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Author(s): Vivian C. Sobchack

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# ***THE GRAPES OF WRATH* (1940): THEMATIC EMPHASIS THROUGH VISUAL STYLE**

VIVIAN C. SOBCHACK

*Salt Lake City, Utah*

SINCE ITS RELEASE IN 1940, THE FILM VERSION OF *THE GRAPES OF Wrath* has attracted enormous and enduring critical and popular attention.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in some ways it has also remained a neglected film, a film obscured by the shadow of its illustrious parentage (John Ford out of John Steinbeck) and by its generic absorption into that body of culturally significant art representative of and concerned with Depression America. Certainly, *The Grapes of Wrath* was and still is a highly visible film; its popularity as a “classic” is evidenced by its frequent appearance on prestigious commercial television series, at cinema club retrospectives, and in literature, film, and American Studies classrooms across the country. In addition, the film enjoys a wealth of critical consideration—as an adaptation of a work of fiction, as a cultural artifact which illuminates various aspects of popular American ideology and myth, and as part of the *oeuvre* of a major film *auteur*. Paradoxically, however, this widely considered film has suffered from visual neglect. Examined from several critical perspectives, *The Grapes of Wrath* has been more frequently looked *into* than looked *at*. Its visual surfaces have been hardly explored and mapped, its texture and tone have been rarely considered as functions of its imagery, and its dominant thematic emphasis has been only minimally related to its visual style.

The reasons for this literal and figurative oversight can be linked, of course, to the myopia demanded by focused and limited critical discourse. Adaptation criticism, for example, is practiced through a comparison of a novel and film. And, no matter how sophisticated and cinematically liter-

<sup>1</sup> John Ford directed *The Grapes of Wrath* for Twentieth Century–Fox.

ate such adaptation criticism is, its comparisons tend to gravitate toward the literary values and structures which supply common ground between the two art forms. Thus, whether the literature/film critic is ignorant of the complexity of a film's visual text or conversant with film aesthetics, the bulk of adaptation criticism seems to consider a film like *The Grapes of Wrath* almost solely in terms of the literary structures which dictate its narrative action, characterization, and thematic emphasis. George Bluestone's influential *Novels into Film* and Warren French's more recent *Filmguide to The Grapes of Wrath* spend the major portion of their discussion and analysis of the film dealing with its adherence to or departure from Steinbeck's parent work on the basis of dialogue selection, scene deletions or additions, characters maintained, dropped or synthesized, and the structural arrangement of narrative activity.<sup>2</sup> What the image looks like is neglected for a consideration of what happens in it. The subject matter is considered dominant to its visual treatment. Similarly, what happens next is considered more important than how the images happen next. Indeed, images are ignored as affective and cumulative units of meaning and texture which accrue to express the film's theme in conjunction with its verbal and literary devices. Rather, they are regarded as discrete particles of larger dramatic sequences and greatly subordinate in importance to what dialogue and action take place within and through them. Although both Bluestone and French describe various visual aspects of *The Grapes of Wrath*, they have difficulty in their respective methods integrating what they see with what the film says and means. In the final analysis, their differing conclusions about the thematic emphasis of the film and its relationship to Steinbeck's novel both derive from a primarily literary approach to the film text.

A similar approach is taken by those critics whose interest in the film is more cultural than aesthetic. *The Grapes of Wrath* has been praised for its courageous realism and its social relevance as well as damned for its conservatism and timidity in addressing the problems it pretended to tackle. It has also been analyzed and discussed as a cultural and social barometer, expressive of those "meanings and values that were a part of the dominant culture"<sup>3</sup> at the time the film was made and seen. If the cultural approach is not quite literary, it is often too literal in its response to the film's imagery. Content again is predominant and considered independently from its visual treatment. For example, at its release, the fact

<sup>2</sup> George Bluestone, *Novels Into Film* (1957; rpt. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973); Warren French, *Filmguide to The Grapes of Wrath* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Charles J. Maland, *American Visions: The Films of Chaplin, Ford, Capra, and Welles, 1936-1941* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 367.

that the film dealt with relatively contemporaneous subject matter, that it cinematically seemed to articulate the world and the plight of Dust Bowl migrants, and that the material content of its images bore a superficially strong resemblance to the physical world outside the theatre attracted far greater critical attention than did the film's stylized and abstracting treatment of its subject matter and physical content. Indeed, the film was initially reviewed and apotheosized more in terms of its relationship to actuality, to documentary realism, than treated as a successful adaptation of a novel or a work of cinematic fiction and art. *Life* magazine called it "bitter, authentic, honest,"<sup>4</sup> and Edwin Locke, a documentary filmmaker, compared the film favorably with the documentary films of Pare Lorentz and the Depression photographs of Dorothea Lange, saying it "set a precedent for contemporary and historical honesty in movie-making."<sup>5</sup>

Certainly in recent years cultural criticism of *The Grapes of Wrath* has moved far afield from measuring the film's social worth on the basis of its realism. Now the pendulum has swung the other way and the film's value as a cultural artifact is based on its relation to myth, to its expression of a popular social vision which Charles Maland, for example, sees conveyed through the construction of "a symbolic universe meant to present a pattern of values and meanings in a popular fictional form to a broad audience." But despite the increased sophistication of such cultural analysis, the notion of social vision is linked only rarely to actual vision, to the integration of the film's images and visual texture with the reading of its narrative and cultural content. Thus, while Maland may conclude that *The Grapes of Wrath* is one in a number of contemporaneous films whose concern for the American family "symbolically represents a larger shift in the American film industry at large from a social criticism to affirmation, another indication of the decline of radicalism between 1936 and 1941," that contention is never given the ample and cogent visual support the film could provide.<sup>6</sup>

One might expect that the literary emphasis of adaptation criticism and the literal emphasis of cultural criticism directed toward *The Grapes of Wrath* would be counterbalanced by the more visually-oriented attention of film criticism. Not bound through intent or academic discipline to compare the film to the novel or to investigate its place in a cultural and historical *gestalt*, cineastes might be expected to consider the film more

<sup>4</sup> French, 59.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin Locke, review of *The Grapes of Wrath, Films* (Spring 1940), rpt. in *American Film Criticism*, ed. by Stanley Kauffmann with Bruce Henstell (New York: Liveright, 1972), 389.

<sup>6</sup> Maland, ix, 169-70.

freely as an autonomous work of visual as well as verbal art. Unfortunately, such has not been the case. As Steinbeck's novel has obscured the less verbal aspects of the film from literary critics, and as the film's relationship to a particularly fascinating period of social and cultural history has narrowed the focus of cultural critics, so has John Ford's position as a pantheon *auteur* blurred the specific vision of film critics. Rather than being considered on its own merits and discussed on the basis of its aesthetic development and coherence, *The Grapes of Wrath* has been regarded primarily within the context of Ford's entire body of work. As such, it has been either seen as less than a major work and ignored, or discussed less visually than thematically as part of the director's continuing vision of what Andrew Sarris calls a "nostalgic" and "family level of history."<sup>7</sup> In the first instance, the film is often given short critical shrift because it is not a Western, because it was made at a mid-point in Ford's career which has garnered less attention than his work in the 1930s and after the 1940s, and because it is regarded as somehow less "pure" Ford for being an adaptation of a classic novel. (It is interesting to note that most of the close textual analysis of Ford films is practiced on those *not* adapted from literature, and that although Ford used literary sources for ten of his films, only *The Informer* and *Stagecoach* have merited nearly unanimous praise and attention from cineastes.<sup>8</sup>) In the second instance, that film criticism which has dealt with *The Grapes of Wrath* in any detail has done so in terms of its thematic concerns as derived from its narrative structure and its general resemblance to other Ford films. The film itself and its visual specificity have fallen victim to how a given critic feels about Ford. For someone like Sarris, the film's apolitical evocation of nostalgia through its "humanizing Steinbeck's economic insects into heroic champions of an agrarian order of family and community"<sup>9</sup> is clearly one of the film's chief virtues. On the other hand, in a negative "reassessment" of Ford, Michael Dempsey castigates the director and his work for political conservatism and easy sentimentality and says disparagingly of *The Grapes of Wrath*, "Ford the contemporary of Dreiser and Dos Passos and even Steinbeck gives us . . . a hollow celebration of that emptiest abstraction, *The People*, along with a cop-out analysis which avoids blam-

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema, Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 43-49, quote p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> The two most detailed textual analyses of specific Ford films are "John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*," *Screen*, 13 (Autumn 1972) translated from the original in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 223 (1970); and "*The Searchers*: Materials and Approaches," *Screen Education*, No. 17 (Autumn 1975). See also H. Peter Stowell, "John Ford's Literary Sources: From Realism to Romance," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 5 (Spring 1977), 164-65.

<sup>9</sup> Sarris, *The American Cinema*, 45.

ing any individual or interest for the plight of the Okies."<sup>10</sup> These statements, however, whether for or against Ford as a film artist of merited stature, are not backed up by careful consideration of the film's imagery. Unfortunately, that imagery is too often assumed as a given by critics anxious to get on with the job of dealing with Ford's themes. As Pierre Greenfield notes, a great deal of such criticism presents "an exposition of Fordian philosophy without any serious justification of it."<sup>11</sup> Film critics are therefore as guilty as literary and cultural critics in their general neglect of the visual elements of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

This tripartite oversight needs some redress—not necessarily because *The Grapes of Wrath* is a great work of film art (which is arguable), but because it is a *film* and it is shown on a screen and has a *visual* presence. The way we read and perceive it is as much a function of its visual imagery as it is of its literary and dramatic and cultural content. Indeed, in most cases the strength and immediacy of a film's visual imagery is at least equal to if not far greater than its literary content—even if its power is not acknowledged or articulated. Because of this power, a film's visual imagery merits as much attention when it is supportive of literary and cultural and thematic analyses as when it is more flamboyantly contradictory or quietly subversive. In the case of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the consensus of critical response has been nearly unanimous in its recognition that Ford's film is different in tone and spirit from Steinbeck's novel and that the film is a politically conservative and poetic work whose major theme is the value and resilience of the American family. That consensus was not arrived at merely by an examination of the film's structural relationship to the novel which was its source, or by a cultural analysis of its place in a *gestalt* of populist art, or by its thematic echo of what its principal creator expressed in his work both before and after it. That consensus of critical response to *The Grapes of Wrath* was also generated by the *seeing* of the film, by the intuitive integration of the film's imagery into the critical act. The apprehension of that imagery and its function needs both appropriate recognition and articulation.

It is agreed that Ford's transliteration of Steinbeck's book to the screen restructures the values of an essentially realistic and political novel and emphasizes those aspects of the parent work which are the most consistent with the filmmaker's own values and personal vision. Although both Steinbeck and Ford do share a common bond in their focus on American institutions and ideology, in their dramatic humanization of those institu-

<sup>10</sup> Michael Dempsey, "John Ford: A Reassessment," *Film Quarterly*, 28 (Summer 1975), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Greenfield, "Print the Fact: For and Against the Films of John Ford," *Take One*, 5 (Nov. 1977), 15.

tions and ideas through the medium of proletariat protagonists, and in their use of humor and folklore, their sympathies and interests are dramatically divergent. Steinbeck's novels emphasize the importance of the present, the harshness of reality, the potential of radical politics, and the need for social and political change. Conversely, Ford's films emphasize the values of the past and soften the harsher aspects of historical reality with nostalgia; his film worlds are apolitical and atemporal and his aesthetic evocation of America revolves around the harmony and established traditions of community. Indeed, his life's work reveals a reverence for those human values which are most simple and universal, a reverence which balks and trembles at the necessity for progress and change. As Andrew Sarris cogently indicates in *The John Ford Movie Mystery*, "Ford never lost his faith in the benign drift of American history . . . and intuitively redirected the pessimistic class conflicts in . . . Steinbeck . . . into relatively optimistic family chronicles."<sup>12</sup>

The novel, however, is less concerned about seven months in the life of the Joad family than it is about the relationship of men to land, about an untenable economic system, and about the inevitable awakening of a communal revolutionary consciousness in the oppressed and exploited. The Joad family is only a sharply-focused point from which the novel continually moves out far beyond the limited awareness of its main characters to deal with epic social and political issues, abstractions which—of dramatic necessity—must find embodiment in the concrete and specific, in characterization and action and the details of physical imagery. Although the Joad family takes on the bulk of this dramatic function in the novel, Steinbeck has structured the book in such a way that the reader cannot forget that the family is only one of many families, that it is part of a larger organism composed not only of families but also of land and plants and animals and weather. The Joads are constantly counterbalanced by the equal emphasis given in the intercalary chapters to larger issues than their immediate survival and on larger groups than the family. As a result, their family unit is not metaphorical in function; it is, instead, illustrative. Its importance in the novel is not in its mythic cohesion and endurance, but in its realistic specificity. The Joads comprise only half of the novel's emphasis, enjoy only half its attention. And the universal theme of family solidarity is greatly subordinate to the larger emphasis Steinbeck gives to a cry for the solidarity of men in a definite political and economic context. Indeed, as Warren French points out, the novel charts the progress of the Joads' "growing out of the narrow con-

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Sarris, *The John Ford Movie Mystery* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1975), 161.

cept of 'family' in the blood-relationship sense to a concept of membership in the entire 'human family.'''<sup>13</sup>

As has been pointed out by many critics including those cited here, Ford is not particularly concerned with the Joads' integration into the family of man. Nor is he particularly interested in relating them to an economic or political milieu. Although there is a great deal of dialogue in the film which relates the family to the land, to a larger population, and to a political climate *verbally*, the visual interest of the film is on the Joads as an isolated and universal family unit which transcends the particularity and specificity of time and place. Certainly, the Joads on screen are specific and particular in their photographic realization; it is the nature of the medium to particularize "characters" and "place" far more exactly and idiosyncratically than written language. But the visual treatment of Henry Fonda's Tom, Jane Darwell's Ma, Charley Grapewin's Grampa, John Carradine's Casey, and John Qualen's Muley softens their physical individuality and resonates photographic specificity into expressive metaphor (see Figure 1). Because of the manner in which the major portion of the film has been visually conceived and shot, Steinbeck's multiple themes and simultaneous emphasis have been exchanged for a less epic but equally universal vision, for a scope at once smaller than the novel's in its reduction of politics and economics and social realities to the size of a single romanticized family, and yet also a scope larger than the novel's in its evocation of the survival and endurance of that family against a stylized background which is not limited by time and space. While Charles Maland suggests that Ford's emphasis on the Joads as a familial and communal unit can be linked to the director's natural affinity for Jeffersonian agrarianism, to his belief in independent ownership of land by industrious and hard-working families,<sup>14</sup> the Joads gain their universality from their being dispossessed of their land. Indeed, it is their lack of land (and its lack of photographic reference) which abstracts them into the generalized and poetic space of the montage sequences and places them in cramped close-ups and medium shots isolated in trucks and cars and tents far from communion with anyone but themselves.

Thus, where the novel *moves out* both structurally and imagistically from the Joads to continually emphasize the land, biological presence, and the crush of thousands of migrants on the move, the film's movement visually *closes in* on the Joads, at times to such a degree that they have only a minimal connection with either the land or the rest of society. The characters, of course, do pay lip service to that connection through the

<sup>13</sup> French, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Maland, 164-66.



Figure 1. The Joads and their friends often live out relationships in universalized space. The film visually softens physical individuality and instead emphasizes expressive metaphor. (All photographs of *The Grapes of Wrath* are courtesy of the Lester Glassner Collection.)

dialogue—so much so that a reading of the continuity script alone might result in the impression of a quite different film from the one actually realized on the screen. But that connection is not actually visible through a great portion of the film. Land is not as visible as what French calls “the fresh, temporary look of studio sets.”<sup>15</sup> Most of the film was shot indoors or on the studio lot rather than on location in a landscape which might have matched the visual power and presence of the Monument Valley Ford used in so many of his Westerns. Though there are some brief long shots of authentic locations in some of the montage sequences, their open quality primarily serves as a striking reminder of the film’s overwhelmingly closed visual construction. If one *looks* at the film’s imagery, it seems rather off the mark to read *The Grapes of Wrath* as a land tragedy.

Some early critics noted this absence of land imagery in the film and remarked on Ford’s departure from Steinbeck in this regard. Generally, these astute reviewers were filmmakers themselves, attuned to the visual

<sup>15</sup> French, 18.

qualities of film. Edwin Locke, for example, came to the film with a background as a member of the U.S. Film Service, a government agency whose films specialized in evoking the beauty of the American landscape:

It is a pity that Ford's sense of environment has not come through as well as his sense of people. The opening of the picture is greatly weakened because he has given us no feeling of the country or the people's background. Where are the vast stretches of the dust bowl and the tiny houses as lonely as ships at sea? Where is the dust? It is hard to believe that Ford has ever seen *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. It is baffling to hear that a camera crew was sent to Oklahoma along Route 66; certainly but a few feet of their film was used. It is regrettable that the Joads were snatched across the beautiful and terrifying expanses of the country in a few pans and process shots; we could justly have expected more. We could have expected more of what it is like to be tracted off the land, more than the knocking over of a prop house by a Caterpillar roaming at large, more than a hackneyed montage of clanking monsters in abstract maneuvers. We might have all these things, and a richer picture, if Ford had followed a little further the documentary technique that is now being talked about in connection with his work.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Pare Lorentz, director of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River*, was disappointed by the lack of will to evoke the land and its moods:

. . . he [Nunnally Johnson, the screenwriter] needed to think in terms of skies and brown land and, most of all, wind. He needed only to have written "drought" and then left it to the director to re-create the feeling of those dusty plains tilting from Oklahoma clear up to Canada, with their miserable huts and busted windmills. In fact, he needed only to have gone to the panhandle of Oklahoma and Texas and western Kansas and the Dakotas and eastern Colorado and said: "Photograph this—here is where they came from."

As he did not, then Director John Ford (who, by virtue of going to Zion Park in Utah to photograph his outdoor sequences in *Stagecoach*, made a Western action picture into a thing of beauty) at least might have started his picture with the Great Plains instead of with scenes that, even though they were from the book, did not give you a feeling of the land.<sup>17</sup>

Less important for their recognition of how Ford's film broke a certain faith with Steinbeck's book or with natural history than for their recognition that the visual images of a film are crucial to its meaning, these

<sup>16</sup> Locke, 387–88. (*The Plow That Broke the Plains* was made in 1936 by Pare Lorentz for the U.S. Film Service.)

<sup>17</sup> Pare Lorentz, review of *The Grapes of Wrath* in *Lorentz on Film* (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1975), 184.

comments indicate the closed quality which permeates Ford's work, his visual *choice* which omits wide-open spaces and panoramic vistas of either parched earth or pastures of plenty. Indeed, until Ford brings the Joads into Hooverville—halfway through the film—the camera isolates them, disconnects them, perhaps even protects them from larger forces and larger movements which give the novel an epic quality.

The general composition of *The Grapes of Wrath* is consciously controlled and tight. For the most part, the action occurs in visually limited space—limited either by its actual spatial parameters and tight framing or by the amount of it we are allowed to see by virtue of the given illumination. Right from the beginning—after one brief long shot—we move inward. Tom hitches a ride and we are confined for the first of many times in the cab of a truck, cramped in its interior or looking in close-up through the windshield at Tom and the driver. While Maland's comment that the film "consists almost entirely of the Joads riding in their ramshackle truck"<sup>18</sup> is an exaggeration, it is true that the characters are usually cramped into a cluttered screen and limited space (see Figure 2). Not only is a good deal of the Joads' odyssey confined and isolated in automotive interiors, but a large share of the dramatic action is also confined indoors: in cluttered or darkly oppressive rooms, tents, or shacks, all of which close in on the characters. Out of the 50 "scenes" French describes as comprising the units of the film, a total of 25 are shot (entirely or in part) within the Joad truck or within an oppressive interior.<sup>19</sup>

Those compositions which occur in "open space" are also chafingly contained and limited by their cardboard and set-like quality and by the relative lack of internal movement of both the camera and the characters. Although, for example, Tom's initial encounter with Casey takes place in an "open" field punctuated by an overly-aestheticized willow tree, the camera stays in one spot and the characters stand immobile except for occasionally and uncomfortably shifting their weight from foot to foot. Containing their physical movement in such a way, Ford contains the frame as well. The visual effect is that there is no field outside the limits of the camera's vision, no land—rather, there is a non-space, or a studio set covered with false and aestheticized earth. The long long shot which concludes the sequence shows Tom and Casey silhouetted against the darkening sky as they set out for the Joad homestead. But the shot—however long and panoramic—is more closed than open, more memorable for its composed quality and artful lighting and static vision than it is for an evocation of a real world with real earth and dust which is really

<sup>18</sup> Maland, 154.

<sup>19</sup> French, 38–56. (I have not included those scenes shot in brightly lit interiors.)



Figure 2. The Joad family is often abstracted from context through framing.

blowing away. Uncle John's farm yard is no more open spatially than a stage setting which pretends to realism. And both the Keene Ranch and the Wheat Patch government camp seem patently artificial in their respective evocations of squalor and darkness and spanking clean brightness. The effect of this spatial closure on the film is not necessarily negative, but it does communicate the visual message that the world which the Joads inhabit is less than real and vital. *Their* vitality against the cardboard settings, the Edward Hopper skies and contrived grimness and beauty, makes them more important than the problems they face—for they are physically present and dramatically highlighted while the Depression and the land blowing away and the rest of the world are shown as an abstracted stage set or ignored altogether.

The static compositions, the tableaux-like posturing of the characters, and the pattern of the editing also add to the visual elements which lift the Joads out of connection with things immediate and specific and create of their struggle and endurance something universal and iconic. The camera rarely moves, preferring for the most part to look at its subjects from eye-level and mid-distance. This point of view produces images which

look at times like the same view of the action one would get watching a stage production or historical tableau; the entire human figure is seen in the frame and so the image does not extend itself imaginatively out into the world, and the relative immobility of the camera creates a sense of the characters entering and exiting from wings as opposed to the camera's seeking them out. The one literally jarring exception to the general pattern of composition and camera and subject movement is the visual treatment given to the Joad's entrance into Hooverville, and to the fight which occurs in that tent city. The subjective camera which moves as a member of the Joad family through the street visually opens up the film as it, paradoxically, limits its objectivity. Both the subjective vision and the camera movement are more jolting than the supposedly shocking content presented, as is the later fight sequence which contains so much more movement and randomness than we have seen before. Indeed, generally the dramatic activity or stage "business" within the frame is rarely spontaneous or random, and the relative lack of physical movement by the characters when someone has something important to say (a "speech" such as Casey's on not being a preacher, or Muley's on being "touched," or Ma's on Tom's not becoming mean) makes the dialogue denser than it might otherwise be if lightened by some random motion. Instead, such speeches are met with stillness, are photographed as tableaux removing the characters from a peopled and physically present environment into the realm of archetype and iconography. The settings of the Joad farm, of Uncle John's farm, of the cabin in the pickers' camp, in the tents of Hooverville, in the neat exteriors of the government camp—not one of them has the uncontrolled and extraneous quality of realistic and immediate art or document. Not a chicken stirs, and every object seems to exist for dramatic and atmospheric rather than natural purpose. As a result the social and political and economic problems which the characters face seem far more dramatic than real, far more aesthetically and narratively functional than immediately pressing.

The way in which the film is edited further stresses the archetypal and iconic aspects of the Joads by creating stylized temporal relationships between shots. The Joads exist in montage time, for example—shots linked together rhythmically or superimposed so as to convey the passage of time without really being specific. As well, the Joads exist in what might be called "tableau time"—that is, they are seen in set pieces, in scenes which are not dynamically connected or visually continuous to others. Warren French has derogatorily commented about the perfunctory nature of the editing, criticizing not only the narrative puzzles it presents with the disappearance of Noah Joad or Rosasharn's baby, but also with the use of "sharp breaks between scenes" and the lack of

associational editing, the “switch from one scene to another by cutting from an object in one scene to a similar object in another.” He also notes that Ford “apparently preferred to break the picture into a series of discrete episodes by the use of sharply delineated fadeouts and fadeins.” These editorial devices add to the film the “compensating universality” French sees as a substitute for the bite and timeliness of Steinbeck’s novel. The lack of simultaneity through cross-cutting, the abstractness of the montages, the measured and highly theatrical fades, and even the one flashback sequence in which Muley “tells” what happened to the land—all are stylistic choices which serve to abstract the Joads.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas the average viewer might not notice the abstracting qualities of the film’s composition and editing, it is nearly impossible not to notice that the film is dark. French points out that “almost exactly half the action takes place at night or under dimly lit conditions,”<sup>21</sup> a proportion which might allow one to also argue that almost exactly half the film takes place during the day or in brightly lit conditions. The dramatic weight of the film, however, falls on the dark side, for if one compares those scenes which occur in varying degrees of darkness with those which take place in relatively bright light it becomes obvious that the former are more important to the narrative and more intense in their emotional content than the latter. Casey and Tom’s reunion is marked by the dimness of approaching dusk. The long and highly dramatic scene in the deserted Joad cabin is shot in candlelight as Casey and Tom are joined by Muley who relates in the dark present and in the punctuating brightness of a flashback what has occurred to the farmers and their land. Ma Joad’s brief but powerful review of her life’s souvenirs occurs in the dimness of the stripped house. The Joads’ first stay in a campground with other migrants and their encounter with the man who tells them about the false promise of the handbills is at night. The Joads’ desert crossing in which Granma dies is also dark. And nearly the entire 22 minutes of the Joads’ sojourn at the Keene Ranch is played in the dusky interior of the filthy cabin or at night—as is the important dramatic sequence under the bridge in which both Casey and Tom and their companion strikebreakers fight the Keene guards, a fight which leaves Casey dead and Tom hurt and guilty of murder. Finally, even the climactic scene in the Wheat Patch camp occurs at night; despite the celebratory nature of the Saturday night dance and its triumphant drama in which the migrants form a cohesive and persuasive group to oust their enemies, the sequence is dark—as is the related scene in which Tom says goodbye to Ma and delivers his “I’ll be ever’where” speech before

<sup>20</sup> French, 35, 33, 38.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

disappearing into the blackness. The drama and narrative impetus in the daylight scenes are anecdotal compared to the force of the night scenes. And, again, it is only in Hooverville that Ford provides a marked exception.

The chiaroscuro lighting of a major portion of the film does more than merely supply atmosphere and support the thematic darkness of the Joads' odyssey. It also functions as a technique which is abstracting, which again brings a sense of closure to the screen image by obscuring the connection between various objects in the frame and turning the viewer's attention inward toward the Joads. The shadows spatially blot out the rest of the world much of the time and are, as well, oppressive and confining. Consider, for example, the sequence in the Joads' abandoned farmhouse near the beginning of the film. Composed quite statically and shot in darkness punctuated only by candlelight and flashlight, the images curl into themselves rather than extend outwards to the corners of the frame and to a consciousness of a physical world in motion beyond its confines. The camera's emphasis is on faces, faces which become not quite real in the semi-darkness, faces which are isolated in cinematographer Gregg Toland's "web of shadows and night" visually reinforcing, for instance, "Muley's belief that he is just 'an ol' graveyard ghos'."<sup>22</sup>

Either through the actual proximity of close-ups or the masking effect of darkness in the medium shots, the abundance of expressionistic cinematography which emphasizes the pale faces and glistening eyes of the characters (see Figure 3) is not really counterbalanced to any great degree by an equivalent insistence on realistic and clearly-defined imagery. Indeed, the personal intensity and attention of the camera on the faces of the Joads is never matched in kind by equally intense or emphatic shots of the people they meet or the land they supposedly revere—with one exception. Muley's flashback sequence is as stylized and intense and visually compressed as any in the film. The land as a force is *visually* acknowledged in such a manner that it is made as transcendent and universal as the Joads. In one stylized and uncharacteristic high angle shot, Muley squats on his land, alone and in dark contrast to the barren lightness of the earth around him. And in another, the final shot of the sequence, the camera moves from Muley and his family to isolate their shadows upon the ground marked with the destructive tracks of the caterpillar tractor. The confluence in the frame of the men's shadows, the trail of destruction, and the land itself is as expressive and compressed as Charles Maland suggests in his analysis of the sequence.<sup>23</sup> But the expres-

<sup>22</sup> Stowell, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Maland, 156–59.



Figure 3. This production still demonstrates the effect of chiaroscuro lighting used throughout John Ford's rendering of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

sive weight and metaphorical force of the flashback's visual articulation is diluted by its early and singular placement in the film. The same is true of the visual style and brighter illumination in the sequence in Hooverville. It is only in Hooverville that Ford connects the Joads visually with a context which unites them with other people. The tent city is teeming with spontaneous humanity. It is more concretely physical in its presence than any other location in the film—a world of dirt and dust and texture which Ford let Toland photograph in daylight. The images of Hooverville are less moody, less artfully shadowed and expressionistic than elsewhere in the film; the viewer is allowed to see and thereby experience the texture of material things, the gray and grainy images effectively evoking the feel of grit and dust. Because there is more light, the composition seems freer and the boundaries of the frame seem larger and more potentially extendable; our attention is not directed inward to the center of the frame as it is through a great deal of the rest of the film. Because of the relatively bright illumination, because there is more random movement of more characters who are visually seen in contiguity with the Joads, and because there is a selection of more spontaneous visual detail (it is hard to control the flapping of clothes drying on a line), the episode in Hooverville is singular in its attempt at documentary realism. Although it is memorable, it is also jolting in its contrast to the film's predominant visual style, a style acknowledged by both Ford and Toland for its "blackness."<sup>24</sup> That blackness is less grim than abstracting, less harsh than protective; the Joads and the viewer are removed from a visually urgent and engaging context and the result is a predominant imagery which seems highly aestheticized, staged, and framed.

The lighting in *The Grapes of Wrath* and its abstracting effects derive from the *chiaroscuro* practiced by the German Expressionists in their nightmare paintings and films and, indeed, practiced by Ford himself in two highly expressionist and stylized works which rank among his personal favorites—*The Informer* (1935) and *The Fugitive* (1947). The visual ambience created by the lighting in *The Grapes of Wrath* evokes the vague outlines of night and dream rather than the harsh specificity of daylight and Depression America. In a brief but cogent discussion of the film's lighting, French concludes that through the lighting "Ford converted what could have been a nerve-racking social protest . . . into an artful product that resolves all transient violence in a serene meditation."<sup>25</sup>

That serene meditation is, of course, on the Joads' "coherence as a family . . . not as a class,"<sup>26</sup> and the film's appeal and emotional force derive from the simplicity and directness of Ford's focus. Indeed, Maland

<sup>24</sup> John Ford speaks of this in Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968), 78.

<sup>25</sup> French, 34–35.

<sup>26</sup> Sarris, *The John Ford Movie Mystery*, 96.

points out the film's ability to satisfy "the intense desire of many Americans to be involved, through their sentiments at least, in the human problems caused by the depression."<sup>27</sup> But one might amend Maland's observation by suggesting that Ford's film was so satisfying precisely *because* it involved the contemporaneous viewer primarily on the level of sentiment, because its transcendent vision of the Joads as an archetypal family freed the viewer from the responsibility for specific social action. It is not only the lighting (as French suggests) but the whole visual style of the film which lifts the Joads from specificity and immediacy, which elevates them far from spatial and temporal urgency. Indeed, the film is most powerful in its use of what might be identified from today's perspective as the visual shorthand of a Depression iconography. Through its images it evokes the softened and popularized form of the Depression—its outline—without assaulting the viewer with the harsh demands of actual content.

Although he sometimes confuses the content of the imagery with its softened treatment, George Bluestone senses the iconic visual quality of *The Grapes of Wrath*:

Behind the director's controlling hand is the documentary eye of a Pare Lorentz or a Robert Flaherty, of the vision in those stills produced by the Resettlement Administration in its volume, *Land of the Free . . .*, or in Walker Evans' shots for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men . . .* Gregg Toland's photography is acutely conscious of the pictorial values of land and sky, finding equivalents for those haunting images of erosion which were popularized for the New Deal's reclamation program and reflected in Steinbeck's prose.<sup>28</sup>

While Bluestone seems off the mark in his efforts to prove how the film and novel share a common tone or evoke similar land imagery, he is to the point in noting the film's visual resemblance to the documentary poetry of both Robert Flaherty and Pare Lorentz. Both of these filmmakers dealt in a kind of generalized imagery which has given their work universal qualities. Man's struggles against the landscape of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* and *Man of Aran* are as primal and timeless as they are physically concretized in specific geography, and the editing techniques of Lorentz combined with his use of abstracting close-ups of water and land and objects give to both *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River* a temporal and spatial vagueness which is powerful and iconic. Indeed, despite Lorentz' criticisms of the absence of land imagery in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ford's visual abstraction of the Joads parallels in style and effect that documentary filmmaker's timeless and aspatial treatment of the ecological problems of the Middle West. On the other hand, Bluestone displays a visual insensitivity to style when he equates Ford's film and the

<sup>27</sup> Maland, 161.

<sup>28</sup> Bluestone, 161.

photography of Walker Evans. The hard-edged clarity, sharp focus, and unsentimental asceticism of Evans' work is removed in both sensibility and style from Flaherty, Lorentz, and John Ford. *The Grapes of Wrath* only superficially resembles the always specific and unsparing definition in either Evans' or Dorothea Lange's Depression photography; if there is a likeness it is in content rather than style. A visual counterpart to the general effect of the film's imagery can be more readily found in the work of a fine artist who tempered the realistic subject matter of his content with a softening of focus, a rounding off of hard edges and sharp contrasts; *The Grapes of Wrath* looks more like the blunted vision of Edward Hopper than the acutely-detailed vision of the Depression's most acclaimed photographers.

Indeed, the film derives much of its emotional and aesthetic power from its generalized quality, its use of what Bluestone calls "popularized" images which are neither realistic nor documentary as Bluestone's aligning them with documentary filmmakers and photographers would suggest. They serve mythology and metaphor rather than social realism, and while they may often tug at the heartstrings with their sentimental appeal, they rarely incite the viewer to serious thought; they are equivalent not to the harsh prose of Steinbeck's work or the clarity and asceticism of Evans' photographic style, but rather to the emotional appeal of poster art. Thus, much as Ford in his Westerns has used the temporally and spatially circumscribed and compressed world of object and landscape to evoke a mythology which creates its own contained time and space and which owes little to actual history, he has also used the temporally and spatially circumscribed iconography of the Depression to create softened and blunted images which evoke the Depression but which continually contain it in the realm of art. The film abounds with material objects and landscapes which simultaneously concretize and yet abstract the political, economic, and social realities of Steinbeck's chapters about the Joads into poetic and emotional shorthand: the slouched and soiled hats, the caps, the floral print dresses and the haphazardly buttoned sweaters which have come to clothe our emotional associations with the Depression; the static posturing of family groups, stiffly posing for the future with a fascinating self-consciousness which keeps them rigidly facing the camera while they secretly avert their eyes from it; old trucks and jalopies whose geometry is top-heavy as an inverted pyramid—falling apart, choking, and bursting at the seams with material goods gathered together with old clothesline, familiar mattresses, and old kitchen chairs; gas stations and gas pumps somehow evocative of both ordered corporate power in a technological society and the migratory movement of an agricultural people no longer in harmony with the land; industrial machinery glorified by the power conferred by the closeup and low angle, biting into the earth like prehistoric carnivores. The visual imagery of Ford's film uses all this emotional



Figure 4. Ford's tableau compositions draw from Depression iconography.

iconography which has come to us generalized out of specific and harsher pieces of Depression art and life (see Figure 4).

In the final analysis, the film projects the images of a ritualized world, a world in which change is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, survival and endurance and the continuation of traditional values are apotheosized by the Joads and their odyssey through "a timeless world that cages men, while allowing them the freedom of movement to dignify and humanize their lives through action and comedy."<sup>29</sup> This is certainly not the world of John Steinbeck. Rather, the film is the result of the legitimate aesthetic choices made by a director with a reputation at least equal to the novelist's whose work he has translated. By choices, Ford's film is powerful in its realization of "Family." His style is not miscalculated or unconsidered. And it is not merely derived from the changes made in the literary elements of the film. The static compositions and camera placement, the artificiality of the studio set, the non-dynamic editing, and the chiaroscuro lighting and its resultant softening of harsh contrasts and hard edges, coupled with Ford's neglect of a concrete political and social context and his omission of those sequences which would make the family less attractive than it is—all serve his emotional exploration of the endur-

<sup>29</sup> Stowell, 169.

ing dignity and value of American family life. Rather than choosing to follow Steinbeck's alternation of the abstract with the concrete (something which film is quite able to do despite its constant dependence on material reality), Ford has chosen to make a film equivalent in tone with the intercalary chapters of Steinbeck's novel. That tone, however, is applied to the stuff of Steinbeck's more concretely realized chapters: the Joads. If Ford's film is so enclosed, so reluctant to include the visual feel and evocation of humanity found in Walker Evans' or Dorothea Lange's Depression photographs so alive with sweat and dirt and particularity, it is consistent with Ford's lack of interest in the specificity of history and politics and social problems. It is no accident that the film's visual style neglects real estate and agriculture for people. We never see the Joads work the land they speak of. At the Keene ranch, when the men and children go off to pick fruit the images stay behind with Ma and Rosasharn. The only work we see Tom do that has any connection with earth and dirt is laying pipeline. And there isn't a single peach in the film.

Asked by Peter Bogdanovich what attracted him to the novel, Ford answered: "The whole thing appealed to me—being about simple people—and the story was similar to the famine in Ireland, when they threw the people off the land and left them wandering on the roads to starve. That may have had something to do with it—part of my Irish tradition—but I liked the idea of this family going out and trying to find their way in the world."<sup>30</sup> The family as the basic unit of community is crucial to Ford's work. Thus, as Warren French notes, the director aims at "abstracting the Joads from any particular context and treating them as ageless figures of dispossessed wanderers."<sup>31</sup> The film image hardly leaves the Joads for more than a few moments. Tom's final speech to Ma about his metaphorical omniscience everywhere articulates his and his family's own position within the context of the film. And Ma's final affirmation ("We'll go on forever, Pa. We're the people.") is less an assertion of social consciousness than of the indomitability of the family. With respect for what it achieves in its own right as well as for its artistic coherence and its place in a larger body of acknowledged work, Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* clearly and *visually* evidences his main interest and main thematic emphasis on the Joads as a family unit—and not as Steinbeck emphasizes them in the novel as a family of Man. Although the same conclusions about the film can be arrived at through careful consideration of the film's literary elements and its place in the culture of a specific period, those conclusions deserve the support of an equally careful visual analysis.

<sup>30</sup> John Ford in Bogdanovich, 76.

<sup>31</sup> French, 38.