Dust Bowl Migrants In The American Imagination

Charles J Shindo

Nor was ‘Dust Bowl’ the appropriate phrase. For people in Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma the drought and economic depression of the mid-Thirties were real enough, but the legendary dust storms afflicted mainly Kansas and Colorado: they brushed past Oklahoma and Texas and missed Arkansas by four hundred miles. Farm labourers’ wages in California were then the highest in the world, and demand for native-born farm workers increased as the Depression turned local feeling and legislation against Mexican immigrants. Shindo examines the images of Dust Bowl migrants in photography, fiction, film, and song and marks off the various distances between these representations and the realities of migrant lives. He shows how photographer Dorothea Lange, novelist John Steinbeck, Hollywood filmmaker John Ford, and folksinger Woody Guthrie, as well as folklorists and government reformers, sympathized with the migrants’ plight but also appropriated that experience to further their own aesthetic and ideological agendas. Shindo’s study shows us how art can dominate history in the popular mind and illuminates the ways in which artists blend aesthetics and politics to make a personal statement about the human condition.