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# Ideology and Structure in *Salt of the Earth*

--Debby Rosenfelt

Recently I saw *SALT OF THE EARTH* as it was meant to be seen, in a darkened theater in 35 mm. Through the efforts of Sonja Dahl, director Herbert Biberman's sister-in-law, a special showing had been arranged at one of Los Angeles' Laemmle theaters, as part of the Emerging Women series. Many of us had seen the film before in 16mm and had been moved by it, even though the often pirated prints were technically flawed, parts of the sound track almost inaudible. Now every word was clear. After the second showing, author Michael Wilson rose to answer questions. The packed theater gave him a sustained standing ovation. The applause welcomed both Wilson and *SALT OF THE EARTH* back from the shadowy world of the blacklisted; it also acknowledged the merit of the film.

There are many things to be said about the film<sup>1</sup>; I want to focus here on the relation between its ideology and its structure. The continuing significance of *SALT OF THE EARTH* for our own time arises from its attempt--rare in works of art in any medium--to integrate the struggles of women, of an ethnic minority--and workers. The issue of "sectoral" struggles based on nationalism, feminism, ethnicity and their relation to class struggle has always been a cause for debate in left political movements, today more than ever. Stanley Aronowitz's statement in 1973 could have been written to sum up the theme of *SALT OF THE EARTH*, made twenty years earlier: "The contradiction of working class struggle today is that it must recognize the demands of different oppressed groups...and simultaneously strive for a unified class identity that transcends the prevailing system."<sup>2</sup> Esperanza puts the case for sectoral struggles rather more dramatically in her climactic confrontation with Ramon:

Why are you afraid to have me at your side? Do you still think you can have dignity only if I have none?...The Anglo bosses look down on you, and you hate them for it. "Stay in your place, you dirty Mexican"--that's what they tell you. But why must you say to me, "Stay in your place." Do you feel better having someone lower than you...? These neck shall I stand on to make me feel superior? And what will I get out of it? I don't want anything lower than I am. I'm low enough already. I want to rise. And push everything up with me as I go....And if you can't understand this you're a fool--because you can't win this strike without me! You can't win anything without me!

*SALT OF THE EARTH*, of course, is not social science; it is art. It does not analyze the interaction of these struggles; it does centrally present that interaction. In refusing to assign priorities to these struggles either in importance or in time (e.g., first the workers, then the women, or vice versa), the film acknowledges their often uneasy contemporaneity in life.

At times in the film these struggles--against racism, sexism, the unchecked power of the ruling class--converge and coalesce; at times they conflict (or seem to conflict) with one another. Where they conflict, the mining community becomes divided against itself. Where they converge, there is unity. The film's power as a narrative and visual structure comes largely from its acknowledgement and use of that pattern of conflict and convergence, of division and of unity.<sup>3</sup> The pattern itself reflects the contending social forces of that time and place: the inevitable antagonism between labor and management, the long history of tension between Mexican American and Anglo, the more recent tension between the women and the men as the women's picket line altered their roles and consciousness at different rates.

The opening scenes establish almost immediately the conflict between the women and the men, and the apparent conflict between the problems of the women and the problems of the men. The camera shows both Esperanza and Ramon at work--Esperanza chopping wood, carrying it to the fire, scrubbing the clothes, hanging the wash, tending the children; Ramon lighting fuses of dynamite in the darkness of the mine shaft. It suggests the difficulty and significance of both kinds of work. Yet initially the conflict between Ramon and Esperanza centers on their mutual failure to understand the extent and source of one another's feelings of oppression:

Esperanza (timidly): What's more important than sanitation?

Ramon (flaring): The safety of the men--that's more important! Five accidents this week--all because of speed-up. You're a woman, you don't know what it's like up there....First we got to get equality on the job. Then we'll work on these other things. Leave it to the men.

Esperanza (quietly): I see. The men. You'll strike, maybe, for your demands--but what the wives want, that



Ernest Velasquez as Charley Vidal, Clinton Jencks as Frank Barnes, and miners

comes later, always later.

Ramon (darkly): Now don't start talking against the union again.

Esperanza (a shrug of defeat): What has it got me, your union?

Ramon: Esperanza, have you forgotten what it was like...before the union came? (Points toward parlor.) When Estrella was a baby, and we couldn't even afford a doctor when she got sick? It was for our families! We met in graveyards to build that union!

Esperanza (lapsing into desperation):

All right. Have your strike. I'll have my baby....

Her prediction is fulfilled in the montage sequence, where the editing juxtaposes the beating of Ramon with Esperanza's childbirth, unintended by a doctor because none will come to the picket line. Yet this scene is one of confluence rather than conflict. Again, the nature of their specific oppression differs, but in calling out for one another they express their bond with one another--a bond of love as well as shared oppression. The editing underlines the commonality of their struggles. We know what they are fighting against and what they are fighting for. Both learn during the course of the film that, though their needs may differ, they can demand redress only if they join forces. The difficulty--and the source of the film's greatest dramatic tension--is that they learn this lesson in different ways and at different rates.

In the final sequence both script and camera emphasize the coalescence of the different struggles, the forging of a "unified class identity." That sequence is literally one of convergence, the spatial reflecting the political, as streams of people pour toward the scene of the eviction. Initially we see only a few people at la casa de Quintero, the members of the community of women with whom we are most familiar--Esperanza, Luz, Mrs. Salazar--and the children. Gradually others join them, the women flagging down cars, the men arriving in Jenkins' car and the union truck, the crowd swelled increasingly with still other women walking down from the surrounding hills, with the "guys from the open pit" (a reference to the copper mining operation at nearby Santa Rita), with "the guys from the mill" (down the

road some ten miles in Hurley). The children throw dirt clods at the deputies, spontaneously initiating an effective diversionary tactic in a general and organic movement of resistance.

The treatment of two objects in this sequence deserves particular mention. One is Ramon's gun; the other, the portrait of Benito Juárez. Throughout the film each has accumulated an iconic significance; the negative image of the gun and the positive image of the portrait each concentrate elements from at least two of the film's main ideological thrusts.

Guns in the film, in addition to serving their literal function, become images both for a crude machismo and for the power of the ruling class. At times that usage seems almost too obvious, as in the frame filled by the holster and gun on the hips of the deputy Vance, who later taunts the female picketers in an obvious (though entirely believable) double entendre: "Hey girls! ...Don't you want to see my pistol?" At times it is more subtle. In the barroom scene, when the men are feeling most pessimistic, they find a news photo of the owner of the company, in his guise of Great White Hunter, clothed for the safari with his gun across his lap. The men, with the false consciousness that apes the activities of the ruling class as a substitute for genuine power, decide that they too will go hunting, a decision arising directly from their sense of helplessness.

During most of the climactic confrontation scene between Esperanza and Ramon, when Esperanza is at her strongest and Ramon at his weakest, most defensive and potentially most brutal, Ramon cradles, cleans, oils and loads his rifle for the hunt. At this point the conflict between the different struggles--like the conflict between the two protagonists--seems greatest. To Ramon--although not to Esperanza and the audience--the women's insistence on equality seems utterly irreconcilable with his own need for respite in the home from his struggles at the workplace. He raises his hand to strike Esperanza--an exercise of male power akin to his absorption with the rifle and a gesture obviously familiar if not habitual. She stiffens in defiance, ordering him never to threaten her physically again. "That would be the old way." And

she retires to sleep alone. The gulf between the two of them as individuals seems unbridgeable; so for a moment does the gulf between the rising of the women and the struggles of the workers in their exclusively male occupation.

But during the hunt phrases from Esperanza's impassioned statement echo in Ramon's mind: "I don't want to go down fighting. I want to win. (Pause) Have you learned nothing from this strike?" A gunshot marks the point of his decisive turnabout. And in the final sequence he half raises his rifle, then thrusts it aside, handing it to Mrs. Salazar. The action suggests, through earlier accretions of meaning, a rejection of the masculine mystique and of ruling class methods for maintaining power. Literally it represents a rejection of an individualistic, suicidal modality for social action against the bosses, of the explosive but finally ineffectual anger of some of his earlier confrontations. Having finally understood the lesson Esperanza learned first, he says, "Now we can all act together, all of us." And they do, the women reversing the eviction with the same esprit de corps they have brought to the picket line and the jail, the men for the first time backing them effectively, with the sheer weight of their numbers and determination.

The photograph of Benito Juárez, the Zapotec Indian who became one of Mexico's greatest leaders, is a positive image, evoking a heritage of resistance to imperialism from abroad and reaction at home. We already know its significance from an earlier scene, the encounter between Ramon and Frank Barnes at the card table. In that scene Ramon accuses Frank, though not in so many words, of racism. The charge is two-fold: Frank thinks Mexican Americans are "too lazy to take the initiative," and he is ignorant of Mexican American history. He has shown his ignorance by failing to identify Juárez. Ramon, telling him that Juárez was the father of Mexico, adds, "If I didn't know a picture of George Washington, you'd say I was an awful dumb Mexican." Frank denies the first charge--that he thinks Mexicans are lazy--and the other men defend him. He accepts the charge of ignorance, agreeing that he has a great deal to learn about Mexican American culture and history. In the tension between the two men we see that one of the consequences of racism is to threaten the possibility for trust and friendship even between allies in the class struggle; throughout, the film makes clear how the bosses manipulate racial antagonisms to obstruct unity between the workers. Here, Frank's openness tentatively reestablishes trust. The pattern has moved briefly from conflict to convergence, as each of the men tries to come to terms with his own racism.

In the final sequence the friendly, educable ignorance of Frank Barnes is replaced by the hostility and destructiveness of the Anglo power structure and its agents. In this scene racism and capitalism dramatically reinforce one another. The sheriff and his deputies do the job because they are in the employ of the bosses; they enjoy their job because of their scorn for (and fear of) the people. They dump the precious portrait of Juárez on the road along with other possessions: the shrine to the Virgin, a doll, furniture. In a subsequent shot we see a boot damage the frame of the portrait. But when the eviction fails, each of the Quinteros takes a part in rescuing the portrait, and in the final shots Luis adjusts its frame before the family turns to enter its saved home. The young have salvaged part of their heritage.

In the final frames the camera visually creates the image of unity summarized by Ramon's verbal, "Now we can all act together." It lingers on the faces of the crowd gathered to watch and finally halt the eviction: the faces of women and men, of young and old, of Anglo workers and Chicano workers. Then it draws back to show the crowd as a solid, dense mass. For a time it focuses on Ramon and Esperanza on the steps of their house--the baby in Ramon's arms for the first time by his own choice. But the final filmic image is again of the people, as they



Esperanza's birthday party

leave the area. We must see Esperanza and Ramon as part of an entire community, their struggle representing and synthesizing the struggles of the community as a whole. The hard-won unity is not permanent, nor is the victory, as Hartwell's, "Maybe we better settle this thing--for the present" makes ominously clear. But something significant has been won, an inheritance for the future, a sense of hope and confidence and power to pass on to the children: "and they," Esperanza's final voice-over predicts, "the salt of the earth, shall inherit it." *Esperanza*, of course, means *hope*.

The conclusion is powerful, and because the filmic structure has built up to it, it is also believable. Its power lies not only in the relief of narrative suspense--of knowing that the strike has been won and that the personal relation between Esperanza and Ramon has, at least "for the present," rejected the old way and advanced to a higher plane of consciousness. It is also powerful as the last tonic chord of a musical composition is powerful: relieving a structural tension. At last the entire working class community can all come together in a shared political action, as before it could not; the conflict between the three different struggles is dramatically (if temporarily) resolved.

The relief of laughter, too, plays its part:

Sheriff (bellowing): Now see here, Quintero! These women are obstructing justice. You make 'em behave, savvy?

Ramon: I can't do nothing, sheriff. You know how it is--they won't listen to a man any more.

Ramon's line always brings down the house. It is a deliberate parody of his own former sense of helplessness; the words are the same as words he might have used earlier, but the meaning is utterly different. The gulf between men and women, earlier the deepest source of conflict and pain, has been transformed by a new consciousness into a weapon against a common enemy. We laugh with Ramon at the sheriff's disfigurement; we also laugh with relief at the transformation from point of conflict to point of confluence. *SALT OF THE EARTH*, incidentally, is a very funny film, one of the few to use humor to deflate sexist pretensions.

In the final scenes, then, for one moment in time, a single collective act combines a rejection of sexism and racism with resistance against the unadulterated power of the ruling class. Put another way, the temporary abeyance of sexism and racism within the community has enabled that resistance: a fact, not a formula. For a moment in time we understand emotionally and intellectually the meaning of "unified class identity."

Clearly the film's main thrust is toward this unified class identity. But *SALT OF THE EARTH* is not, strictly speaking, a revolutionary film; that is, it does not explicitly urge workers to take control of the means of production. To do so would have been politically impossible and historically inaccurate. It does argue for a strong and democratic union capable of wresting better working conditions from those who own the means of production, and it does intimate that winning a single strike is no final victory, given the fundamental antagonism between owners and workers. Class struggle figures prominently; revolution does not.

As with class struggle, *SALT OF THE EARTH*'s feminism, though pervasive, stops short of the radical. Ramon comes to understand how important and demanding household tasks are when he is forced to assume them during Esperanza's three days in jail, but certainly there is no criticism of the nuclear family itself and of the basic division of labor along the line of traditional sex roles. Still, we can be grateful that the film presents housework, childcare and sanitation as fundamentally political issues. It takes its stand on the "woman question" even more forcefully by its very choice of a woman as both protagonist and central consciousness. Not only are her growth and her heroism central; the filmgoer's reactions depend, at least in part, on her interpretive voice. Contemporary viewers recognize like a page from their own lives the dramatic conflict between her growing sense of self and Ramon's sullen resistance. The film's feminism was powerful enough to provoke male unionists ranging from officials in the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, co-producers of the film, to the Longshoremen's Harry Bridges into complaining to organizer Clint Jencks (the film's Frank Barnes), why did you have to bring in the woman question? Why couldn't you have made a straight labor film?<sup>4</sup>

The struggle against racism, though of equal weight with the film's other thrusts, is in some ways less dynamic, because it generates less conflict between the protagonists and less suspense as a narrative element. The racism of the Anglo bosses and their agents emerges in crude and obvious ways, as racism often does: the designation of Ramon Quintero as "Ray" and "Pancho," the beating and taunting of Ramon in the police car, the statements about the childlike mentality of the Mexican Americans.

The film not only depicts the "evils of racism"--the verbal abuse, the cruel discrimination in working and living conditions--it also exposes its economic usefulness, suggesting that racism serves the bosses by dividing the workers and setting them against one another. Finally, it vigorously asserts the value of traditions and history divergent from the dominant Anglo cul-



The christening

ture. Mexican American traditions and cultural patterns weave like the Spanish language throughout the texture of the film. References to the *florilecto*--flowers and song--add a poetry to the screenplay while evoking the quality of the Latino heritage. The score, by Sol Kaplan, consists of variations on "La Adelita," a fighting song of women in the Mexican Revolution.<sup>5</sup> One of the film's subthemes concerns the inroads of the dominant Anglo culture on the Mexican American. The cowboy music on the radio, the ersatz Spanish music on the jukebox, suggest its dilution. When the deputies take away the radio, they force the people to draw on their own capacity to create culture rather than depend as consumers on the pre-packaged. "Here," says Ramon, thrusting the guitar ("a dusty guitar," says the screenplay) at one of his friends, "Let's hear some *real* music for a change."

As UCLA's Bob Rosen points out, *SALT OF THE EARTH* lacks a dialectic common in many Third World films: the treatment of the traditions of an ethnic or national group as both source of strength and as relics of the past inimical to progressive struggle. In *SALT* even the Church, whose officials in the real strike warned the women back into their homes lest they sin, appears benevolent. Perhaps that dialectic emerges only in films less indebted to Anglos for their final shape. Where ethnicity is concerned, self-criticism has always seemed more appropriate than criticism. On the whole, though, the film is conscientious in its portrayal of working-class Mexican American life, taking an obvious pleasure in the culture without patronizing it.<sup>6</sup>

The preceding four paragraphs were qualifications, not judgments. For *SALT OF THE EARTH* is a rich and powerful film, and what it has to say matters as much now as twenty years ago. Having seen it, we leave the theater with renewed energy for the struggles in our own lives.

#### A POSTSCRIPT

The day I finished this paper, I attended a discussion group on ideology and the media that brought Stanley Aronowitz and Bob Rosen together. Ironically, given the use I make of their ideas in this essay, both of them questioned the merit of *SALT OF THE EARTH* as a work of art. Aronowitz, a Hitchcock fan, used *SALT* as an example of a film politically "correct" but ideologically heavy-handed and formally uninteresting; he wants ambiguity in art, reflecting a complex reality. Rosen faulted the film, as I understand it, for its linear qualities as narrative and its failure to use the camera and the editing room in innovative ways; the film, he said, provides no "cerebral space"--formal devices demanding critical thought as well as immediate emotional involvement. Both found the film melodramatic, sentimental, "Hollywoodish," though Aronowitz added that he had seen it six times, each time with pleasure. Some of their specific objections, particularly Aronowitz's, sounded similar to those Pauline Kael registered in her 1954 essay on the film (in *I Lost It at the Movies*, Bantam, 1966, pp. 298-311); their reactions, though, were harder for me to dismiss than her blatantly anti-communist diatribe.

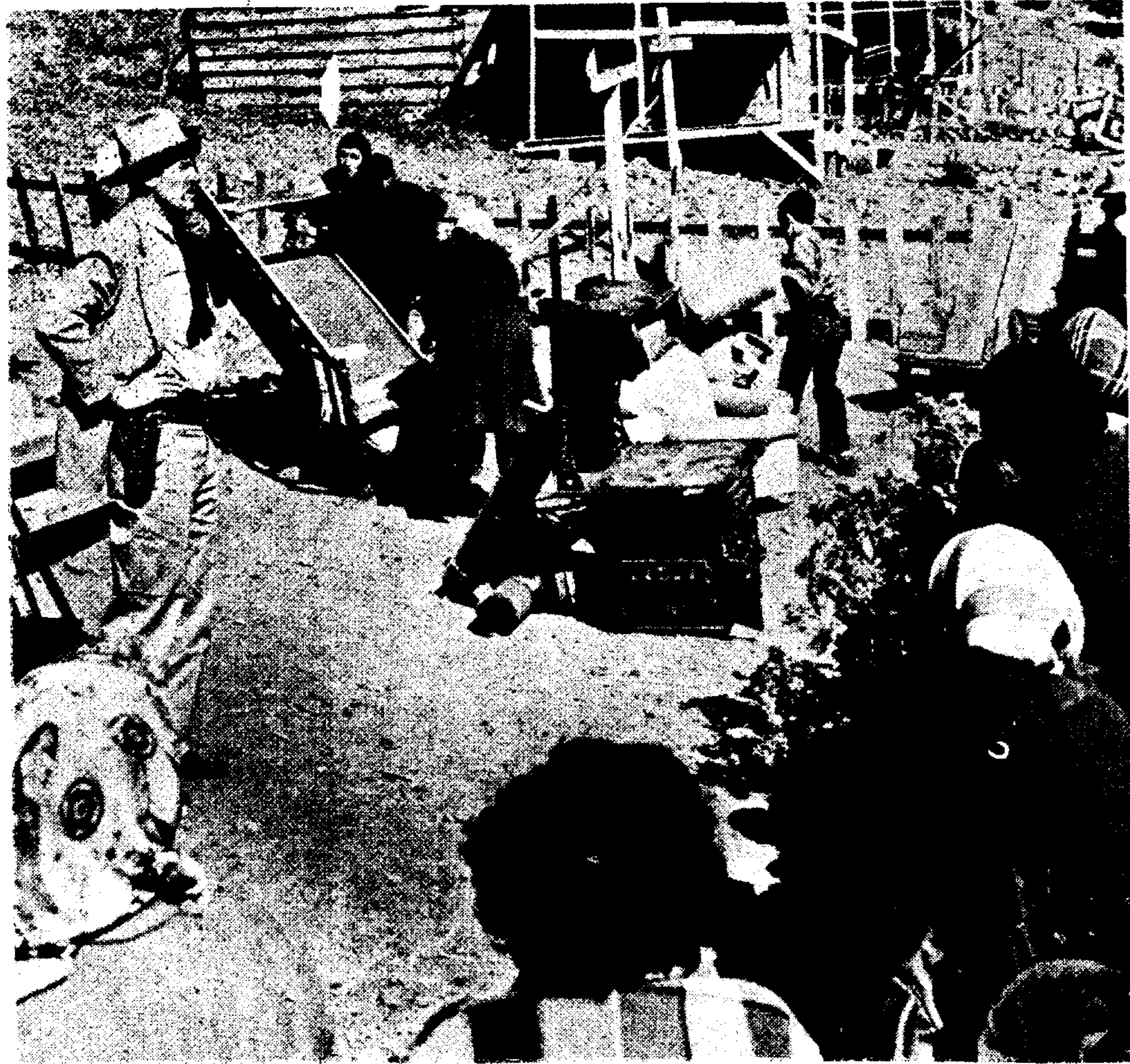
Those who admire the film, as I do, can respond to their criticism in two ways: (1) We can admit the validity of the criteria--innovativeness, ambiguity, complexity, aesthetic distance--but question their negative application to *SALT OF THE EARTH*; or (2) We can argue that the criteria themselves are too narrow, that *SALT OF THE EARTH*, though it may lack all or some of the criteria in question, possesses other aesthetic values neglected in the discussion and/or values that are not strictly aesthetic but are nevertheless important.

I would defend the film on both counts while conceding that there is some truth to the criticisms.

Certainly, innovative, interesting camera work and editing style are one measure of a film's quality. And it is true that *SALT OF THE*



The women take over the picket lines



The eviction

EARTH breaks no new ground in these areas. But if the camera work and editing are not venture-some, neither are they flawed--a considerable feat given the constant harassment during every phase of work on the film from pre-production to distribution, resulting in a lack of money throughout, an inexperienced and understaffed crew and limited access to Hollywood technical facilities during editing.<sup>7</sup> Even so, the filmmakers did their best to turn the restrictions to advantage. For example, when insufficient personnel and equipment for a moving camera dictated the use of a stationary one, Biberman decided to shoot scenes from the same angle but at a number of distances. This way the pace of the film, with its unprofessional cast and their slow, halting English, could be speeded up by rapid cutting; and "because there were no changed angles, the audience would not have a sensation of abruptness and being yanked about" (*Salt of the Earth*, p. 80). Consequently, the filmgoer is aware, not of the camera, but of the people and the land. A film of deliberate social realism, SALT uses a combination of close-ups, group scenes and full shots in a way that suggests the relation between the central couple, their community and their environment. The camera work in the final sequence, described in more detail above, illustrates this usage. Personally, I find the deliberately unobtrusive camera style appropriate to its subject.

Then there is the business about ambiguity, complexity. Perhaps for this discussion we can make a distinction between the two terms. The opposite of complexity is simplicity; of ambiguity, clarity. All have been used at various times as terms of critical praise. Ambiguity suggests to me, William Empson's seven types notwithstanding, the relativity of *value*; it seems especially apt in discussing the moral implications of art, the difficulty of resolving problems of good and evil. It is useful as a descriptive term; I have my reservations about it as a criterion. *Complexity*, if we define it as richness, depth, resonance and, in mimetic art, some fidelity to the messiness of life, does seem to me an important value. I am arguing that art can be complex without being ambiguous. SALT OF THE EARTH seems to me such a work.

Certainly the film is not ambiguous about where it stands, where its sympathies are. And yes, this clarity of conviction does at times make for melodrama, especially in the polarization of the forces of good and the forces of evil. The bosses and the deputies (less so the sheriff) are cardboard figures, racist capitalist pigs and their agents, villains less than convincing in their total nastiness. That their counterparts in real life were equally nasty, as newspaper accounts indicate, is perhaps no vindication of the film's aesthetic merit--though it does answer the charges of critics less sympathetic than Aronowitz and Rosen that these figures were exaggerated for propagandistic purposes. But it is some vindication to point out that these figures lie outside the film's primary dramatic interests. The struggle that figures most prominently is that of the working-class community to unify itself. The film mirrors the complexity of that struggle in its structure and central characterizations.

Aronowitz used the term *overdetermination* to attack the film's structure and ideology. He misused the term,<sup>8</sup> but he knew what he meant: "over" for him clearly meant "too much." He found the coexistence of contradictions based on class, race and sex unconvincing and heavy-handed. Though historical accuracy in a fictional film is not of itself a validation of merit, still it is worth remembering that such a juncture in history is what brought the filmmakers to New Mexico in the first place. And unlike Aronowitz, I find the use of these related struggles an important source of dramatic tension; as described

in the body of this essay, they do not overlap and confirm one another in facile ways but bump contradictorily against one another, determining the narrative structure of the film.

The characterizations range in complexity, but even the bit parts, except those of the "bad guys," transcend the stereotypical. The fullest portrayals, of course, are those of Ramon and Esperanza. Ramon is not a "pure" working-class hero. His fundamental decency, passion and compassion do not preclude a sullenness, a quickness to anger and a defensiveness on the issues of sex and race that one understands without liking in the least. I suspect that male critics like Aronowitz, who believes with other male leftists that the film fails to represent working-class interests as convincingly as it does feminist ones, would as soon delete this dimension of complexity. Certainly Esperanza's growth in strength and consciousness, so well portrayed by Rosaura Revueltas, is at the heart of the film; indeed, its real innovativeness lies in the very selection of a woman as both protagonist and narrator. Her growth, slow and hard-won, brings her up hard and sharp against the pervasive sexism of her world, including her husband. She and Ramon are convincing, three-dimensional characters. And the film finds some superb ways to suggest their changing interactions. One is the moment when Esperanza removes the chair from under Ramon's feet and brings it into the circle for the meeting of the Auxiliary. Another is the scene when, in jail, she passes the children quietly to Ramon, then slowly lifts her head, opens her mouth and for the first time screams with the other women; perhaps one has to be a woman to know what an important moment that is.

The language of the film, both visual and discursive, also achieves a level of complexity. One of the characteristics of both narration and dialogue, for example, is a remarkable density of historical reference. Phrase after phrase evokes whole episodes in these people's experience: a history of land grants and land grabs ("claims his grandfather used to own the land where the mine is now"), of secret struggles to build a union, of painful discrimination and exploitation, of resistance and pride. A familiarity with that history and with the culture of the people of New Mexico increases one's appreciation for the authenticity of the film and makes one able to recognize its richness--a richness of allusion, rather than of irony or symbol.

Not that the film lacks a multivalent iconography. The rifle, as described above, is one complex icon; the radio is another. The radio provides the housebound Esperanza with her main source of pleasure; it also functions as a measure of the workers' exploitation under the installment plan and the Mexican American's cultural oppression under the onslaught of Anglo products. It appears at critical junctures in the narrative: in the opening scenes Esperanza clings to it and Ramon attacks it; later, when the deputies arrive to repossess it, he shows his love by his readiness to fight over it, and she shows her new political astuteness by holding him fiercely back.

Finally, SALT OF THE EARTH does possess some value not mentioned by Aronowitz and Rosen in their admittedly unsystematic discussion of criteria: a remarkable unity and economy, in which no gesture or word or scene is wasted; a content that *matters*, by which I do not mean an ideologically correct "line" but rather a believable and authentic portrayal of a community in struggle and transition; and not least, the power to move us deeply.

This last quality perhaps confirms Rosen's argument that SALT OF THE EARTH offers no "cerebral space." Certainly the aesthetic of the filmmakers lay at the other end of the continuum from the illusion-breaking Brechtian mode.

Theirs was a deliberately affective art. And it is true that SALT OF THE EARTH does not always avoid sentimentality. But if it is occasionally sentimental, it is never, I think, dishonest. There is nothing vulgar or self-indulgent in its appeal to our emotions. And if it can still move us on the sixth viewing, its appeal must transcend the manipulative; sentimentality alone would surely wear thin after a third or fourth exposure. Must we assume that appeals to the heart preclude appeals to intelligence and good taste?

SALT OF THE EARTH does something else as well: it inspires belief in the possibility of genuine social change; it encourages us to act on that belief. Seeing it has made a difference in more than one life; my own was one of them.

Both Aronowitz and Rosen find SALT OF THE EARTH an "engaging" film; they simply do not regard it as good art. I disagree in this instance; I think it is an important film, and I think it is a good one. But I share their insistence that the left requires a culture rigorous in its creative and critical standards, capable of self-criticism, imaginative and supportive in its forms--a demand no one on the left concerned about the juncture between culture and class struggle can afford to ignore.

<sup>1</sup> I do not want to dwell here on the making and subsequent repression of SALT OF THE EARTH. Much of that story is told in *Salt of the Earth: The Story of a Film*, by Herbert Biberman (Boston: Beacon, 1965). I am working now on an afterword to a paperback reprint of the screenplay, soon to be published by the Feminist Press; it will discuss the film's historic context and significance at some length. Most readers will be familiar with the film's background, but for those who aren't: the film was based on an actual strike at Empire Zinc, a subsidiary of New Jersey Zinc, lasting from October 17, 1950, until January 25, 1952. The film was the product of an unusual collaboration between blacklisted Hollywood people and the families of a militant local of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. Most of its major roles were played by people in the mining community. Efforts to complete and distribute the film were hampered by local redbaiting and vigilantism, the deportation of the Mexican actress who played Esperanza, congressional pressure and opposition from the studios and the conservative IATSE.

<sup>2</sup> *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), pp. 333-4.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Bob Rosen and some of his students in the UCLA Department of Theater Arts for the concept of "conflict and convergence," though not for its specific application in this case, and for many of the ideas in the following discussion, especially concerning the film's iconography.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Clint Jencks, Summer 1975. He was capturing the tenor of their remarks, not quoting them directly.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the film's least convincing moments occur when union songs drawn from Anglo working-class culture and obviously performed by Anglo singers burst forth from the soundtrack--ostensibly the women on the back of the truck and on the picket line giving a rousing rendition of "We Shall Not Be Moved." If we compare that moment to the mananita scene, when the community gathers to serenade Esperanza on her Saint's Day, we recognize the difference between authen-

ticity and superimposition.

<sup>6</sup>The genesis of SALT OF THE EARTH was in many ways a collective effort. Michael Wilson wrote the script in constant consultation with the mining community, and a production board of four members each from the miners, the Ladies' Auxiliary and Hollywood coordinated production. But that is an essay in its own right.

<sup>7</sup>During the legal struggles over the boycott of SALT OF THE EARTH Paul Jarrico, its producer, prepared a 40-page chronology detailing the specifics of the harassment. It brings home vividly the staggering thoroughness and brutality of the blacklist.

<sup>8</sup>The term was borrowed from Freud by French Marxist Louis Althusser, who uses it not judgmentally but descriptively to describe how various contradictions in society, including the "final" contradiction between labor and capital, sometimes reinforce, sometimes impede, one another's revolutionary potential. In that sense, not the judgmental one, the term does indeed describe the historical moment on which SALT OF THE EARTH is based--but then, Althusser argues that such overdetermination is always present.

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