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Apocalypse and Eschatology in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)

Abstract

John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) visualizes conventions of the apocalypse genre to represent not simply a particular historical setting, the Great Depression, but also a vision of history to be interpreted in terms of eschatology. Expressionistic photography transforms the characters' experiences into enigmatic visions that invite and guide interpretation. A comparison of montage sequences in Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936), a Farm Security Administration documentary, clarifies how Ford's narrative film aligns spectators within and outside the *mise-en-scène*.

Keywords

apocalypse, apocalyptic, convention, documentary, Dust Bowl, eschatology, expressionism, Farm Security Administration, genre, Great Depression, history, hope, interpretation, John Ford, montage, next age, Pare Lorentz, photography, vision.

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Author Notes

Dr. Nancy Wright is Professor in the Department of English at the University of Victoria, Canada. Her interdisciplinary research crosses the boundaries of legal history, theology, film and literature. Her publications on film have previously appeared in *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, *MELUS*, and *Screening the Past*.

Critical responses to John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, particularly its visual style and genre, have changed since the film's initial reception in 1940. As Andrew Sarris notes, when first released the film was praised for its realistic photography and its historical topicality.¹ Now, almost eighty years after its first release, critics discuss its representation of the family as a typical theme of Ford's films,² appreciate its complex expressionistic photography,³ and analyze its subtle modulation of the genres of documentary and western.⁴ John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* also merits analysis as an "apocalyptic film"⁵ that visualizes conventions of the apocalypse genre in order to represent not simply a particular historical period and setting but, in addition, a vision of history to be interpreted in terms of eschatology. Ancient and modern apocalypses, Eugene Weber explains, are less concerned with accurately recording present history than with interpreting the present in relation to eschatology, that is, "the last things:" death, judgment, resurrection, reward and punishment, the closing of the present age and the beginning of the next. Ancient and modern apocalypses aim "to interpret their times, to console and guide, to suggest the meaning of the present and the future. Typically, they relate fear to hope."⁶ By comparing the film's representation of history to that of a contemporary documentary, Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), I clarify how *The Grapes of Wrath* adapts conventions of the apocalypse genre as defined by scholars of religion as well as film criticism. Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* prompts spectators within and outside the film's *mise-en-scène* to engage in eschatological interpretation. Expressionistic photography transforms the Joads' experiences and journey, set during the historical period of the Great Depression, into an enigmatic vision that requires interpretation. The shifts between realistic and

expressionistic photography throughout the narrative guide spectators to engage in eschatological interpretation.

Over the past decade, criticism has developed a nuanced appreciation of how American narrative films represent apocalypticism that Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding characterize as “not just a set of beliefs but a network of discourses and practices in social and political use and circulation”⁷ in America. Stewart and Harding’s review of interdisciplinary scholarship identifies how apocalypticism and millennialism inform and “structure American life across a wide range of registers” in politics, religion and media, including film.⁸ Marcus O’Donnell conceptualizes apocalyptic films not as a binary dichotomy of sacred and secular but rather as a continuum of complex representations of apocalypticism in American film.⁹ Film scholars not only classify and differentiate apocalyptic films but also identify points of convergence in films with and without overt references to religion. For example, Conrad E. Ostwalt analyzes American science fiction films that use a “traditional religious” conceptualization of the apocalypse as the “end-of-times” meaningfully to represent “current secular concerns,” such as environmental catastrophes and hope for their resolution.¹⁰ Justin Heinzekehr evaluates how an apocalypse “can be framed in a secular way,” that is, “without recourse to any divinely ordained destruction”¹¹ while also alluding to eschatology to interpret the concepts of death, judgment, resurrection, reward and punishment. Similarly, Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* guides spectators to engage in eschatological interpretation by creating visual analogies to conventions of the apocalypse genre identified by scholars of religion, including John J. Collins,¹² David Hellholm,¹³ Mitchell G. Reddish,¹⁴ John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler.¹⁵ Among the conventions of the apocalypse genre, these scholars include a narrative framework that recounts a revelation, represented either as a symbolic vision or a journey that an

“otherworldly” mediator interprets in terms of eschatology. The narrative, set at a particular historical moment, articulates a consolation for a suffering minority for whom a hopeful future or “next age” is prophesied after the end of the present catastrophic conflict between forces of good and evil.

Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* adapts and visualizes conventions of the apocalypse genre in order to enable spectators to interpret the review of history represented by characters’ journeys. Ford’s film begins and ends with images of a journey. The film begins with a long shot of Tom Joad walking towards an intersection of a road leading towards his family home. Tom, who is returning home after serving a prison sentence for manslaughter, encounters John Casy, a former preacher, and a sharecropper, Muley Graves. After finding the Joads who have been evicted from their home, Tom and Casy begin a journey with them along US Route 66 from Oklahoma to California, staying at three camps for transients and migrant workers. They briefly reside at the Hooverville camp, a jail-like peach farm at the Keene Ranch, and finally the Wheat Patch camp, a New Deal cooperative typical of the housing projects sponsored by the Roosevelt government’s Farm Security Administration from 1935 to 1939. None of the camps provides a secure or permanent resolution to their predicament. The journey of the Joads, who at the film’s conclusion leave the security of a New Deal resettlement cooperative to continue traveling, represents the temporal postponement of the next age. Their journey literally represents the historical exodus of the Okies, the pejorative name given to sharecroppers and other residents of the Great Plains evicted from their homes during the drought known as the Dust Bowl.¹⁶ The narrative and montage sequences representing the journey of the Joad family with Casy also present a vision of history that requires interpretation.

Throughout their journey, characters in Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* struggle to understand their immediate experiences of poverty, dispossession and social dislocation as they wait for the next age to begin. The journey ends differently for two groups of characters: Tom Joad departs alone to gain understanding of his people's suffering, while Ma Joad continues with other family members whom she exhorts to abide. Ma Joad's speech, which concludes the film, does not advocate social and political activism but instead her belief in judgment and reward implied by the continued existence of "the people," the poor who will live, rather than the rich who will die out.¹⁷ Ma Joad's fearless acceptance of the need to abide until the next age echoes eschatological interpretations of history in apocalyptic sermons and tracts written during the Great Depression from 1932 to 1939. Jonathan Ebel identifies a hopeful eschatological interpretation of a "Gospel of Cosmic Catastrophe" articulated by migrant communities in California during the Dust Bowl.¹⁸ Such an eschatological perspective, as Brad Lookingbill suggests, provided "a paradoxical assurance" that the dust storms were guided by "the invisible hand of Providence."¹⁹ Many of the prophecies written and published as responses to New Deal policies during the 1930s expressed the premillenarian belief that political activism had no purpose; the coming of the next age would be brought about by divine not human intervention. "Prophecy writers," according to Paul Boyer, "viewed efforts to resolve the economic crisis much as they viewed the crisis itself: as evidence of the vanity of all secular human endeavor, and of the accuracy of end of time prophecies."²⁰ While some prophecy writers during the 1930s were hostile to political programs and union efforts on behalf of "the suffering," others described them as misguided. For example, in a sermon published in 1932, Norman Coen Beskin prophesied: "What can we do to arrest the downward current? Nothing! It is too late to patch up this old world ... Our objective is to get men ready for the next age."²¹ Similarly, Anna Reiff, the editor of the

Latter Rain Evangel journal, wrote, “there is no human remedy for present conditions.”²² Ma’s speech concluding the film expresses similar ideas; she assumes that the present age in which her family struggles will end in the future without human intervention. Her concluding speech is a consolation, a convention of apocalypses that exhort those enduring suffering to remain hopeful with the comforting knowledge of the future end of the present age and their reward with the coming of the next.

Eschatology in *The Grapes of Wrath* becomes apparent when comparing its photography and narrative to those of the documentary *The Plow That Broke the Plains* that represents the experiences of sharecroppers during the Great Depression. The Farm Security Administration (which from 1932 to 1935 had been named the Resettlement Administration) was a federal office that dealt with the resettlement of farmers and sharecroppers dislocated from their farms by the Dust Bowl. The Farm Security Administration’s “function was simultaneously ideological and economic, in that it provided for the reorganization of small agriculture, transferring entire families to more productive zones, modifying cultivation and culture in the process.”²³ In order to explain its policies and projects (represented in *The Grapes of Wrath* by the Wheat Patch camp, a government cooperative), the Farm Security Administration commissioned and produced a series of documentaries as well as better-known photojournalism by Dorothea Lange and others.²⁴ Documentaries made by the Farm Security Administration included *The New Frontier* (McClure, 1934), *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (Lorentz, 1936), *The River* (Lorentz, 1937) and *Power and the Land* (Ivens, 1940). The Farm Security Administration documentaries and Ford’s film *The Grapes of Wrath* both review and interpret history for spectators.

The documentaries engage in the review and interpretation of history in order to assure spectators that economic problems of the Great Depression were about to end – *now* – in the present. Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, in contrast, reviews the same history but interprets it within the framework of eschatology that directs hope towards the future when suffering will end. Comparison of two montage sequences, one from Ford's film *The Grapes of Wrath* and the other from a New Deal documentary, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* directed by Pare Lorentz, illustrates their different interpretations of history. Both films use montage, a device associated with Soviet cinema and the writings of Sergei Eisenstein, who argued that montage generated ideas in the minds of spectators as a result of a collision of images. In a montage sequence, images are edited so that they do not fit together smoothly and as a result provoke interpretation of the discontinuous visual images. In Ford's film, an intellectual montage is framed by two flashback sequences in which Muley narrates recent history to Tom Joad and Casy. This montage in *The Grapes of Wrath* guides spectators to interpret the film's narrative, characters and themes in terms of eschatology. I will discuss the montages first and then return to the flashback sequences set on the property that the Joads farmed.

Most discussions of the photography of *The Grapes of Wrath* analyze the montage sequence of caterpillar tractors or “cats” that Muley explains destroyed the sharecroppers' homes. Janey Place directs attention in the montage to the “extreme low camera angles, and dynamic movement”²⁵ of the sequence of images, which are similar to Soviet montage techniques. In the montage, high key, flat, natural light captures fantastic images of the caterpillar tracks that fill the screen, obstructing both sky and earth. There is no voice over narration or music during the montage that includes only images and realistic sounds of caterpillar tractors crossing the frame directly towards spectators and

moving across the frame on diagonals. A series of dissolves overlay images of the caterpillar tractors with a close up of a caterpillar track moving towards, and seemingly over, spectators. This montage in *The Grapes of Wrath* associates a series of ideas with the “cats” – ideas of vehicles that destroy people who are powerless, and ideas of the catastrophic scale of irresistible, impersonal forces that overwhelm, threaten and oppress. The screenplay explains ideas to be generated by the montage: “The scene dissolves to a MONTAGE OF TRACTORS: tractors looming overhillocks, flattening fences, through gullies, their drivers looking like robots, with goggles, dust mask over mouth and nose – one after another, crossing and recrossing as if to convey the impression that this was an invasion of machine men from some other world.”²⁶ The section of the montage in which the entire screen is filled with a caterpillar track evokes for spectators conflict on a cosmic scale in which humans are overwhelmed by an omnipotent and malevolent force. The realistic sound of the machines, like the sound of the “dusters” in an earlier sequence near the Joads’ cabin, communicates the meaning and affect of the vision experienced by the characters and spectators. The suspension of dialogue and music during the montage focuses spectators upon the realistic sound of the machines just as the absence of dialogue and music as Tom and Casy approach the Joad farm directs attention to the windstorm. The sound of the “cats,” like the windstorm, reveals to spectators the overwhelming scale and threat of the economic and natural forces – agricultural mechanization and drought – against which the tenant farmers found themselves in conflict.

The tractor montage in Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* can be explicated by comparison with another representing similar subject matter, the diaspora of tenant farmers and sharecroppers during the Dust Bowl, in the 1936 documentary *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. Vivian C. Sobchak notes that Lorentz creates “generalized imagery” that gives his documentaries “universal qualities.”²⁷ She

explains, “the editing techniques of Lorentz combined with his use of abstracting close-ups of water and land and objects give to ... *The Plow That Broke the Plains* ... a temporal and spatial vagueness which is powerful and iconic.”²⁸ Lorentz uses montage not simply to document the ecological conditions affecting agriculture and New Deal programs for their resolution but also to evoke ideas stated more explicitly by the voice over narration in the documentary. In *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, intellectual montage connects historical footage of World War I tanks on the battlefield to increasing mechanization of agriculture that caused erosion of the Great Plains and culminated in the Dust Bowl. The conjunction of images of tanks on the battle front and tractors on the home front represents economic cause and effect; the war increased demand for food production that initially brought about increased mechanization and prosperity for farmers (represented by the tractors themselves) but ultimately caused environmental degradation that immobilised tractors and uprooted farmers, particularly tenant farmers and sharecroppers from the Great Plains.²⁹ The documentary’s voice over narration of key phrases that match the repetition of visual images in the montage explicitly explains the cause and effect of the sequence of historical events. Cuts move repeatedly between sequences of tanks on the battlefield and tractors ploughing wheat fields punctuated by shots of printing presses and handbills promoting agricultural production. The voice over narration urges increased production with the slogans: “wheat will win the war,” “plant wheat,” and “wheat at any price.”³⁰ The tractors on farm fields in the montage have been photographed with lance or canon-like appendages that connect the militaristic and agricultural themes. A subsequent montage juxtaposes images of fliers advertising new farm ventures, ticker tape machines indicating share prices, a jazz performance, handbills about the depression and dissolves of wheat grain. These

images are edited together as a rapid sequence of cuts in a rhythmic montage that associates a variety of ideas with the causes of the depression of the agricultural industry.

The conclusion of the documentary shows farm families working on new government sponsored model farms. Environmental and economic disaster, the ending explains, have *now* found a means of resolution in the present through New Deal policies. The repeated sequences of cars in a montage representing the resettlement of farm families on New Deal model farms focus spectators' attention and explicitly encourage interpretation of the images as evidence that documents the termination of poverty in the present because of government housing projects. The voice over narration explains the Resettlement Administration has provided homes and benefits to thousands of families. Images of suffering represented in the review of history conclude, the voice over narration and images explain, *now* in the present; human agency exercised through political policy has resolved economic and social problems. The documentary, in the montage and concluding sequence, guides spectators with discontinuous images that construct an argument about the difference between the recent past and the present when suffering ends. The review of history in the documentary, unlike an apocalypse, presents a teleological line of argument concluding in the present.

In contrast, the montage and flashback sequences in *The Grapes of Wrath* review recent history not to conclude a teleological argument but instead to represent and problematize the task of interpreting history. Soon after the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*, when Tom and Casy first reach the Joads' abandoned cabin, they meet Muley, a sharecropper who narrates to them a history of the events that forced his family and other sharecroppers from their land. The two flashbacks create a narrative frame for the tractor montage that represents the perspective of its narrator whose

words, along with the flashbacks and montage, comprise an enigmatic vision of history like those in apocalypses. In the two flashback sequences, Muley is first served with his eviction papers and subsequently watches as a caterpillar tractor destroys his family's cabin. The flashback sequences set on Muley's farmland, Janey Place explains, are "lighted in high key, flat, natural light,"³¹ which differs starkly from the high contrast photography of blackness and shadow within the Joads' cabin. Lighting is key to what Maland describes as the "expressiveness of the compression" of the flashback sequences.³² In the first flashback, Sobchack explains, "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."³³ The concluding image of him as a dark, diminished and faceless figure crouching on the ground transforms Muley into an anonymous and generalized symbol of a suffering people rather than an individual. The second flashback also concludes with abstracting symbols of the family's displacement when "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 ... expressive and compressed."³⁴ The repeated transitions in lighting in the flashback sequences of the land and people photographed in high key, natural light to concluding images of Muley's and his family's dark, black shadows require interpretation that Muley provides to Tom and Casy. Like a mediating character in an apocalypse, Muley acts as an interpreter of this vision of overwhelming forces – both natural and economic.

The juxtaposition of realistic and abstract images created by the transitions from the flashbacks and montage sequences focuses spectators on the problem of interpretation. At the

conclusion of the first flashback, the camera pans back from a close up of Muley, whose family stands behind him, to an extreme high angle shot of Muley and the black shadow that he casts on his land. A similar progression of images – from high key, flat, natural light to dark, abstract shapes – also occurs in the second flashback; after the Davis boy drives the tractor over their cabin, the camera “pans from a medium long shot of the family down to their shadows.”³⁵ The juxtaposition of the flashbacks’ realistic representation of Muley and his son confronting first, the bank’s employee and, then, the Davis boy who drives the caterpillar tractor, with the montage of “the cats” provides a means to interpret Muley’s individual experience in two ways: first, it is a historical example of how communities of sharecroppers were legally and physically dispossessed of their homes and farm land; and second, Muley’s experience is raised in scale from a regional socio-economic conflict involving individual farmers against institutions – the banks and the law – to a catastrophe in which the farmers’ antagonists have the power of extraordinary forces – fantastic “cats,” winds and dust. Tag Gallagher argues the sequence of shots in the flashbacks alienates spectators from individuals, like the Davis boy who, in the second flashback, drives the “cat” over Muley’s cabin and the bank employee seated in a luxury car, in the first flashback; they are agents of oppression who rationalize and deny their responsibility for the sharecropper’s eviction.³⁶ The bank employee who serves the eviction notice dismissively tells Muley, “They told me to tell you, you got to get off, and that’s what I’m telling you,” after explaining the economic rationale of the bank: “Fact of the matter, Muley, after what them dusters done to the land, the tenant system don’t work no more. It don’t even break even, much less show a profit. One man and a tractor can handle twelve or fourteen of these places. You just pay him a wage and take all the crop.” The dialogue between Muley and the man presenting him with eviction papers distances the eviction of the sharecroppers from human

agency; sitting in his luxury car, the employee insists that he, personally, is not to blame, neither is the land's "owner," which is the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company, which like the bank in Tulsa is a corporation acting on instructions from the "East." To Muley and other sharecroppers, the corporations are an impersonal but seemingly omnipotent, evil force that determines their lives. Muley, whose suffering and isolation have made him seem nothing but "an ol' graveyard ghost," acts like an "otherworldly" figure who, in an apocalypse, interprets the vision of his communities' oppression for Tom and Casy. In Muley's vision of history, the "dusters" and machines are symbols representing the malevolent natural and economic forces that the sharecroppers cannot resist or end in the present age.

The position of the flashbacks and montage sequence near the beginning of the film emphasizes the problem of interpretation. Sobchack criticizes the placement of this sequence and that at the Hooverville camp because they compress the sharecroppers' dispossession and the facts of the Dust Bowl into a brief, early section of the film.³⁷ The placement of these sequences at the beginning of the film, I argue, establishes iconography representing conventions of the apocalypse genre, specifically visions, visionary experience and eschatological interpretation that guide the film's spectators. The alignment of the vision and experience of spectators within and outside the *mise-en-scène* is made explicit in the sequence representing the Joads' car entering the Hooverville camp. In this moving camera sequence, the camera is positioned to capture what the Joads see from their car – emaciated people gazing directly back and listlessly walking from different angles in front of the car among shacks and tents scattered across the dry soil of the campground. The subjective point of view ensures that spectators see people and objects from the point of view of the Joads, who do not identify with the people they see. The sequence also emphasizes the Joads' and spectators'

difficulty comprehending what they see. Leslie Gossage explains that as the Hooverville sequence continues the photography works to triangulate the gazes of the Joads, the residents of the camp, and spectators outside the *mise-en-scène*. Spectators see “a series of alternating shots of the observing Joads in the truck cab and of the people they are looking at,”³⁸ when the Joads stop their car. Gossage describes the “reciprocity / mutuality of looking”³⁹ emphasized by the following sequence of six alternating shots of the Joads and other camp residents that concludes with a reflection in the car’s windshield of a woman gazing at the Joads. The gaze of the characters at this point distances the Joads from other residents of the camp; the Joads literally do not see themselves in this vision of hopeless, suffering people. Throughout the introductory sequences at the Hooverville camp, the emphasis on what characters see is presented in high key, flat, natural light that recalls the realistic style as well as the subject matter of Farm Security Administration documentary photography of migrants. Despite the clarity and realism of this style of photography, the Joads struggle to comprehend and interpret what they literally see on their way to California because of their naïve expectation that their journey will take them to “the land of milk and honey.”

Throughout much of the film, the expressionistic style of photography and lighting created by Gregg Toland, the director of photography, differs from the style of the Hooverville sequence as well as the realistic location shots along Route 66, photographed by the second unit directed by Otto Brower. Expressionistic cinema, associated with German cinema from 1919 to 1933, used unusual forms of visual representation, particularly distorted perspectives, sharp camera angles and harsh contrast, to transform an alienating environment into a personal vision. Drawing upon expressionist techniques of lighting and photography, Toland makes the interior of the Joads’ abandoned farmhouse into a fantastic, dark, shadowy setting for Muley to narrate his vision of history.

Sobchack notes, “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).”⁴⁰ Expressionistic photography emphasizes the apocalyptic conventions of visions and eschatological interpretation in many scenes photographed to be “black,” such as the scene in the Joads’ family home. Using high contrast film, Toland shot this scene in which the only visible source of light is a candle held by the actor Henry Fonda, who plays Tom. Toland worked only with his own crew and equipment on films, such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, to create the distinctive dark photography in many sequences.⁴¹ In the Joad cabin, Tom, Muley (John Qualen) and Casy (John Carradine) are lit from below and their bodies and faces are absorbed into the black interior of the cabin. Gallagher explains, in this and other sequences set on the Joads’ property, “exteriors are carefully photographed to look like soundstages, the characters are lit like statues. People and objects are shorn of autonomy, emotions are *too* externalized (expressionistically).”⁴² The blackness of the original print of the film made the world within it seem, in Gallagher’s words, “unreal” and “an abstraction from reality. Everything is submerged within a heavy shadowed mood, a dreamlike world.”⁴³ Gallagher’s description of the appearance of the setting as a “dreamlike world” (created by Toland’s lighting and photography) directs attention to the fact that Muley’s words – and the images representing them to spectators in the flashbacks and tractor montage – seem strange and enigmatic like symbols in the visions narrated in apocalypses. Toland’s photography transforms Muley into a strangely unfamiliar and seemingly “unreal,” otherworldly figure. John Qualen, who plays Muley, had been cast in a similar role as a gaunt dispossessed farmer in King Vidor’s film *Our Daily Bread* (1934).⁴⁴ The use of lighting to

represent harsh daylight that emphasized the realism of Qualen's costume and mannerisms in *Our Daily Bread* is the opposite of the expressionist use of *chiaroscuro* effects in the scene set within the Joads' abandoned cabin but is similar to the flashback sequences in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The shadows cast across the characters' faces and surrounding them in the Joads' cabin make them visually recede and literally problematize spectators' visual experience thereby representing the problems of perception and interpretation that they share.

Characters' difficulty understanding visions and visual experience, a convention of the apocalypse genre, is emphasized by the presence of Tom and Casy, who are figures of the spectator within the *mise-en-scène*. Tom and Casy voice possible responses that spectators may have to Muley's vision of history. Tom will raise doubts about the historical events that Muley describes by saying, "Just – it don't seem possible – just gettin' thrown off like that." The affect of the montage of the tractors, however, prevents spectators from doubting Muley's words. The characters' dialogue before Muley's review of history, represented in the two flashbacks and the montage, literally refers to the experiences he shares with other sharecroppers because of the Dust Bowl. Muley initially explains that the Joads like "Ever'body got to get off. Ever'body leavin', goin' to California. My folks, your folks, ever'body's folks." Muley's statements punctuate the review of history and clarify the meaning of the scenes presenting the two primary causes of the sharecroppers' displacement. First, "the dusters Blowin' like this, year after year – blowin' the land away, blowin' the crops away, blowin' us away now." Subsequently, Muley explains his eviction by the bank and the destruction of his home by the caterpillar tractor meant he, like other sharecroppers, realized, "There wasn't a thing in the world I could do about it." Tom's and Casy's responses indicate they cannot understand the visions that they witness and must be given an interpretation by another character.

Their dialogue also addresses the problem of determining the meaning of the vision that Muley's words report to spectators within and outside the film. Within the narrative of the film, the montage and flashbacks create a visual review of history that Muley narrates and interprets for Tom and Casey. The ideas that spectators associate with sequence in the Joad cabin, the flashbacks and the montage include the futility of human endeavours.

In the film, characters' comprehension of visions and their meanings differ. Tom, at the beginning of the film, cannot comprehend the meaning of the vision that Muley narrates. Casey, on the other hand, accepts Muley's vision as the true statement of a sane but "lonely" man whose words should be believed. Casey, a former preacher who feels that he has lost his calling, accepts the "truth" of Muley's review of history. Similarly, Casey accepts the truth of the experiences told by an Okie returning from California after the deaths of his wife and children. Casey will state his opinion that what they have heard from the grief stricken father "is the truth for him" and may be a vision relevant to others' futures. A particular style of photography characterizes those who interpret visions for Tom; Muley and Casey appear in deep shadows with their faces incompletely lighted. Rebecca Pulliam describes Casey, when Tom speaks with him and strike organizers, as "more a symbol" than a person: "the camera's perspective on Casey when Tom finds him leading the strike creates an attitude toward Casey. He is photographed from a low angle, starkly and incompletely lit, as Tom sees him. Casey is ... a man who has become a noble idea."⁴⁵ Tom's description of Casey as a man who "seen things clear. He was like a lantern – he helped me to see things, too," identifies Casey as a mediator who, like an otherworldly interpreter in an apocalypse, provides Tom with an interpretation of the meaning of the vision of poverty, suffering and oppression revealed during the journey. Tom confides to his mother his thoughts about Casey, "about what he said – what he done –

about how he died,” that have made Tom reach a new understanding of the suffering of “the people.” Casy’s death, caused by his role as a union organizer who speaks out to make others aware of how breaking a strike is “helpin’ to starve kids,” is specifically represented as a sacrifice and discussed in terms of eschatology, that is, “the last things” – death, resurrection, judgment, and reward.

Further insight into how the film’s photography evokes conventions of the apocalypse genre is suggested by Sobchack’s analysis of how the visual style of *The Grapes of Wrath* “abstracts” particular characters, such as Tom Joad, into “universals.”⁴⁶ In the film’s opening sequence, Tom seems an “everyman” figure, photographed in an “extreme long shot” walking towards the spectators as he moves down a road during the early morning. The seemingly naturalistic morning light in this scene captures, as Place also appreciates, an expressionistic play of contrasting light and darkness. Tom walks down the middle of the road towards a “crossroad” that, Place notes, “nearly bisects the frame.”⁴⁷ The “vertical compositional lines in the frame” that delineate his passage along this road will subsequently enclose him in the car and in the camps along Route 66. As the Joads’ journey continues along Route 66, “horizontal and vertical lines compose traps and barriers” to the family and to Tom, in particular, who is “trapped in constructions which block him off from the side, the back, and the front” of the frame’s composition.⁴⁸ He escapes this entrapment only when he leaves the family to continue his journey alone. Tom leaves the film in a composition similar to the film’s beginning: “Tom first emerged as the faceless figure on the vertical road,” and when he leaves “he is in long shot, walking away from the camera” into a “panoramic landscape”⁴⁹ at sunrise. Although he seems a tiny, black silhouette in this expansive landscape of high contrast light and darkness, his separation from his family marks his transition from a member of his family – both son and male head – to an everyman representing a suffering, minority people. Tom, like other characters, such as

Muley and Casy who describe and interpret visions to him, is repeatedly photographed in black shadows with incomplete lighting that obscures his face or bisects his body; in this way Tom, Muley and Casy become, much like the visions of history that they articulate to others, symbols requiring interpretation rather than realistic characters.

Photography, throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, I have explained, prevents the closure of meaning to engage spectators in a process of interpretation rather than passively accepting an unproblematic representation of reality. Sobchack suggests the expressionistic photography and lighting used in much of the film create a “visual ambiance” that “evokes the vague outlines of night and dream rather than the harsh specificity of daylight and Depression America,”⁵⁰ particularly the iconography of the Depression established by Farm Security Administration photographers, such as Dorothea Lange, Edwin Rosskam, Arthur Rothstein and Horace Bristol.⁵¹ Because Zanuck, the producer of *The Grapes of Wrath*, used Horace Bristol’s photographs for art and costume design,⁵² the transient camp sequence and some scenes in Muley’s flashbacks share both the subject and style of Farm Security Administration still photography. There is a high degree of similarity in the transient camp sequence to the hard-edged clarity and sharp images of Farm Security Administration photography. The expressionistic style of Toland’s photography throughout many sequences in *The Grapes of Wrath*, however, differs starkly from the style of Farm Security Administration photojournalism. The extreme darkness of many of the scenes, like those set on the Joads’ cabin at the beginning of the film and subsequent scenes on the Keene Ranch, limit the comprehension of spectators within the *mise-en-scène* and the film’s spectators who depend upon others, like Muley and Casy, to interpret what they see. The juxtaposition of the brightness and specificity of Farm

Security Administration photojournalism with dark expressionistic photography throughout the film invites interpretation by disrupting the closure of meaning.

The film suspends closure of its meaning by ending with two contrasting images and explanations of the continuation of the Joads' journeys into the future: Tom's movement away from the camera walking up a hill into a vast landscape as the sun rises and the film's concluding shot as Ma and other members of the family drive away from the safety of the Wheat Patch camp at sunset. The last shot of the film, Place explains, "carries on the journey towards unity visually with a final image of the road which represents the future illuminated by the beautiful sunset and marked by a sign post center frame."⁵³ Their journey continues into the future after the Joads leave the Wheat Patch camp. Ma's speech explains the importance of the continuing journey in terms of the "life" of the people and the coming of the next age. It is the fact that the next age is promised in the future to those who have hope that differentiates the eschatological framework of Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* from the teleological trajectory of Lorentz's documentary or the immediate present moment captured by Farm Security Administration still photography.

Throughout Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* visual analogies to the conventions of the apocalypse genre create a framework to interpret the characters' present suffering in relation to a more hopeful future. The film represents the Joads' journey, which continues at the end of the film's narrative, not simply as the family's present tribulations during the Great Depression but also as a vision or review of history prophesying "the next age." Although for much of the narrative Tom depends upon others to act as mediators who interpret and explain what he sees and experiences, he will ultimately articulate to Ma an eschatological understanding of Casy's death. Ma Joad's consolation about the future life of "the people" is an eschatological prophecy of the next age in

which her family's and others' suffering will end. Expressionistic photography transforms settings and people into enigmatic symbols that literally represent the problem of interpreting visual experience and visions that spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* share with Tom and other characters. Similarly, the film's repeated transitions from high key and natural lighting to blackness and *chiaroscuro* effects obstruct visual experience and prompt eschatological interpretation. Like other apocalyptic films that do not explicitly address divine revelation and agency,⁵⁴ Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* adapts conventions of the apocalypse genre to represent a vision of history that relates present suffering to "the next age" that characters look hopefully towards but have not reached.

¹ Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 92-97.

² Janey A. Place, "A Family in a Ford," *Film Comment* 12.5 (1976): 46.

³ Vivian C. Sobchak, "The Grapes of Wrath (1940): Thematic Emphasis through Visual Style," in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford and Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005), 121.

⁴ Robert C. Seckles, "Landscapes of Failure in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)," in *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre*, ed. Deborah A. Carmichael (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), 76.

⁵ Conrad E. Ostwalt, "Apocalyptic," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 368-83.

⁶ Eugene Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Toronto: Random House, 1999), 31.

⁷ Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding, "Bad Endings: American Apocalypsis," *American Anthropology Review* 28 (1999): 290.

⁸ Stewart and Harding, "Bad Endings," 286, 291.

⁹ See Marcus O'Donnell, "'If you can hold on...': counter-apocalyptic play in Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales*," *Journal of Religion & Film* 18.2 (2014): 5-7. Cf. Wynn Gerald Hamonic, "Global Catastrophe in Motion Pictures as Meaning and Message: The Functions of Apocalyptic Cinema in American Film," *Journal of Religion & Film* 21.1 (2017): Article 36.

¹⁰ Conrad E. Ostwalt, "Visions of the End: Secular Apocalypse in Recent Hollywood Film," *Journal of Religion & Film* 2.1 (1998): Article 4.

¹¹ Justin Heinzekehr, "The Reenchantment of Eschatology: Religious Secular Apocalypse in Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*," *Journal of Religion & Film* 16.2 (2012): 1.

¹² John J. Collins has written extensively on the apocalypse as an ancient genre of writing in collaboration with the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature's Genre Project. For their definition of the apocalypse genre in relation to biblical and other ancient Hebrew apocalypses, see his "Introduction," in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of the Genre*, *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9. He provides a detailed review of scholarship about apocalyptic writing and form criticism in *Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, *The Forms of the Old Testament*, vol. 20, ed. Rolf Knierim and Gene M. Tucker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984).

¹³ David Hellholm analyzes the function of an exhortation that offers consolation for a group in crisis in, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John," *Society of Biblical Literature 1982 Seminar Papers*. ed., K.H. Richards (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982): 168.

¹⁴ Mitchell G. Reddish organizes ancient Jewish canonical and apocryphal apocalypses by focusing on two conventions, "otherworldly journeys" and "visions and dream visions" that review history in the "Introduction" to *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader*, ed. Mitchell G. Reddish (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 21-22.

¹⁵ John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler, *The Bible As Literature: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 132-43.

¹⁶ Daniel Worster, *Dust Bowl* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 42-63.

¹⁷ All quotations from the film are transcribed from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ford, 1940 (Fox Classics DVD, 2005).

¹⁸ Jonathan Ebel, "In Every Cup of Bitterness, Sweetness: California Christianity in the Era of the Great Depression," *Church History*, 80.3 (2011): 391-94.

¹⁹ Brad Lookingbill, "'A God-Forsaken Place': Folk Eschatology and the Dust Bowl," *Great Plains Quarterly*, (1994): Paper 801, 169.

²⁰ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 103.

²¹ Norman Coen Beskin, "The Doom of Civilization," *Latter Rain Evangel* (July 1932): 23.

²² Anna Reiff, "The Night Cometh," *Latter Rain Evangel* (October 1931): 2. Cf. Heather D. Curtis, "'God is Not Affected by the Depression': Pentecostal Missions during the 1930s," *Church History* 80.3 (2011): 581-83.

²³ Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 83.

²⁴ James R. Swensen, *Picturing Migrants: The Grapes of Wrath and New Deal Documentary Photography* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).

²⁵ Janey A. Place, *The Non-Western Films of John Ford* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1979), 64.

²⁶ Quoted from “‘THE GRAPES OF WRATH’ Screenplay by Nunnally Johnson.”
<https://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/grapes_of_wrath.html>.

²⁷ Sobchak, “*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940),” 122.

²⁸ Sobchack, “*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940),” 122.

²⁹ See the discussion of the impact of tractors on the agricultural economy and workforce in the 1930s in Paul S. Taylor, *Adrift on the Land* (New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1940), 27 and 29.

³⁰ All quotations from the documentary are transcribed from *The Plow That Broke The Plains and The River*, Lorentz, 1936 and 1937 (Naxos DVD, 2005).

³¹ Janey A. Place, *The Non-Western Films of John Ford*, 61.

³² Charles J. Maland, *American Visions: The Films of Chaplin, Ford, Capra, and Welles, 1936-1941* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 156-59.

³³ Sobchack, “*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940),” 120.

³⁴ Sobchack, “*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940),” 120.

³⁵ Place, *The Non-Western Films of John Ford*, 61.

³⁶ Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 180.

³⁷ Sobchack, “*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940),” 120-21.

³⁸ Leslie Gossage, “The Artful Propaganda of Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*” in *New Essays on The Grapes of Wrath*, ed. David Wyatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 113.

³⁹ Gossage, “The Artful Propaganda of Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*,” 113.

⁴⁰ Sobchack, “*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940),” 121.

⁴¹ See George Turner’s discussion of Toland’s method and equipment in “Sharp Practice: The Innovators 1940-1950,” *Sight and Sound* 9.7 (1999): 24-26.

⁴² Gallagher, *John Ford*, 180.

⁴³ Gallagher, *John Ford*, 180.

⁴⁴ See the analysis of New Deal themes in *Our Daily Bread* in Brian Neve, “*Our Daily Bread*: ‘Cooperation’, ‘Independence’, and Politics in Mid-1930s Cinema,” in *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, ed., Iwan Morgan and Philip John Davies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 194-95.

⁴⁵ Rebecca Pulliam, “*The Grapes of Wrath*,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 4.2 (1971): 6.

⁴⁶ Sobchack, "*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)," 120.

⁴⁷ Place, *The Non-Western Films of John Ford*, 60.

⁴⁸ Place, *The Non-Western Films of John Ford*, 65.

⁴⁹ Place, *The Non-Western Films of John Ford*, 68.

⁵⁰ Sobchack, "*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)," 121.

⁵¹ See Swensen, *Picturing Migrants*, 11-52, for detailed discussion of the still photography commissioned by the Farm Security Administration published in books, including *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and *12 Million Black Voices* (1941).

⁵² See "*The Grapes of Wrath*: Horace Bristol's California Photographs," *Life Magazine* (January 19, 1940), 10-11.

⁵³ Place, *The Non-Western Films of John Ford*, 61.

⁵⁴ See Heinzekehr, "The Reenchantment of Eschatology," 1-18 and Hamonic, "Global Catastrophe in Motion Pictures," 1-8. Cf. Ostwalt, "Visions of the End," 3-4.

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