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Words and Deeds in *Viva Zapata!*

Robert Morsberger's new edition of John Steinbeck's screenplay *Viva Zapata!* (New York: Viking, 1975; all page references to this edition, with italics and capitals removed) is such a model of restrained but thorough editing for the popular market that it manages to serve the scholarly community as well. In short, the end result of Morsberger's edition — with its accompanying reprinted essays on "Steinbeck's Zapata" and "Steinbeck's Screenplays and Productions" and its clear indications of the major changes between screenplay and finished film — is that, in effect, the primary work of scholarly research and criticism for *Viva Zapata!* has already and suddenly been done, and by one man.

Now the secondary, more specialized, discussion may begin. This paper is intended as an examination of the *Viva Zapata!* filmscript in terms both cinematic and literary: that is, from the standpoint of Steinbeck's usage of planned shots and actions to reinforce the "statements" of his characters, and thus to create an artistic unity out of colorful but surprisingly complex materials. Robert Morsberger has already commented on what might be termed Steinbeck's version of Camus' distinction between the rebel and the revolutionary. I should like to extend his insight by pursuing throughout the screenplay the conflict between those who live by words or deeds alone and those who attempt to back their words with deeds — who strive for balance, in other words.

At the simplest level, Steinbeck uses sound to underscore the significance of basically visual events: the train whistle which "seems to increase the tempo of the ride" during the cut main title sequence (3); the coyote howls which add tension to the early temptation scene involving the newspaper clippings (18) as well as the later, cut scene of the attack of the Federals (51); the fright of horses both during this

same newspaper scene and during the fatal ambush of Zapata (116-17). And there is also the blaring horn used to drown the execution of Madero (82). But this aural emphasis of important action is not unusual in itself; it acquires noteworthiness only in a broader context of meanings.

In general, that broader context can be described as an attention to the means and the meanings of various sorts of communication. If Steinbeck's dichotomy of words and deeds reminds one of Faulkner's Addie Bundren and her "message", then Zapata's identification with the male assertiveness of his horse Blanco ought to bring Sutpen to mind. For the horse establishes Zapata's singularity during the cut opening sequence (3-4) — an individuality which only gradually emerges in the finished film, during the initial scene with Diaz. During the newspaper scene with Fernando, Zapata shares his horse's restlessness and remains by his side (19-21) — both horse and man want a female — and the posture of sympathy is repeated during the riverside conference scene (31, 33). Again, the newly-freed Zapata takes the time to worry about his horse's loose cinch before riding off (46) to end a scene of almost Eisensteinian movement of masses.

But then Blanco is given as a reward to a boy who has repeated Zapata's own heroic action of lassoing a machine gun (57-58), although the point of this near-adoption is thwarted when the boy is later reported dead. The ambiguity of Zapata's efforts either to wield or to pass away power is not resolved until the return of Blanco just before Zapata's murder, a scene which — before the shots ring out and the horse bolts — Steinbeck calls "a love scene" (117). And of course the horse's act in shying and running away (120), then to be seen safe and "alone, grazing peacefully" at the end of the film (122), confirms the restitution and salvation of the values Zapata stands for.

Steinbeck's usage of sex as metaphor, however, is never a matter simply of equating maleness with action and femaleness with words or with inaction. Yet the world of woman is primarily a milieu of safe and domestic concerns in the screenplay — a condition imposed by society, not the artist — so that Zapata's love for Josefa is not only a romance, but also an entanglement. He must sneak after her through the midst of enemies to church to court her (22), following which he risks the loss of his independence — a job, or capture — in her behalf. Restive as Don Nacio's major-domo (26), he nevertheless finds cigars and fine clothes

appealing (30); indeed, clothes are a measure of temptation in the filmscript in such scenes as Pablo's return in Texas dress (31) and Zapata's acceptance of the trappings of a general (60). In the latter instance, the simultaneous acceptance of a gift of chickens represents the varying demands being placed upon his ability to serve as leader.

The cut role of Juana is an indication of what it is to be a soldier's woman (57, 60-61), while that of the Soldadera — who is rendered mute by the cutting of her attempt on Zapata's life (and its accompanying dialogue) following the killing of Pablo — is nevertheless an index of the effects of war upon sexual distinctions (90-92). In scene after scene, the Soldadera functions as a silent presence, or as a leader; it is as though her silence were the mark of her commitment to action. Consider such scenes as the meeting with Fernando (14-21), the raid on the town (54-55), the attack by Huerta's men (where the Soldadera draws a knife along with Pablo, whose actions she follows closely; 78-79), and the scene with the newly-slain Zapata's body, which the Soldadera is the first to reach (120-21). It would seem that in portraying her as "A Woman of the Country, still half girl, with a kind of savage animal beauty" (14), Steinbeck meant the Soldadera to appear less characteristically "woman" than an embodiment of Zapata's wild spirit — like the great horse Blanco — a spirit that by the end of the film has moved out of the dead "tiger", Zapata, into his men, a litter of "cats" (120).

In general, then, Steinbeck's women in *Viva Zapata!* are institutionalized, agents for hearth and heritage. Innocente's wife upbraids his corpse for not having acted sensibly, safely (38), while the selfish landowners' wives are "dumpy" — though that of the enlightened Don Nacio is "ravishingly beautiful" (48-49). One offers women things to placate them (61, 77, 94), or makes them objects of direct assault, as Eufemio does (62-63). In any case, their roles are equated with their bodily functions: Lazaro says that "a field is like a wife" (39), and Eufemio seems to think of taking other men's land as much the same as taking their wives (103); indeed, when Zapata tells Eufemio's victims to fight for their land, the screenplay tells us "he's also referring to the Woman" Eufemio took (104), and the lesson as soon as it has been learned costs Zapata's brother his life.

But if women are a kind of property, even in the best of senses, it is Josefa who most profoundly represents the link between sex and

possessions in this script about the coming of political and economic awareness to a group of the ignorant dispossessed. It is because of her that Zapata, whom Josefa already finds appealing, restrains his spirit in a uniform of "respect" in the employ of Don Nacio; and, still disliking Senor Espejo, he must listen as Josefa's father makes note of the gap between Zapata's tastes and lacks (29-30, 40). Even later, Espejo continues to regard his daughter's marriage to a general as a "business" opportunity (88-89); and although Josefa ends precisely as her father had predicted (109), Espejo never understands the appeal for her of the spirit of the man she loves, nor how much Zapata risks in tying himself to her.

When their love undergoes the ritual of formal courtship, Zapata and Josefa participate in the screenplay's most striking depiction of the difference between the realms of word and deed (61-65). During this sustained scene, Zapata's men cluster outside — even including the young Zapata-surrogate who has been given Blanco — while inside the house Zapata courts Josefa under the watchful glares of her female relatives. Outdoors is the world of the free spirit, whose possessors stare in at the windows; indoors it is "stiff" and "uncomfortable", and love is reduced to matter for negotiations. Conversation becomes rigidified into a parrying of folk adages, and even the suggestion of taking a walk outdoors causes shock; the process continues until the outside world (which the camera continues to contrast with the inside one) invades, bursting in with the news that Diaz has fled! With that, the outdoor world has triumphed, and Zapata and Josefa may embrace.

Something nearly the opposite takes place almost immediately thereafter, during the scene of Zapata's wedding night (66-70). This time, it is Fernando — the not quite "human" revolutionary — who chafes uncomfortably in the midst of the revelry outside, devoid of genuine emotion or the possibility of an intimate relationship. Inside, the lovers are talking, and Josefa tells a troubled Zapata about her desires for land and for children. Steinbeck apparently purposely generalizes the character of Josefa here: makes her a kind of type, by having her say to her husband, "I've been married to hundreds of generals", a strange statement stylistically quite at odds with anything else in the script. And when the scene ends with Josefa's touchingly beginning to teach her Emiliano to read, not all the values of the moment are fully positive ones; for in a sense, the "indoor" world has

invaded, intruding upon Zapata's wedding night, and forcing him to confess his relative inadequacy in the company of the literate — those men, primarily his enemies, who function according to *words*.

Deeds, especially of binding and loosing, are what characterize Zapata for the greater part of his public career. For instance, after Zapata speaks out in the presence of Diaz, we see him further distinguishing himself by cutting the fence to the farmers' property, and then lassoing the machine gun of the rurales (8-10). Ashamed for the sight of a girl caught dipping her finger into a bowl of egg mixture meant for grooming the horses of Don Nacio, Zapata takes the next opportunity that comes, and saves a boy stealing food from the horses from a beating (28-29). Zapata and Eufemio attempt to give the captive Innocente water and to cut the rope that ties him to his captors, but it is too late — they have talked too long — and Innocente is killed (35-38). Editor Morsberger's quotation of Camus to the *Billy Budd* effect of wondering whether innocence (Innocente) "can avoid committing murder" as soon as "it becomes involved in action" comes home with a vengeance here, for it is the speechless Innocente who commits Zapata to a path of expression by violent acts — as though Zapata were acting for Innocente and all others like him who lacked the "words" that the men in power could hear. And although Zapata's only gesture during his meeting with Espejo to ask for Josefa's hand is to strike the father's desk in rage, he is shortly thereafter involved in the dramatically emphasized cutting of telegraph wires (40, 46-47). He frees the weaponry of Don Nacio for insurgent usage (51), and a servant of the Don's drops all to follow him, as if he were the Christ; then he liberates a trainload of equipment (53-54). Finally, Zapata's acts are largely concerned with reinforcing moral rights and with dissolving immoral claims, and it is his own realization that he has himself repeated Diaz's role in his opening assertion of his distinction (but with himself this time on the side of the legalizers, the delayers of justice) that makes Zapata decide as suddenly to quit the world of binding and loosing (7-8, 98-100, 102).

Such role reversals are familiar conventions of the stage. But Steinbeck's central means of discerning character is profoundly cinematic, and essentially non-literary. It involves the casting of suspicion on verbal, especially written, communication, and the complementary reinforcement of physical contacts of other sorts,

especially by means of eyes. Zapata is seen quite early on appreciating Fernando's "ferocity" in the defense of his typewriter, and shortly thereafter, there is a mutual studying of eyes, interrupted by the presentation of a newspaper photograph of Madero (whose face Zapata likes), and followed by Zapata's sending of Pablo to "look in his face" because "a picture is only a picture" (16-20). When Zapata is forced to speak an apology to the Manager, his sympathies remain with the Indians, whose Aztec jokes he can understand (26-30). He learns to adopt Don Nacio's excuse that he cannot be "the conscience of the whole world" (30, 34). And when Zapata is captured by the rurales, his complicity with his plotting allies and the understanding of his captors are both indicated by glances (41-42). And more significant looks are exchanged at the time of Zapata's freeing, when the telegraph lines are cut (47).

When Juana is sent away from Zapata, she accepts a young soldier as his replacement after such an exchange of glances (61). Other looks epitomize a confrontation between Zapata and Madero (72). Pablo's last appeal to Zapata is made with his eyes (86). When Zapata and Villa move away from the formal photography ceremony to the open outdoors, it becomes a sign of political health — with it, Villa renounces power in favor of Zapata (92-95). The altercation between Zapata and the Old General is handled similarly (98-100), as is the action involving the woman Eufemio takes away from her husband (103-104). And finally, Zapata's parting from Josefa is conveyed by means of a drama of eyes (110, 112-13). In all, Steinbeck uses the interplay of eye communication to establish genuineness of relationships — as opposed to the legal fictions of land claims and other such documents, whose real worth is demonstrated when Eufemio spills chile on one of them (59). For Madero speaks of law (70), and Zapata of land; the latter wishes to stay armed, and trusts Madero only as long as his promises are kept (73). In a world where Huerta can mock Zapata for believing in what he fights for, or in which guns are exchanged for names in books or on tags (75-76), it is no wonder that both Madero and Zapata are surrounded with instances of word-breaking (80-82, 84-85).

Nor is it any wonder that the screenplay of *Viva Zapata!* comes down at last on the side of trustworthy action. When a scene begins with a surprise shifting of the camera eye from a bowl of eggs to a dipped sponge to a horse's coat to the general setting of a stable (27),

the viewer of *Viva Zapata!* has already been trained to look for context and to judge by wholes. Contrast is established between Fernando's "logic" ("This is the time for killing!") and Madero's trust in "law" (72). And in the middle stands Pablo, a voice raised dying for "Peace — not a dream, but a time of rest and kindness" (86). Fernando can make a message wait for the cessation of action — the killing of Pablo (87-88) — and so can Zapata: once he realizes that he has fallen into the camp of "words", he departs, his growth of awareness ironically indicated by his stichomythic triumph over Fernando (100, 102). The new gospel is action: Zapata's words produce the killing of Eufemio (105) even before words lead to the betrayal of Zapata (109). But as Charro tells Zapata, his spirit has taught them all how to survive (115). In the end, Emiliano Zapata's white dream of a horse paces the hillside, and Steinbeck's filmscript has clearly opted for meaningful action over deceptive verbiage.

As Jim Casy yields place to Tom Joad, the script of *Viva Zapata!* tells us, the social organism will develop a head, and, crustacean-like, replace whatever it loses; thus an Innocente dies, and a Lazaro immediately replaces him. Nor need we wonder where our next Emiliano will come from. Resembling *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in its courtship scenes and in its demonstration of the power of the people to produce leadership during periods of stress, John Steinbeck's screenplay *Viva Zapata!* surpasses Brecht in proving to be a learning-piece for popular employment of a clearer and more immediate power, untrammelled by theory.