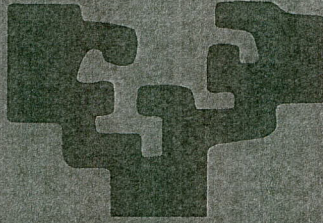


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**DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGIA INGLESA Y ALEMANA  
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**OF MICE AND MEN AND DE RATONES Y HOMBRES:  
CULTURAL TRANSFER OF SUBSTANDARD CHARACTERS FROM  
LITERARY DISCOURSE TO FILM DISCOURSE**

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In this paper, I shall attempt to show how the film “De ratones y hombres”, based on the novel by John Steinbeck *Of Mice and Men*, presents a different type of socio-cultural, historical and ideological discourse in spite of being faithful to the scenes and the plot of the literary text. It is my intention to develop these contrastive views drawing on a critical stylistics, or critical linguistics, as David Birch names it (1989), which is mainly concerned with text as part of social, institutional, ideological discourse. Interpretation in textual analysis is the process of recovering the social meanings expressed in discourse. This is done by analysing the linguistic structures in the light of their interactional and wider social contexts (see Fowler and Kress, 1979: 196).

As the social theorist Michel Foucault (1972) has argued, discourses are historically determined. Our knowledge and beliefs are not universal but social-semiotic in origin. They are discursively produced. The language we use not only reflects, but also determines the socio-historical, culturally shaped position we are in. Language is not a neutral instrument. It does more than pass on information. Language is about action and interaction. As Birch put it (1989: 42), “it is biased in a thousand different ways, and those are of course determined by any number of different ideologies, knowledge and power systems, and institutions.” It is the role of a responsible critical linguistics to understand and explain these mechanics (Birch, 1989: 42). Within linguistics, discourse analysis is the branch most directly concerned with the broader contextual properties of texts (the term being understood here in the Hallidayan sense of written and spoken texts) and with their operations as part of a dynamic process between participants. Literary and film discourse analysis should seek to show how ‘meanings’ and ‘interpretations of meanings’ are always and inevitably discursively produced. At the interface of language and literature is stylistics, which saw in the 1960s a decade of formalism, in the 1970s a decade of functionalism and in the 1980s a decade of discourse analysis. The 1990s could well become the decade in which socio-historical and socio-cultural stylistic studies are a main preoccupation. This is what Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson (eds., 1989) hoped. They stand in a position that many others defend, i.e. that referential, text-immanent language is not the only constituent of the text and, as they argued, “the existence of an extra-textual world of social, political, psychological, or historical forces should not be discounted as being beyond the analytical remit of stylistics.”

(1989: 7). The stylistic Roger Fowler has been very influential in the past twelve years in promoting a 'theory of literature as social discourse' (1981), which he calls 'linguistic criticism' (see Fowler, 1986). It is a sociolinguistic functionalism following M.A.K. Halliday's social-semiotic framework, which insists on the social functions of language (see Halliday, 1978, 1985). The literary text is seen as a communicative event, not as an autonomous verbal artefact. What he proposes is the ideological analysis of literary and non-literary texts, which obviously include films, using linguistic techniques in an interdisciplinary approach that profits from sociology, philosophy, history, politics, sociolinguistics, etc.

Language is social practice and not a phenomenon external to society (see Christopher Candlin's preface to Norman Fairclough's *Language and Power* (1989: vii-viii). Language should be seen as discourse rather than as accomplished text. This compels us to take account not only of the artefacts of language, the products that we hear and see, but also the conditions of production and interpretation of texts, in sum the process of communicating of which the text is only a part. This is the concept of language we need: language as discourse, language as a form of social practice. Whenever people read or see a film, they do so in ways which are determined socially. The processes of text production and reception involve an interplay between properties of texts and those resources which people have in their heads and draw upon when they produce or interpret texts: their knowledge of language, representations of the natural and social worlds they inhabit, values, beliefs, assumptions and so on. These resources are not only cognitive, but also socially determined. To sum up, texts and processes of production and interpretation are embedded in social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures.

At the same time, discourses and the texts which occur within them have histories. This intertextuality quality is part of the process of interpretation. Related to this is the fact that Fairclough points out (1989: 160) that there are "stereotypical patterns against which we can match endlessly diverse texts, and once we identify a text as an instance of a pattern, we happily dispense with the mass of its detail." As the same academic underlines in his very interesting book, both producers and interpreters generate interpretations of the situational, social and intertextual contexts of the discourse. As a result, critical linguistic analyses need to be intertextual (see Birch, 1989: 155).

We, as readers of the novel *Of Mice and Men*, do not reach the same interpretation as the viewers of the film *De ratones y hombres*.<sup>1</sup> The reason will emerge clearly once I relate all the precedent caveats to the understanding of the social conditions surrounding both pieces of communication, the book and the film. In writing *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck tried to create a kind of play-novel, where dialogue fulfilled an important role in the structure of the text. From what

I have briefly remarked before, it is no mere coincidence that the author chose a social dialect for his characters. All of them speak in a sub-standard kind of English, which sets off a marked contrast with the standard voice of the narrative and descriptive sections.

First of all, though, I should place the novel in the socio-historical context when it was produced. *Of Mice and Men* was written in 1937. In the prewar years, there had been a literary excitement about language and verbal experimentation -Pound's "Risorgimento"-, which bore fruit in the brilliant writing of the twenties and the thirties. Widespread experiments with the introduction of the speech patterns of the regions and classes depicted could be found in several writers (such as Ring Lardner's short stories or Sherwood Anderson's inclusion of Midwestern accents). However, the stock-market crash of 1929 posed an immediate threat to that "Risorgimento". During the thirties American writing as a whole moved left. In contrast to the experimentation of the twenties, and the search for formal security of the forties, the thirties was a decade of 'social consciousness' and naïve political commitments<sup>2</sup>. Poverty and injustice was thrown into sharp relief. Depictions of agrarian and Southern life became more common than urban or foreign scenes. White authors turned away from the romanticizing of wealth and high times to a neonaturalism concerned with the plight of the poor and the unfortunate. This was the time of the great social novels: Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932), William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

These and other authors created in the thirties a genre of proletarian novels, which tried to bring humanity and country folks back to literature. All of them somehow implicitly opposed the exaggeration of individualism promoted by the psychological novel. They highlighted the inevitability of the influence of economic and political forces at a time of social struggle and economic hardship. They insisted on the necessity to consider society as inseparable from the lives of masses of people.

Especially Caldwell, Faulkner and Steinbeck portrayed poor folks in extreme situations of failure, poverty, injustice or incompetence. Steinbeck, born in California (Salinas, 1902) observed and wrote about the social and economic reality of Californian workers and rural migrant peasants. It is interesting to note that contemporary criticism accused him of inability to create living characters.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, Steinbeck was not interested in creating individualized fictional entities, even though this is what we have in the film. Obviously, Steinbeck's intent was to reflect a social consciousness in his interest to deal with proletarian materials and in his renderings of the half-wit, the oppressed, the distressed, and the cast-off. As Antonia Seixas claimed in relation to *Of Mice and Men*, a clue to a fuller understanding of it lies in his philosophy, conveyed by his phrase "non-

teleological thinking”, a phrase which embraces “not only a philosophical notion but a *modus operandi*, and, above all, an attitude towards reality. (...), a concern not with what could be, or should be, or might be, but rather with what actually ‘is’.” (1957: 277). In fact, Steinbeck’s career has been outlined by Maxwell Geismar on the frame of his developing awareness of social problems and involvement in them. And even though the same academic sees *Of Mice and Men* as flawed by tendencies to sentimentality and sadism, he could also envisage the social message I am emphasizing here, “the inadequacy of American civilization” (In Tedlock & Wicker, eds. 1957: xvii). Joseph Warren Beach (1957: 263) sees the preoccupation of this author with the forgotten man and how he holds the community responsible for the man without work, home or food. He highlights Steinbeck’s intention to make people aware of the social problems created by their system of production and finance. And, obviously, there is no more effective way of bringing this about than to have actual instances of cruel hardship and injustice, presented by means of fiction.

*Of Mice and Men* could be considered a kind of document on seasonal labor and life in the Californian bunkhouses. Only at a superficial level could it be interpreted as the simple story of two migratory laborers, their friendship and the tragic end of their dreams for a piece of land of their own. This is the only level that the film clearly conveys. The message of social protest for the exploitation and hardship of these people is lost in a great measure from the moment that the film does not echo the sociolect that Steinbeck used to portray all the characters in this play-novel. This point is extremely significant. The author’s command of common speech has been praised by scholars such as Barker Fairley (In Tedlock & Wicker, eds, 1957: xv), who identified this linguistic resource of his with his sympathy for those who use it, and felt that Steinbeck began to find himself in a form of socialism. Speech styles encode different meaning potential, according to M.A.K. Halliday’s systemic functional model of language (see Halliday, 1978, 1985). Linguistic varieties within a community, characterize social groups and embody their values, attitudes and world-views and symbolize their identity. In the organization of texts, different social varieties of language have an important function.<sup>4</sup> In the film, only Lennie retains his childish, retarded language with the vulgar and substandard overtones that are common to all the other characters in the novel. In the film, their standard language that the rest speak misleads the viewer into an almost ahistorical, asocial interpretation of the account of two friends, two individuals. This different interpretation comes about because of the special weight dialogues have in the organization of this novel, as narrative strategy. In fact, it is only through the substandard sociolect, which pervades the development of the story, that the wider social and historical context of the text is transmitted. It is not irrelevant to remember that when Steinbeck set out to create a new book, his first idea had been to write a play, as he had said to his agents.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, *Of Mice and Men* became the first attempt in the play-nove-

lette form. This technique offered the advantage, according to the author<sup>6</sup>, that scenes and people are described in detail; this fact, he thought, would be of value to the director, stage designer and actor. Truly, in the film, we can observe a high degree of fidelity in this respect. Among other benefits he alluded to, it is interesting to pinpoint the necessity he expressed, referring to this particular novel, of sticking to the theme and of holding a mass audience for its full effect. He separated this novel from other types of novel writing. It was clear for him that *Of Mice and Men* did not intend to present characterization through analysis. His aim was to get across a social message to a readership and audience as wide as possible through the empathetic story of two rough and homeless men who move from ranch to ranch in search of work. One of them is mentally defective, but he is a giant man of immense strength, who depends on the care of his friend George. George feels responsible and attached to this huge fellow, who has a weak point. He likes stroking small animals, which he always ends up killing because he miscalculates his force. When, at the end of the story, it is a woman who is the victim of his passion for soft things, and this woman is the daughter of the boss's wife, George has to save him from lynching, and because he loves him, he has to put an end to his life.

This tale is like a microcosm, whose most prominent feature is its directness and economy in the rendering of the story. Not surprisingly, it was quickly turned into a successful drama, which merited the Drama Critics' Circle Award. They praised *Of Mice and Men* for "its direct force and perception in handling a theme genuinely rooted in American life."<sup>7</sup> Very significant as well is the fact that Steinbeck did not stay to receive the laurels. After completing the stage version, he joined a group of migrant workers, lived with them and worked with them side by side when they arrived in California. He was beginning to write *The Grapes of Wrath*, that magnificent proletarian novel where he deals directly with a sociological subject matter, the plight of migrant workers in the South. It is true that in *Of Mice and Men* there is no direct touching on the industrial and social problems involved, as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and this superficial level of treatment of the material is really what comes through in the film. However, I do not agree with Warren J. Beach (1941: 324) when he infers from this that "in this book, Steinbeck was content with the imaginative, the basically human factors in the drama." The single concretion he concedes is that "the tale may have its bearing on the treatment of certain types of mental defectives." This is precisely the point highlighted in the film, and it is no coincidence that his idiolect is the only one that has been respected in the film version. No doubt, the producers of the movie have drawn upon that level of meaning, also intended by the author.<sup>8</sup> No wonder either, that this book has been accused of sentimentalism (and the same could be said of the film), especially the character of Lennie, whose human qualities attract the reader's and the viewer's sympathy and affection, in spite of being a social misfit, muscles and no brain. In the film, the final climax

is the pathos of his tragic end, as in the novel. But in the film, the viewer has no clues to transcending the individual drama of this poor fellow, whereas in the book this ending can be defocused and diverted into deep empathy towards that human group who suffered the confusion of the impoverished economy of the thirties and late twenties. The account of the story of Lennie and George, told through the substandard voices of that collectivity, is symbolically transposing to a fictional medium the real macrocosmos of the social predicament of these people at that time. This sense of a human collectivity is evident even in the title, as well as a veiled reference to this kind of low-animal level they are forced to live.

According to some past tradition in critical theory (see Terry Eagleton, 1983, ch. 2 & 3), which sprang from New Criticism in the 1950s and from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), literature is untainted by history. It is not a way of knowing reality, or the self-expression of individual authors. It is rather a universal system, which embodies 'archetypes' or figures of universal significance. This explains why Carlos Baker, a scholar who wrote around that time, suggested an allegorical reading in terms of the dichotomy of Mind and Body<sup>10</sup> and Lisca (1958: 139) supported that interpretation (obviously, possible), and found it "the most important (one)" when he considered that "in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck extends the experience of two migrant workers to the human condition." If I have dwelt too much on this point, it is precisely because the film offers a similar dispensation with the social roots of that human suffering, which is even more striking in view of the apparent fidelity of the movie to the scenes, the surroundings, the plot development, the external characterization of the actors, their excellent performance. The only thing that is missing is their vernacular speech patterns, and, as I have tried to argue, this produces a different discourse and therefore a different text altogether. As I have claimed before, it is socially-determined discourse that we encode and decode in the dynamic process of creation of meaning. I would go as far as to say that the substandard sociolect of all the characters is the main protagonist of the story. Very few hints are given in the book about the geographic, socio-economic, religious background, apart from their speech styles in the dialogues. It is clear that Steinbeck wanted to present them through their speech rather than by describing them. As Armand Schewerner (1965: 16) indicated, he was aware to some degree of the weaknesses of the old-fashioned narrative style and, as a consequence, chose to depend on dialogue as a means of seducing the reader into a belief in the reality of the world represented in the novel. Apart from this, the story in the film is not perceived through the point of view of those two particular characters. The viewer identifies with George, who, apart from being good-looking, is a standard speaker. Rather, the story in the novel is received through the effect of substandard dialogues and these reveal, more than anything else, the historical sociolect that symbolizes a way of life and the social situation of poverty and physical and



cultural squalor in which all these people are condemned to live. The individual tragedy is a by-product and the reader not only feels pity for the giant's fate. He/she may also be driven into an indirect awareness of the sociological, economic, historical and political circumstances, which are present although not explicitly stated.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The film *De Ratones y Hombres* was produced in 1992 by Metro Goldwyn-Mayer, directed by Gary Sinise and performed by John Malkovich and Gary Sinise. The screen play was written by Horton Foote. There is a translation into Spanish by Román A. Jiménez (Publishing House: Edhasa). Presently, the Publishing House Vicens Vivens is going to publish another translation, with an introduction and notes by Juan José Coy Ferrer and suggestions for home assignments (at secondary level) by Consuelo Montes Granado.

<sup>2</sup> See Elliot, E. (ed) (1988), 843-910, and 1126-7.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Lisca. (1958). As long ago as 1946, Alfred Kazin said of him that despite his humanity, his moral advantage and his poetry, "there is something imperfectly formed about Steinbeck's work; it has no creative character. For all his sympathetic understanding of men ... Steinbeck's people are always on the verge of becoming human, but never do." (Kazin, Alfred (1942), *On Native Grounds*, New York, pp. 393-394, quoted by Lisca. (1958), p. 12).

W. M. Frohock also launched into a criticism of Steinbeck's characters. All his people, he said, have "an essential identity." The variations in "race, fortune, and social level are in the surface." (W.M. Frohock (1946), "John Steinbeck's Men of Wrath", *Southwest Review*, 31, p. 152, quoted by Lisca (1958), p. 12).

J. S. Kennedy, in 1951, "insisted at length that Steinbeck is evermore strongly affirming that, in the last analysis, man has no individual identity, that the human person as such, separately created and distinct from all others, does not in fact exist." (John S. Kennedy (1951), "John Steinbeck: Life Affirmed and Dissolved", p. 225, in the critical anthology called *Fifty Years of the American Novel*, and subtitled "A Christian Appraisal", quoted by Lisca (1958), pp.16-17).

<sup>4</sup> Marked by functionalist and sociolinguistic influences, Elizabeth Traugott and Mary Louise Pratt (1980), explored not only the relevance of pragmatics and speech act theory to the study of literary texts but also the functions of different social varieties of language in the organization of texts. Likewise, Bakhtin (1981: 262-3) valued so much the diversity of social speech types in the novel that he considered it a prerequisite for the novel as a genre. It is worth quoting in full: "The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons... languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day...- this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre." (Bakhtin, 1981: 262-3). See also Montes Granado, C. (1993) where I carried out an interpretative analysis on the sociolinguistic function of dialect in some novels by D.H. Lawrence, relevant for this purpose.

<sup>5</sup> He said in 1935: "I'm doing a play now. I don't know what will come of it. If I can do it well enough it will be a good play. I mean the theme is swell." (JS-MO, ca. February, 1935), quoted by Lisca (1958), p. 130.

<sup>6</sup> In *Stage* (January, 1938), pp. 50-51. This article was published while *Of Mice and Men* was on Broadway, although he submitted it before. Quoted by Lisca (1958), pp. 132-133.

<sup>7</sup> Stark Young, "Drama Critics Circle Award", p. 396. Quoted by Lisca (1958), p.143.

<sup>8</sup> The author himself indicated, when he wrote to his agents: "the microcosmos is rather difficult to handle. (...) -the earth's longings of a Lennie who was not to represent insanity at all but the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men." Quoted by Lisca (1958), p. 134.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the title, *Of Mice and Men*, I would like to include a reference suggested to me at the Conference by Prof. Eithne O'Connell, from the National Centre for Translation, at Dublin City University. In Ireland and Scotland (although not in England or the United States), this expression "of mice and men" forms part of two verse lines, popularly known, from a poem by Burns: "The best laid plans of mice and men / oft times gang alee" (that means often go astray). At the same time, the first half of the first line "the best laid plans..." is now common English usage, similar to a proverb, with this meaning: I (we, they) did everything I (we, they) could, but still things didn't work out, because other forces intervened.

<sup>10</sup> Carlos Baker (1940), "Steinbeck of California," *Delphian Quarterly*, 23, April, p. 42. In Lisca (1958), p.139.

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