a starving man in a railroad car. In 1940, Hollywood could not film such a scene or even suggest to by implication. The director chose to end the film with a meditative speech from Ma Joad that expressed a far safer sentiment for the audience; [The Joads travel to a new ranch for day work]

Ma: I ain’t never going to be scared no more...we was almost beat... like we was lost and nobody cared.
Pa: You’re the one who is holding us together Ma.
Ma: Well Pa, a woman can change better than a man. A man lives in jerks. Baby’s born or someone dies, that’s a jerk. He gets a farm or loses it and that’s a jerk. With a woman it’s all in one flow like a stream. Little eddies and waterfalls but the river it still goes right on....rich fellas come up and they die, and their kids ain’t no good and they die out. But we keeps a coming. They can’t wipe us out. We’ll go on forever Pa, because we’re the people.

There seems to be a hint of reverse racial theory or eugenics here. Can you detect it?

Perhaps it is appropriate that a ‘Marxist’ theory of racial dominance by the hard working and honest working class would contrast greatly with the ‘fascist’ or Aryan myth of the Nordic / Germanic superman taking over Europe!

Question 13:
Did any good come out of all this social upheaval and forced migration?

Roger Ebert (an esteemed film critic) writes; “Tom Joad didn’t know the end of this story, how the Oakies would go on to work in the new war industries and their children would thus prosper more in California than the farms of Oklahoma, and their grandchildren would live on to experience the songs of the Beach Boys.

It is easy to forget that for many ‘The Grapes of wrath’ had an unwritten fourth act.”