

# “The Forgotten Man” 1932-1940: Four American Movies from the Decade of the Great Depression

A Film Series Presented in Conjunction with the  
Hallie Ford Museum of Art  
Exhibition  
*Forgotten Stories: Northwest Public Art of the 1930s*

November 28, 2020 - March 27, 2021

## *The Grapes of Wrath*

Director: **John Ford**. Producer: **Darryl F. Zanuck**. Script: **Nunnally Johnson**, based on the novel by John Steinbeck.  
Director of Photography: **Gregg Toland**. Film Editor: **Robert Simpson**. Art Directors: **Richard Day** and  
**Mark Lee Kirk**. Sound: **Robert Parrish**. Sets: **Thomas Little**. Music Director: **Alfred Newman**.  
Release: 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, 1940.

Tom Joad  
Ma Joad  
Casey  
Grampa Joad  
Rose of Sharon  
Pa Joad  
Al  
Muley Graves  
Connie  
Grandma Joad  
Noah  
Uncle John  
Winfield  
Ruth Joad

**Henry Fonda**  
**Jane Darwell**  
**John Carradine**  
**Charley Grapewin**  
**Dorris Bowdon**  
**Russell Simpson**  
**O. Z. Whitehead**  
**John Qualen**  
**Eddie Quillen**  
**Zeffie Tibury**  
**Frank Sully**  
**Frank Darien**  
**Darryl Hickman**  
**Shirley Mills**

Nominated for seven Academy Awards, *The Grapes of Wrath* is director John Ford’s most popular and acclaimed masterpiece. Ford won the Academy Award for his direction, and actress Jane Darwell won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of Ma Joad. Five Academy Award nominations (that did not result in wins) honored the movie in these categories: Best Picture, Best Actor (Henry Fonda), Best Screenplay, Best Sound Recording, and Best Film Editing. (The Best Picture of 1940 Oscar went to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*.) Ford also won the New York Film Critics award for Best Director of the year.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is one of those rare literature-to-film adaptations widely regarded as a faithful translation of the original novel, and a cinematic masterpiece in its own right, that also achieved the respect and admiration of the author of the novel on which the movie is based. Author John Steinbeck had been understandably worried that Hollywood would soften his tragic depiction of the Dust Bowl farmers who suffered foreclosure and eviction by banks and that the studio would downplay the exploitation of migrant workers that Steinbeck had described in his novel. After he sold the book

rights to 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox producer Darryl F. Zanuck, Steinbeck was displeased to learn that the studio was controlled by the Chase National Bank, recounts Ford biographer Joseph McBride. Indeed, producer Zanuck must have been at least somewhat skeptical of Steinbeck's distressing account. Writes McBride, "Zanuck told Steinbeck that he had hired a detective firm to investigate the charges levied by the novel and found that 'the conditions are much worse than you reported.'" When the finished movie was screened for Steinbeck before it was released, the author wrote the following to his agent: "Zanuck has more than kept his word. He has a hard, straight picture in which the actors are submerged so completely that it looks and feels like a documentary film and certainly it has a hard, truthful ring. No punches are pulled—in fact, with descriptive matter removed, it is a harsher thing than the book, by far. It seems unbelievable, but it is true."<sup>1</sup>

The title of the book is derived from a lyric in the Civil War song "Battle Hymn of the Republic," by Julia Ward Howe, which references the Book of Revelation. "*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored, He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword, His truth is marching on.*"

At this point, this program note will begin to assume that you have seen the movie, and interpretations that follow will necessarily include spoilers. So, first-time viewers of *The Grapes of Wrath* are advised to discontinue reading until after the movie.

Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* is structured in three parts or acts, and the film's first act, which we could call "The Homecoming," provides a lengthy introduction to the characters, the setting and the conflicts. It begins with a magnificent establishing shot. The opening shot of a movie, in the hands of a great director, can be significant. Here, a solitary figure appears in a vast expanse of flat land, a small and distant figure walking toward us on a paved road. This is an archetypal John Ford image: a lonely (and heroic) protagonist set against an imposing and symbolic vista. This opening image will correspond to a similar shot as the film closes. The figure is Tom Joad (Henry Fonda), an ordinary and unlikely man to assume heroic qualities. The loose framing of open space around this man is evocative of his feelings of freedom, and the delicate dawn light is suggestive of new beginnings and possibilities. We soon learn that he has just been released from prison. Clearly, he has come some distance and he will have another full day's walking and hitchhiking to reach home. The road he travels is a signal to us that this tale likely will be about a metaphorical journey, and indeed the film will trace a long and arduous path toward a renewed sense of self for Tom. As Tom approaches, the road intersects another highway, and on the corner stands the Crossroads Café. We will discover that Tom's path will be a journey toward identity and purpose, but one marked by life-changing decisions.

On this journey home, Tom has a chance meeting with an old acquaintance, the community preacher, Casey (John Carradine), now a lost soul, a drifter. He has "lost the calling... lost the spirit." In this tale of upheaval and displacement, Tom's first encounter is with a man who has become dislocated from the former meanings and truths of the profession that framed his life and gave it purpose. Casey confesses openly his doubts and his pattern of sinfulness to Tom, and this confessional honesty may open a door to his possible redemption. But for now, Casey is utterly lost, deeply conflicted and questioning, and he has been in a state of solitude and emotional exile. Despite his stated great love of people, he regards himself as unfit to preach the gospel. His own sinfulness (his exploitation of the young women, the "holy vessels," in his care) is in conflict with the Old Testament guidance and judgments he believes he must render. Confronted with this contradiction, Casey cannot preach anymore, despite his natural and valuable ability to deliver magnificent barn-burner sermons, which he recalls for Tom with pride and sorrow that "it is all gone." Together, Casey the repeat offender and Tom the ex-con have a shared experience of a period of separation from the fellowship of their community, but in Casey's case it is self-imposed.

The setting for this reunion of Tom and Casey is significant. Casey is found sitting under a tree. In the context of Casey's Biblical references, the tree can be seen as The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil highlighting Casey's sinful disobedience, transgression and "banishment." It's an Edenic symbol of a paradise and state of grace that has been lost. Much later in the movie, a new symbol becomes associated with Casey, signifying his rediscovery of the calling, a lighted lantern, when the fallen religious preacher who truly loves people is reborn as a secular preacher (a migrant union organizer) then to become a Christ figure, a martyr, whose life is willingly sacrificed for the sins of others. But for now, the aimless Casey decides to walk along with Tom, saying that one direction is as good, or as pointless, as another. It's now a homecoming journey for two fallen, displaced souls. What they will discover at Tom's home is a nightmare suitable for a horror movie.

Ominous storm clouds gather, foreshadowing disorder, as Tom and Casey walk home. They make their way along a split-rail fence that in Ford films frequently announce the boundary between community and wilderness. Darkness falls as they arrive at the Joad house and a gloom settles in. They stand before the broken gate and a starkly barren tree, marking the threshold to a bad dream. Dust and wind blow through the vacant front yard, a recurrent Fordian image of dissolution. Once inside the dark, abandoned house, lit only by Tom's candle, a creaking door signals a ghostly arrival off-screen, and they discover man's face in the ominous darkness. Muley Graves (John Qualen) tells Tom and Casey his history (via flashbacks) of being served an eviction notice by a man in a roadster, who informs Muley that his landlord is not a person but a company in a succession of land companies and banks, so there is no one for Muley to hold responsible or to shoot. It's worth noting that Muley's nightmare of impenetrable corporate power and lack of accountability is our own now. Monopolistic banks and mega-corporations have been granted rights of "personhood" while remaining largely legally indemnified against any personal responsibility for corporate sins against individuals or the nation. A contemporary, national version of mass housing foreclosures and evictions by unscrupulous banks occurred in 2008.

The flashback representing Muley's eviction concludes with a high-angle shot of a diminished Muley in a crouched position clutching the dry dirt of his worthless, foreclosed farm. The high contrast lighting is such that Muley's shadowed body merges with his black cast shadow as the wind picks up, blowing dust across the frame. Again, it's a Fordian image of death, and, the flashback concludes with a dissolve that briefly superimposes this image of Muley over a close-up of Tom's face. Muley confirms that he has become a "graveyard ghost, that's all in the world I am..." Similar to Casey, Muley is another lost soul, a displaced wanderer, living an animal life, troubled and disoriented. Given his introduction "materializing" in the void of the abandoned house, his surname, and his description of himself as a "ghost," Muley Graves functions as a Dickensian character presenting Tom and Casey with a vision that may portend their future.

Ford's imagery of the abandoned, decayed and wind-blown Joad house depicts all three characters, Tom, Casey, and Muley, shrouded in a disturbing darkness. Tom's dim candle can illuminate neither a corner of the room nor their dilemmas. Their linkage to past traditions and to their community has been severed, and they have to find a new vision to see their way out of the pervasive gloom. We should take a moment to acknowledge the magnificent cinematography of Gregg Toland, whose contribution to this scene and to the film is immense. Ford and Toland studied the great Depression-era photographers (such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Margaret Bourke-White) who had documented the period. The filmmakers sought to evoke the look that those photographers achieved. In an interview, Ford told film scholar and director Peter Bogdanovich the following:

"Gregg Toland did a great job of photography there—absolutely nothing but nothing to photograph, not *one* beautiful thing in there—just sheer good photography. I said to him, 'Part of it will be in blackness, but let's photograph it. Let's take a chance and do something different.'"<sup>2</sup>

The technical challenges for Toland were numerous, especially given the nocturnal scenes that required a sense of authenticity matching the film's interest in a documentary look. The usual day-for-night filter or over-lighted studio impression of "darkness" would not do. For example, in these scenes in the dark Joad house, the illumination faintly flickering on each face is apparently provided by a single match that Tom strikes and then the candle he holds. In fact, a match or candle was incapable of throwing enough light to expose the film stock used at the time beyond the flame itself. The lighting of the actors in the scene is accomplished thanks to the use of hidden spotlights and precision timing of movements that achieved a candlelight atmosphere. The candle that Tom holds casts some light because the candle is partly a gimmick that hides a small lamp connected by a wire running through Henry Fonda's jacket. (Sadly, Gregg Toland was not nominated by the Motion Picture Academy for his work on *The Grapes of Wrath*. The following year, 1941, Toland photographed the acclaimed *Citizen Kane* for Orson Welles, and he was nominated, yet he did not win.) The effect Toland and Ford achieved in this scene is to shroud these three characters in a convincing darkness representing their dim awareness and confusion. Together, Tom, Casey, and Muley share an outlaw status, having transgressed in one way or another. Now they are trespassing, in Tom's case, ironically, "on my own place." (Certain Depression-era films expressed knowing sympathy for the ease with which a fellow could find himself crosswise with the Law.) The inky darkness around them is expressive of their dislocation and the state of moral disarray they have in common. They exist without an apparent direction or future. Unless they can be guided by the light of a new vision, they are in danger of losing what little sense of identity and purpose they possess.

In the flashback that conveys Muley's telling of his story, the closing scene of Muley's family watching their home bulldozed flat concludes with the unforgettable image of his family's cast shadows crossed by bulldozer tracks in the dirt, the dozer on its way to another target. And now Muley is alone, in a precarious mental state, his family figuratively

plowed under. The bulldozer driven by a young man Muley knows suggests the myriad changes in the land: the corporate interests that have the money to occupy the land, operate mechanized farming, and to employ only a few young people desperate for hourly work. The brilliant montage of rows of bulldozers bespeaks the ruthless efficiency of market forces ready to pick up the pieces following disasters everywhere for pennies on the dollar. This bulldozing and eviction sequence presents a contrast, in miniature, of the economic ideals envisioned by two Founding Fathers that film historian Peter Stowell argues can be seen in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It's the myth of American agrarianism, represented by the Jeffersonian vision of an agrarian nation of Yeoman Farmers — self-sufficient and democratically equal— an individualist ideal, *versus* Hamiltonian ideals of commerce, leading eventually to mechanization, industrialization, and agribusiness, which offers efficiency and progress on the one hand, but results in worker displacement, anonymity, and dependency.<sup>3</sup>

For all the poetry of Ford's Dust Bowl imagery, the film's premise of years of pitiless drought and winds thick with dust "blowin' the land away, blowin' the crops away, blowin' us away..." as Muley testifies, is factual. In truth, conditions were much worse. Along with drought, ignorance of the land's history, greedy land sales, and destructive farming practices had transformed the green fields of grass that held the soil in place into a wasteland, the garden into a desert. Timothy Egan's powerful 2005 book, *The Worst Hard Times: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* provides eloquent testimony about the intolerable environmental conditions the residents of northern Texas and the Oklahoma panhandle experienced during the Depression:

At the start of 1936..., more than 850 million tons of topsoil had blown off the southern plains in the last year, nearly 8 tons of dirt for every resident of the United States. In the Dust Bowl, farmers lost 480 tons per acre. Where it had gone—to the heavens, to the sea, to the mountainous edge of the plains—was anyone's guess.

... There was nothing that spring to indicate the new season: not a sprout or sprig of new life. The dead cattle, some with their eyes frozen and glazed over with sand, were pinned in grisly repose against fences holding tumbleweeds and dirt. [A farmer] cut open the stomach of one dead cow that had wandered onto his land. His autopsy found the stomach packed so solidly with dust that it blocked the food from getting any further. Other postmortems found the same thing: animals dead from starvation caused by internal suffocation. The dust was killing everything in No Man's Land.

By late 1935, more than a thousand people, about 20 percent of the population, had pulled up stakes and left Cimarron County since the start of the drought four years earlier. They crowded into horse-drawn wagons or Model-As with worn tires, the paint long ago chipped away, and headed east to Missouri and beyond, or north to Denver..., or west to California... .

Signs in the Central Valley of California made clear how people felt about the new arrivals. One sign read: 'OKIES AND DOGS NOT ALLOWED INSIDE.'

Following a reunification of Tom and his family, the group packs the truck to leave, and Ma Joad quietly burns her keepsakes in subdued lighting and solitude. Ford lingers on this scene to tenderly associate Ma with recurrent Fordian values of sacrifice, memory, and family cohesion, which she struggles heroically to maintain throughout the film. While this film is about a particular family's disintegration in a specific historical period, Ford's imagery conveys this tragedy as universal. Hence, the movie's enduring appeal, its resonance with current events, and feeling of authenticity. Ford told interviewer Peter Bogdanovich,

"I'd read the book – it was a good story – and Darryl Zanuck had a good script on it. The whole thing appealed to me – being about simple people – and the story was similar to the famine in Ireland, when they threw 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 [heritage]... ." <sup>4</sup>

The nightmare of act I is concluded, and act II begins as a journey to California, a migration out of the aimless wandering in the desert in search of a "promised land," or so the printed advertisements suggest. The Joads will discover that a New Eden doesn't exist geographically, but it can be realized as a state of mind – a hopeful, transformative new vision that in time will be adopted by Casey, Tom, and Ma. With the family truck loaded beyond capacity, the always-courteous and humble Casey is established as fundamentally a seeker, as he asks to join the family: "There's something goin' on out there in the west, and I think I'd like to find out what it is, if you feel you've got the room... ."

It's a decisive step toward his redemption. In contrast, characters who are too wedded to the land or the past are left behind, struggling against change, grandpa expiring along the way as he lets a handful of dirt slip through his fingers, and Connie singing "I'm goin' down the road feelin' bad," foreshadowing his unreliability and departure ("I should have..."). Pa departs willingly but confesses in the film's final scene that his attachment to the old ways has left him rudderless. "I'm no good and I know it. Seems like I spend all my time rememberin' how it used to be." Unable to lead, he has ceded that family role to Ma, already overwhelmed with worry and responsibility. The family truck heads out, similarly overburdened and barely able to stay righted.

On the road, along Route 66, there is doubt, confusion, suffering, and death. Throughout this journey, the individualism that characters believed to be the greatest ideal gradually is challenged as perhaps a selfish concern for one's own family and problems. The vision of California the family perceives in the distance just before they swim in the cleansing river turns out to be a mirage. Among the many great sequences in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the family's drive through a "none too prosperous" transient camp, captured in a magnificently staged traveling point-of-view shot. The concentration of poverty and dehumanization we see through the family's eyes is almost unbearable, but Ma makes the best of the cruel circumstances. Also, on view is the manifest cruelty and indifference of law enforcement engaged in policing the powerless, discharging a revolver in a crowded tent city. "Boy, what a mess them .45s make." It is in this sad and tragic environment, however, that Casey experiences a spiritual reawakening, rediscovering his purpose. In an act of Christian sacrifice, he cheerfully confesses to a crime he did not commit. Happily holding out his arms to be handcuffed, Casey is arrested for the sins of others. Casey's earlier career had revolved around reverence for the sacred symbols of Christ's arrest, persecution and suffering. Seated in the sheriff's car, Casey smiles contentedly as he looks outward and then gazes down at the cuffs, now freighted with meaning.

Tom's rediscovery of Casey later in the film offers us another of the movie's many scenes featuring meaningful lighting worth noting. In a tent by a stream, we learn that Casey has found his path back to the people who he had said he so loves. He speaks with a new-found conviction as he tries to explain to Tom the politics of exploited workers, suppressed wages, and the salvation that union organizing offers suffering, hungry people. Casey's words blend impassioned economic sense and humility, underscored by the lighted lantern positioned above him that brightly illuminates his face in the darkened tent. Favored with a low angle shot, he is heroically dominant. Tom's persistent individualism clouds his ability to comprehend the clarity and compassion of Casey's visionary message of a shared responsibility to act in concert with others. "You'll have to take a beating before you'll know," Casey correctly predicts. Casey is the lantern in this scene. He is the light, in a visual allusion to Christ as "the light of the world." He is moments away from martyrdom. As Casey is targeted and murdered by the growers' strike-breakers, "tin badge" security men, Tom is badly wounded by a blow to his head. Marked now by an outward sign of an inward change, the resulting scar will signify a life-altering moment. Tom says to Ma, "That Casey, he seen things clear – like a *lantern*. He helped me to see things too." Such "lantern figures," as film historian William Cadbury has called them, are recurrent in John Ford movies. Through their sacrifice, they illuminate the path for others: Lincoln in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, the preacher Mr. Gruffydd in *How Green Was My Valley*, among other examples.

In the dark of their temporary pickers' shack, Ma voices her fear and her failure to keep the family whole.

"We're crackin' up, Tom. We ain't a family no more. It used to be that we had the land, old folks died off and new fellers come. There was a boundary to the family that kept us whole and clear, but we ain't clear now. We're crackin' up. Rose of Sharon is going to have her baby, but there ain't no family. And Winfield and Ruthie growin' up wild, just like animals."

Finally, she pleads, "Don't go. Tom. Stay and help me." It is such an eloquent speech about the traditional rhythms of life, articulating how their personal identity, family continuity and wholeness were attached to the land. Environmental catastrophe plus Depression economics have transformed them from a family rooted in the soil to migrant laborers, impoverished, adrift and coming apart. Left unresolved is the fact that now her son has killed a security guard, placing him outside the law again, doomed to re-imprisonment or a life on the run.

**A**ct III offers revelation as Tom and Ma gain a new vision. It begins with a welcome relief, a glimpse of government intervention at its best. The family car coasts, out of gas, into a federal camp for migrants and refugees. A Department of Agriculture camp that the film clearly associates with President Roosevelt's New Deal, it is an island of hope, a visualization of how government can act efficiently and compassionately for those in need. The camp dance that night provides an opportunity for the kind of community celebration and ritual ceremony John Ford loves to feature in his

films (weddings, serenades, funerals, parades, balls, gatherings and speeches, etc.).<sup>6</sup> More than this, we are presented with a hopeful picture of a renewed sense of family, a unity of ordinary people asserting their own value and organizing against the wealthy landholders and their agents in law enforcement. The corrupt police are thwarted in their attempt to create an excuse for arrests.

After the dance, Tom is seated in the dark with his mother on the edge of the dance floor that signifies the comforts of community fellowship they had just enjoyed and that he is now about to forsake forever. Tom speaks of Casey, what his life and death have meant to him, in humble terms and New Testament allusions:

“I been thinkin’ about Casey, what he said, what he done, how he died. And I remember all of it. I been thinkin’ about us too, about our people livin’ like pigs. Good rich land layin’ fallow. Maybe one guy with a million acres and 100,000 farmers starvin’... .

...As long as I’m an outlaw anyway, maybe I can do somethin’, maybe I can find out somethin’, scrounge around and find out what’s wrong... . Well, it’s just like Casey said, ‘A fella ain’t got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody.’ Then..., then it don’t matter. I’ll be all around in the dark. I’ll be everywhere. Wherever you can look—wherever there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever there’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there. I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad. I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry and they know supper’s ready, and when the people are eatin’ the stuff they raise and livin’ in the houses they build, I’ll be there, too... .”

Tom articulates a transcendent vision, a new consciousness, embracing a life of sacrifice and a purpose larger than himself and the needs of his immediate family. His own life and needs “don’t matter.” Tom says goodbye and departs by crossing the dance floor into the dark distance. Ma sits alone in a long shot that frames her lonely failure to comprehend her son’s motives. Tom has adopted Casey’s mystical vision, and he leaves as a disciple. Tom’s narrow individualism has been replaced by an enlarged consciousness and an expanded idea of “family” and one’s place in the social order. A dissolve reveals Tom as a small figure striding atop a distant, silhouetted horizon, ascending a hill against a lighted dawn sky. With a mission now, a duty to others, he is walking along the horizon of time, a figure of myth and history. This is an archetypal Ford image memorializing a heroic moment. A recurrent image in the director’s oeuvre, it is Ford’s signature shot.<sup>6</sup>

This was to be the final scene of *The Grapes of Wrath* as Ford intended it. As such, it would have made the film one of the most dark and tragic movies charting a family’s decline and dissolution to emerge from a major Hollywood studio. However, producer Darryl F. Zanuck wrote an additional scene for Ma Joad in which she delivers her “*We’re the people that live...*” speech to Pa, which became the film’s concluding scene. With Zanuck’s ending, we feel that Tom’s sharing of his newly broadened consciousness with his mother has somehow prompted her to arrive at a similar, transcendent outlook, which she articulates to Pa on the road the next day. “*With a woman it’s all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river it goes right on. Woman looks at it like that....*” It’s a philosophical, Darwinian vision of her connection to a larger “family,” an enduring line of working people, a vision of her place and purpose that transcends time and space and suffering. According to Joseph McBride’s biography of Ford, Zanuck consulted with Ford, who allowed that the scene was fine. However, Ford suggested that Zanuck shoot this scene himself, so Ford had no hand in it. McBride notes that Ford later in life voiced his approval of Zanuck’s addition: “Ford told [Peter] Bogdanovich that while Tom leaving was the “logical end” of the story, the mother had a little soliloquy that was all right.”<sup>7</sup>

The movie’s stature as an American masterpiece and an archetypal John Ford film have not diminished over the decades. Here are two excerpts from critic Roger Ebert’s essay revisiting the film (rogerebert.com), written March 31, 2002:

... *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the sad end of the dream. The small shareholders who staked their claims 50 years earlier are forced off their land by bankers and big landholders. “Who’s the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company?” asks Muley, a neighbor of the Joads who refuses to sell. “It ain’t anybody,” says a land agent. “It’s a company.”

The movie finds a larger socialist lesson in this, when Tom tells Ma: “One guy with a million acres and a hundred thousand farmers starvin'.” Of course, Tom didn't know the end of the story, about how the Okies would go to work in war industries and their children would prosper more in California than they would have in Oklahoma, and their grandchildren would star in Beach Boys songs. It is easy to forget that for many, ***The Grapes of Wrath*** had a happy, unwritten, fourth act... .

... The novel and movie do last, I think, because they are founded in real experience and feeling. My parents were scarred by the Depression, it was a remembered devastation I sensed in their very tones of voice, and ***The Grapes of Wrath*** shows half a nation with the economic rug pulled out from under it. The story, which seems to be about the resiliency and courage of “the people,” is built on a foundation of fear: Fear of losing jobs, land, self-respect. To those who had felt that fear, who had gone hungry or been homeless, it would never become dated. And its sense of injustice, I believe, is still relevant. The banks and land agents of the 1930s have been replaced by financial pyramids so huge and so chummy with the government that Enron, for example, had to tractor itself off its own land.

— Roger Ebert

Still relevant also are the issues of environmental erosion, in the broadest sense of the word, that displaces people, poisons the earth, and ruins lives. Destructive farming practices continue to ruin topsoil, and fossil fuels are altering the climate catastrophically. If the refugees from Oklahoma and Texas found some measure of relief eventually, as Roger Ebert says, in the post-film 1940s prosperity of California, now that Golden State refuge is in jeopardy of burning uncontrollably—every acre of the state, an official stated recently. So, the rest of us may not be so fortunate as the Joads to have a highway out. We have inherited the Joad family's deadly confrontation with environmental degradation, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden writ large. The Genesis story of the Fall of Mankind that informs ***The Grapes of Wrath*** is an allegory for our times, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which climate denial is the equivalent of disobedience in the face of God's /Nature's repeated warnings. Calamity is no longer regional and occasional, it's global and systemic, as wildfires, storms and floods, droughts and famine of supercharged ferocity create wastelands and displace residents from “Paradise,” driving increasing numbers of refugees, like the Joads, to cross borders around the world.

— © Robert Bibler, October 12, 2020

<sup>1</sup> Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford: A Life*, 2001, St. Martin's Press.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford*, University of California Press, 1978, New and Enlarged Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Stowell, *John Ford*, 1986, G.K. Hall & Co.

<sup>4</sup> Bogdanovich.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, *John Ford*, 1975, Da Capo Press, Inc.

<sup>6</sup> McBride and Wilmington.

<sup>7</sup> McBride.