



***Salt of the Earth* & *The Milagro Beanfield War* :
Hegemony in Narrative Conflict**

"You . . . got nobody but yourselves to blame." As the company-bought sheriff in *Salt of the Earth* (1954), Will Geer speaks the ultimate irony, chastising the women of San Marcos (aka "Zinc Town"). And, indeed, in the face of such unbeatable odds, the characters in *Salt of the Earth* seem foolhardy to oppose the racial, labor, and class oppression of the "Delaware Zinc Company." However, Michael Wilson and Herbert Biberman (writer and director, respectively) make no bones about the source of Zinc Town oppression, nor do they dilute the efforts of those who justly challenge it. In this honest, uncompromising chronicle of a mine strike, the players and the stakes on either side of the conflict are carefully delineated.

The Milagro Beanfield War, on the other hand, rejects this approach to a similar theme. Addressing the exploitation of a New Mexican town by capitalist developers, Robert Redford's film chooses to internalize the conflict within the community itself, setting the story against the ill-defined background of western development. This refusal to directly juxtapose victim and aggressor not only weakens the case of the Milagro citizens but also utilizes their internal conflicts as a scapegoat for their problems. By analyzing this film through the filter of its

predecessor, *Salt of the Earth*, we see how *The Milagro Beanfield War* marks a step back into the hegemonic rule of Anglo cinema.

The boundaries of conflict are quickly positioned in the opening moments of *Salt of the Earth*. While Esperanza, the film's central character, labors at her morning chores, her voice-over flatly demarcates the limitations of her lifestyle:

My name is Esperanza Quintero. I am a miner's wife. This is our home. The house is not ours. But the flowers . . . are ours. This is my village. When I was a child, it was called San Marcos. The Anglos changed the name to Zinc Town. Zinc Town, New Mexico, USA. Our roots go deep in this place, deeper than the pines, deeper than the mine shaft.

Ownership, and the right to ownership, are central issues to Wilson's script. Each side vies for the right to utilize the resources of San Marcos. It is the power (or lack thereof) to command those resources that distinguishes the striking miners from their mogul bosses. Along these lines the villagers set up their picket. The marching men and women not only represent the demands of the miners and their families but also provide a clear opposition to

the acquisitive power plays of the mine bosses. The picket is a disruptive target, which the bosses only attack. Just as the local union discusses its strategy, we are made aware of the issues creating the miner/boss conflict: equality in sanitation for Anglo and Hispanic miners and adequate safety procedures in the mines. It is also clear that the dispute will not be settled until either the miners acquiesce and return to work or the mine bosses concede to the strike demands. From this central issue, a chain of personal and interpersonal conflicts is set in motion. Between men and women, husbands and wives and families, these personal issues are brought to a head by the trauma of the strike and become points on the strike agenda, albeit informal ones.

Whereas *Salt of the Earth* is explicit, the central issues in *The Milagro Beanfield War* never fully precipitate. They remain undefined in a narrative that forsakes the “real” for the “ideal” struggle. In place of the self-affirming collective, Redford chooses individuals to embody his ethnic commentary. Although eastern developers threaten the future of Milagro, the town’s citizens are factionalized in their response. Indeed, the threat maintains an elusive presence—as dreamlike as the construction model of the proposed recreation area. Unlike the residents of San Marcos, the citizens of Milagro bicker among themselves as to whether the threat of the development warrants resistance. Shifting focus from the issue at large (i.e., the stasis of a contented community vs. the exploits of big business), *The Milagro Beanfield War* presents the struggle of individuals. Never acquiring the collective strength of a community behind a common cause, each personal conflict flounders within its own internal pettiness.

The collective spirit of *Salt of the Earth* and the individual alienation of *The Milagro Beanfield War* first appear when each community is challenged by eastern business interests. The labor-saving negligence of the Delaware Zinc Company forces the hand of San Marcos’s local union. On the site, the decision to strike is made by all the Hispanic miners. Subsequent decisions to ration food and incorporate women into the strike strategy are made in the presence of all miners (and their wives) at the union meeting hall. Because this community is homogeneously Hispanic, making its decisions based upon the common concerns of the collective, Wilson stresses the ethnic element of the struggle. Deprived of indoor plumbing and other necessities categorically provided for Anglo miners, the Hispanic union builds a strong case condemning the discriminatory practices of the company. By associating the needs of the collective with its ethnic heritage, Wilson draws a close parallel between racial discrimination and deprivation.

Such an argument is never presented in *The Milagro Beanfield War*. Its characters, who act independently of each other, prevent such a conclusion from being made. That is not to say that all situations where a community finds itself under siege

by corporate development involve racial discrimination or deprivation. However, *The Milagro Beanfield War* is not dealing with just any community, and the confused message it communicates harms the media image of Hispanics. On the one hand, Redford tries to establish a pervasive feeling of Chicano culture. Constant references to Catholic iconography and saint worship abound. The fantastical presence of the saint/angel playing a concertina acts as a religious leitmotif throughout the film. This presence is underscored by Amarante’s idol sculptures, the token candles lit in the church hall meeting, and the Mondragons’ bedroom crucifix. Similarly, the collection of old, male citizens, the history of Mondragon’s property, and the grapevine communication network (“Mondragon’s watered his father’s beanfield!”) in Milagro intimate a close community with a cultural legacy.

On the other hand, every individual in Milagro is “out for himself.” This is clearly stressed at the town meeting. The Hispanic mayor openly courts the developers who will destroy the “Milagro” of his *compadres*. Joe Mondragon wants only to irrigate his father’s beanfield. Refusing to use this act symbolically against the land developers, Joe’s sudden motivation is made specious. Ruby’s militant activism seems to be a romantic ploy directed at a lackluster ex-liberal, an Anglo, and not a sacrifice for her “cousins.” If we are to believe that Milagro is undergoing cultural, as well as communal, genocide, then why is there such disharmony among the Hispanic descendants of Milagro? The Anglo developers seem to have more on the ball, holding Milagro in higher esteem. They have studied the area and have a plan for its future, which is more than can be said for Milagro’s residents. Whether intended or not, Redford intimates that the Milagro community is both ignorant of its cultural homogeneity and ambivalent about its preservation. Needless to say, ignorance and ambivalence are attributed to Hispanics at great cost and hinder the advancement of their media presence.

Continuing along these lines, other comparisons may be drawn between the two films. The female characters in *Salt of the Earth* undergo radical transformations, unlike their counterparts in *The Milagro Beanfield War*. As Teresa Vidal puts it, “Anything worth learning is a hurt . . . these changes come with pain.” Sharing in the collective nightmare of the strike, the mothers of San Marcos are individually required to take stock of their own roles within the mining community. As their responsibilities shift, Esperanza, Teresa, and the others assert their influence beyond domestic issues. Embracing strike duty and acts of civil disobedience, these women develop social conscience as well as a clearer sense of their inherent human worth (beyond the prescribed roles of wife and procreator). From these painful changes, Esperanza speaks for all women: “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."

The Milagro Beanfield War offers quite a bit less for its female characters. In David Ward's script, each one is isolated from the others. These women do not participate within the collective support of a female community, nor do they undergo any significant character development. Ruby and Mrs. Mondragon, particularly, remain little more than clichéd stereotypes. As if to indicate that a woman must co-opt masculine traits in order to act assertively, Ruby is cast as Milagro's only auto mechanic. Visually isolated, she is consistently presented swaggering across the screen (to and from groupings of passive males) or privileged by an exaggerated central framing (e.g., the final "fiesta" scene). Conversely, Joe's wife is relegated to domestic settings: baking bread, hemming skirts. This relegation is cemented by her pejorative outburst at Joe in the Mondragon kitchen. Paraphrasing, she scolds him about the beanfield: "The wife is the last to know; I wouldn't even have flowers to put on your grave." Stereotypically, Joe melts his wife's anger with an aggressive kiss, pinning her to the kitchen wall.

The Anglo characters, as well, illustrate the different attitudes at work in the two films. When the union organizer, Frank Barnes, is asked to mediate the mine disturbance in *Salt of the Earth*, he quickly states, "They don't work for me, I work for them." A rare example of Anglos endorsing a Hispanic cause, Barnes and his wife struggle alongside the striking miners, bearing the same pressures and undergoing similar transformations. In *The Milagro Beanfield War*, the token Anglo supporter is Bloom—an ambivalent reject from the '60s era of social protest. With great reticence, he is cajoled into representing Joe Mondragon. Vicariously, Bloom also becomes the spokesman for Milagro's half-hearted preservation. Unlike Barnes, however, Bloom considers Mondragon's efforts "a lost cause," contributing to the overwhelming sentiment that Milagro is not worth saving.

Finally, the nature of opposition itself is contrasted in the narrative structure of the two films. In *Salt of the Earth*, the camps are well defined. Up against a formidable lot, the miners meet with opposition on all fronts. The local store, an arm of "the company," repossesses goods at will. The local law enforcement, an all-Anglo arm of the company, harasses miners and their wives alike. In *The Milagro Beanfield War*, opposition is also internalized within the fractured community. The Milagro general store is managed by a Hispanic who seems interested more in assisting the Anglo developers than in building a loyal clientele among his neighbors. Actor Rueben Blades, as the Milagro sheriff, can barely control his Hispanic deputies who similarly harass the citizens of Milagro. And whereas the violence in *Salt of the Earth* is exacted along the picket line, the violence in Redford's film marks a malevolent internalization of communal anxiety, with the injury of innocent people.

Although more than forty years separate *Salt of the Earth* and *The Milagro Beanfield War*, we are asked to view them *ensemble*. Portraying an ethnic minority living in community, surrounded by the power manipulations of the dominant Anglo culture, these films bear a striking resemblance to a recurring struggle faced by western Hispanics. It is distressing to witness the regressive results of Redford's film in light of the Wilson/Biberman collaboration. *Salt of the Earth* is, more accurately, a self-told tale voiced from the heart of a community in transition. On the contrary, *The Milagro Beanfield War* is the product of "the biggest dick on the set" (reported by a production assistant, *Film Comment*, November 1987), revealing the still-intact hegemonic attitude towards Hispanics in the Hollywood film industry. Esperanza's words are justified when she rebukes Ramón: "Do you think you can have dignity only if I have none?" Failing to externalize the conflict, as does Esperanza, *The Milagro Beanfield War* turns its characters upon themselves in a self-condemning loss of dignity.

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CRB – Another very good paper. I think your overall grade was hurt by a lack of time (Film I, I am guessing) that you could spend on this stuff. Still, your papers were very nice. A-