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Filmguide to

The Grapes of Wrath

WARREN FRENCH

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Filmguide to

The Grapes of Wrath

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS FILMGUIDE SERIES

Harry Geduld and Ronald Gottesman,
General Editors

for Don and Ken and the
great days of "Showtime" on KCUR-FM.

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preface

This book—like all I have written—is based upon the premise that criticism should stimulate, not suppress discussion. I have tried to advance some provocative theories, raise more issues than I attempt to resolve, in the hope of getting others thinking and talking about *The Grapes of Wrath*. Much film criticism has been dogmatic and pontifical. It is time that this important art form was dignified with a criticism that explores films instead of using them as springboards for personal vendettas.

Rather than clutter the text with footnotes, I have incorporated essential references into the text and keyed them to the bibliography.

This book might never have gotten off the ground without the encouragement and assistance of Donald Pease, though he cannot be held responsible for the perversity of any views expressed.

WARREN FRENCH

credits

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940

<i>Director</i>	John Ford
<i>Producer</i>	Darryl F. Zanuck
<i>Associate Producer-Scenarist</i>	Nunnally Johnson, from John Stein- beck's novel, <i>The Grapes of</i> <i>Wrath</i> (1939)
<i>Assistant Director</i>	Edward O'Fearn
<i>Director of Photography</i>	Gregg Toland
<i>Art Directors</i>	Richard Day, Mark Lee Kirk
<i>Set Decorator</i>	Thomas Little
<i>Musical Score</i>	Alfred Newman
	(Song "Red River Valley" played on accordion by Dan Borzage)
<i>Editor</i>	Robert Simpson
<i>Sound Directors</i>	George Leverett, Roger Heman
<i>Sound Effects Director</i>	Robert Parrish
<i>Time: 128 minutes</i>	Opened at the Rivoli Theatre, New York, January 24, 1940.

CAST

The Joad Party

<i>Tom</i>	Henry Fonda	<i>Noah</i>	Frank Sully
<i>Ma</i>	Jane Darwell	<i>Al</i>	O. Z. Whitehead
<i>Pa</i>	Russell Simpson	<i>Rosasharn</i>	Dorris Bowdon
<i>Grampa</i>	Charley Grapewin	<i>Connie Rivers</i>	Eddie Quillan
<i>Granma</i>	Zeffie Tilbury	<i>Ruthie</i>	Shirley Mills
<i>Uncle John</i>	Frank Darien	<i>Winfield</i>	Darryl Hickman

Others

<i>Casy</i>	John Carradine	<i>Policeman</i>	Ward Bond
<i>Muley Graves</i>	John Qualen	<i>Floyd</i>	Paul Guilfoyle
<i>Caretaker</i>	Grant Mitchell	<i>Wilkie</i>	Charles D. Brown
<i>at Wheat Patch</i>			

outline:

The Grapes of Wrath

Films are organized in shots, scenes, sequences. Ronald Gottesman and Harry M. Geduld in *Guidebook to Film* (1972) define a *shot* as "a piece of film that has been exposed, without cuts or interruptions, in a single running of the camera" (pp. 225-26). The camera may move in any direction during a shot, but "within any single shot there is no discontinuity of time or space." A *scene* is a group of shots in which the action is continuous (though flashbacks or flash forwards may be inserted)—the basic narrative unit of the film. A sequence is defined as "an arrangement of shots or scenes which together provide a coherent unit in the development of a film story or theme" (p. 225).

Shot-by-shot analysis of a motion picture is possible, as Theodore Huff's remarkable listing of the 1,716 separate shots in D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* indicates, but it is difficult to use and confusing if only a few feet are lost from a print.

This outline of *The Grapes of Wrath* divides the film into fifty identifiable scenes that may be grouped into fifteen sequences lasting from one minute to twenty-five minutes. The heart of the picture is the three contrasting sequences at camps in California, which account for 61 of the film's 128 minutes.

Sequence One—Tom Joad's Return (10 minutes). Scene 1. A long-shot of a man (Tom Joad) coming over the horizon and walking down an Oklahoma country highway. 2. Outside a roadside restaurant he asks a truck driver for a lift. 3. In the cab of the truck, he tells the driver that he has just been paroled from the penitentiary, where he was serving a term for homicide. 4. Alighting from the truck, Tom finds Casy, the preacher who baptized him, singing under a willow tree. Casy explains he is no longer a preacher, and Tom tells about his four years in prison. 5. Casy describes Tom's father's behavior at a baptizing as Tom and Casy walk toward the old Joad cabin. A dust storm comes up.

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Sequence Two—The Deserted Joad Cabin (12 minutes). Scene 6. Tom and Casy find the cabin deserted. Muley Graves, a neighbor, appears and tells about the sharecroppers being “tractored off” by the big owners. Two flashbacks reveal how Muley was dispossessed. He tells Tom that the Joad family is at Uncle John’s preparing to move to California. 7. Tom, Casy, and Muley are later obliged to hide out from armed watchmen who are hunting for Muley.

Sequence Three—Off to California (14 minutes). Scene 8. Tom is reunited with the family and learns their plans for the trip. The reunion is interrupted by two men in a car who warn Uncle John that the tractors are coming through his farm the next day. 9. The Joads load the truck for the trip, while Ma reminisces over her few souvenirs. 10. When Grampa refuses to go on the trip, he has to be put to sleep with soothing syrup. Casy is invited to join the party, and the truck departs. 11. Outraged, Ma Joad refuses to look back at the farm.

Sequence Four—Grampa’s Death (5 minutes). Scene 12. A montage showing the Joad truck crossing Oklahoma, among many others, while Grampa suffers inside. 13. Grampa is unloaded from the truck and dies. 14. Tom reads a note that will be buried with Grampa, explaining that he wasn’t killed; Casy says “a few words” over the grave.

Sequence Five—At a Campground: Bad News (4 minutes). Scene 15. The campers along the way are being entertained by Rosasharn’s husband Connie, who is singing a folk song. A man returning from California laughs scornfully at the Joads’ optimism and explains that he saw his wife and two sons starve in California. The group breaks up much distressed.

Sequence Six—At a Truck Stop: Good People (5 minutes). Scene 16. Following another montage of highway scenes, the Joads are treated contemptuously by a gas station attendant. 17. Inside a hamburger joint, where a waitress is joshing two truck drivers, Pa Joad attempts to buy a loaf of bread. When the cook and waitress are kind to the migrants, the truck drivers leave a big tip.

Sequence Seven—Across Arizona (2 minutes). Scene 18. After being stopped briefly by agricultural inspectors, the Joads drive across Arizona, through Indian villages and herds of sheep.

Sequence Eight—The Joads See California (2 minutes). Scene 19. The Joads reach the Arizona-California border and are awed

by the desert and mountains. 20. The men of the Joad party cavort in the Colorado River.

Sequence Nine—California Sees the Joads (1 minute). Scene 21. Two contemptuous filling station attendants describe the Okies as subhuman.

Sequence Ten—Crossing the Desert: Granma's Death (6 minutes). Scene 22. Tom and Al talk about the difficulties of crossing the desert, while Ruthie and Winfield look for bones, Ma comforts Granma, and Connie complains to Rosasharn about coming on this trip instead of studying to be a radio mechanic. 23. California agricultural inspectors try to make the Joads unload the truck, but let them go when Ma protests that Granma is deathly ill. 24. The family arrives in the beautiful part of California and gazes with wonder at the Tehachapi Valley, but the experience is spoiled by Ma's revelation that Granma had died even before the California inspectors had stopped them.

Sequence Eleven—Welcome to California (2 minutes). Scene 25. In an unidentified town, a cop from Oklahoma is friendly for a minute, but quickly freezes up and orders the Joads out of town by nightfall.

Sequence Twelve—Hooverville (14 minutes). Scene 26. The Joads drive into the Hooverville and see the sorry condition of the people and huts there. 27. Ma is besieged by hungry children when she tries to cook a stew for the family. 28. A contractor attempting to hire fruit pickers is challenged by Floyd, a migrant. The contractor has a deputy attempt to arrest Floyd; but Floyd knocks the deputy down and flees. When the deputy attempts to follow and shoots a woman, Tom knocks him unconscious. Casy tells Tom to hide and takes the blame for the incident. The deputies drive off with him. 29. Tom comes out of hiding and tells the family to pack up because a mob will burn the camp; it is discovered that Rosasharn's husband Connie has taken off. 30. A mob from the town forces the Joads to turn the truck around and go the other direction.

Sequence Thirteen—The Keene Ranch (22 minutes). Scene 31. Tom and Al are fixing a tire when a man drives up and offers the family work picking peaches. 32. Migrant trucks are lined up outside the ranch gate, surrounded by a murmuring mob. 33. The Joads are checked against lists before being allowed to work and are told to mind their own business. 34. The men and children join a

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gaunt line of pickers headed for the grove while Ma and Rosasharn attempt to clean up a filthy cabin. 35. The Joads at dinner complain about the small amount of food their day's wages bought; Tom decides to go outside and find out what the trouble is. 36. A guard tells Tom to go back to the cabin or he will be taken back. 37. Tom slips under the wire fence and finds Casy with some others in a tent and learns that they are leading a strike against the ranch. Casy asks Tom to bring out those in the camp, but Tom doubts that they will come. Disturbed by noises outside, the group disperses. 38. Fleeing under a bridge, Casy is spotted and killed by guards. Enraged, Tom kills a guard and escapes with a broken cheek. 39. Tom returns to the cabin, where the family tends his wound and hides him. 40. The family packs up and hides Tom under mattresses in the truck. 41. The truck is allowed to leave the fenced-in ranch.

Sequence Fourteen—The Wheat Patch Government Camp (25 minutes). Scene 42. The Joad truck runs out of gas and coasts into the camp, where the caretaker explains that here the migrants govern themselves. 43. In his office, the caretaker explains more about the self-government of the camp to Tom. 44. Ruthie and Winfield Joad explore the camp washhouse and think that they have broken a flush toilet. 45. Tom is working with two other men laying pipe, when the small farmer who employs them warns that an attempt will be made to disrupt the Saturday night dance at the camp. 46. The plot is frustrated by careful work of the camp committee, and the Joad family enjoys the dance. 47. While the camp sleeps, Tom observes two men inspecting the license of the Joads' truck. He prepares to slip away, but Ma awakens and he tells her that he must go. Reluctantly she agrees.

Sequence Fifteen—Hitting the Road Again: Ma Joad's Meditation (4 minutes). Scene 48. The Joads cannot find work around the Wheat Patch camp, so they must set out for Fresno. 49. In the cab of the truck, Ma meditates on what has happened and announces the theme of the film: "We're the people that live." 50. A long, concluding shot of migrants' trucks chugging along between groves of fruit trees.

the director:

John Ford

Sean Aloysius O'Feeney (the anglicized spelling of O'Fearna) was born in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, on February 1, 1895, to Irish immigrant parents, Sean and Barbara Curran O'Feeney. He was the thirteenth and last child of the family. As John Ford, the typically dynamic and inventive Aquarian has enjoyed one of the longest and most honored careers of Hollywood directors, winning increasing recognition while making the difficult switches from silent films to talkies (that put such pioneer filmmakers as D. W. Griffith on the sidelines) and from small-screen to big-screen pictures (that slowed down the careers of important directors like Frank Capra). Although he was a successful silent film director, Ford was recognized as a major artist only late in the 1930s for a series of pictures beginning with *The Informer* (1935), and he did not become "a legend in his lifetime" until his big-screen, color spectacles about the old West in the 1950s.

The transformation of O'Feeney into Ford occurred after he failed to win an appointment to the United States Naval Academy. He may have spent a few weeks at the University of Maine (which honored him with a Doctor of Fine Arts degree in 1939). In July 1914, at the age of nineteen, he arrived in Hollywood, where his brother Francis—thirteen years his senior—had already established himself as an actor and director of serials. Many years later, John Ford told Peter Bogdanovich that his brother had acquired the name *Ford* when he had had to take over for an actor of that name who was incapacitated on the opening night of a Broadway show.*

*This account of Ford's life draws upon Peter Bogdanovich's edited version of an interview with Ford, tape recorded at Ford's California home in 1966 and upon a filmography compiled by Bogdanovich. Both appear in Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford*, University of California Press, 1968, which should be consulted for further details. Since almost all of the material in this short book is grouped under the titles of Ford's pictures, I have avoided the use of numerous, repetitive page references.

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Sean—now Jack—learned the movie business as a property man and stunt man—often for his brother's pictures—and as an actor (he was one of the mob of Ku Klux Klansmen in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915). He graduated to directing in 1917. Although he speaks of his first picture as *Cheyenne's Pal*, a two-reeler (about twenty minutes), filmed May 20–23 with Harry Carey, he is credited with directing and starring in *The Tornado*, another two-reeler, which was reviewed that March. After only a few more pictures, he and Carey—who wrote their own scripts—made a five-reel feature, *Straight Shooting*. The company wanted to cut it back to two, but Carl Laemmle, who headed Butterfly-Universal, happened to see it and ordered it released as made.

Most of the twenty-five or more Westerns that Ford made in 1918 and 1919 were five or six-reelers (one starring Carey was based on Bret Harte's famous story, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"). Ford's first important assignment was his thirty-first picture, *The Prince of Avenue A*, released February 23, 1920, one in a long series of Hollywood efforts to capitalize upon the fame of sporting figures. Ford's big chance in his first non-Western was to make an actor of pugilist "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, who had lost his title of World's Heavyweight boxing champion to Bob Fitzsimmons in 1897. Though 53 in 1920, he played the romantic lead in a preposterous tale of Irish-American politics on New York's old lower East Side.

After grinding out two more films, Ford married Mary McBryde Smith on July 3, 1920; their son and daughter have sometimes worked with Ford. Meanwhile still another brother, Edward, who has often worked as Ford's assistant under the name of Edward O'Fearn (see the credits on *The Grapes of Wrath*), had arrived in Hollywood.

In 1921 Ford left Universal, after turning out three more Westerns with Carey, two with Hoot Gibson, and one with Buck Jones, and went to work exclusively with Fox Films for the remainder of the "silent era." Jack Ford became John in 1923 for his first "A" feature, *Cameo Kirby*, starring matinee idol John Gilbert. (Until World War II, Hollywood studios produced several expensive, speculative, and highly publicized "A" features each year, but relied on the smaller and steadier profits from the low-budget, quickly-filmed "B" pictures to avoid disastrous fluctuations in income. The pro-

motion of a director from "B" to "A" films was an honor that not all proved equal to.) Ford's first big break came, however, the next year (1925) with *The Iron Horse*, Fox's epic challenge to Famous Players-Lasky's enormously successful *The Covered Wagon* (1923), directed by James Cruze from Emerson Hough's best-selling novel—the picture that launched the first era of the "Big Western."

The Iron Horse, a lively fantasy about the building of the first transcontinental railroad, remains Ford's longest picture (2 hours and 40 minutes with 275 subtitles). Although the plot is a tissue of incredible coincidences, the film remains remarkable for the outdoor photography that has become the hallmark of Ford's greatest films (critics were already praising his painterly "framing" of his scenes). Filmed in the Nevada desert, it helped establish the practice of shooting "on location"; and it was one of the first works to capitalize upon the success of a film by turning the screenplay into a novel.

Only two more of Ford's silent films were of special interest. *Three Bad Men* (1926), filmed at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, was distinguished by a famous landrush scene that Ford told Bogdanovich is still being cut into other pictures and TV shows. *Four Sons* (1928) is based on an I. A. R. Wylie story that Ford insisted on filming. The lachrymose tale about the breakup of a family (like *The Grapes of Wrath*) was a tremendous money-maker. It was also the first film in which critics like Paul Rotha found evidences of the "poetic quality" of his major pictures of the 1930s.

The switch to talkies came with a three-reeler, *Napoleon's Barber* (1928), followed by the feature-length *The Black Watch*, which Ford has always disliked because of the long, talky sequences directed by British actor Lumsden Hare. (Hollywood producers in the early days of the talkies were obsessed with the notion—satirized in Kaufman and Hart's *Once in a Lifetime*—that stage personalities had to be imported to teach the films how to talk.) Ford established himself, however, as one of the leading directors of sound films with his third talking feature, *Men Without Women* (1930), his first collaboration with script writer Dudley Nichols and the first film actually shot on a submarine. (It is also the first that Andrew Sarris singles out as entitling Ford to recognition as a "pantheon director.") Of all Ford's silent films, only *The Iron Horse* receives prominent

attention in "Film as Art," the first volume of the incomplete *The Film Index*.)

Of the other twelve pictures that Ford made between 1930 and 1934, Sarris lists six as outstanding (*Arrowsmith*—from Sinclair Lewis's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel and Ford's first film away from Fox since 1921—*Up the River*, *Air Mail*, *The Lost Patrol*, *Doctor Bull* and *Judge Priest*—the last two starring Will Rogers), but agrees with other critics that 1935 was Ford's first really big year. Then he directed the most famous of the pictures in which he worked with Rogers (*Steamboat Round the Bend*—given delayed release after Rogers's death in an airplane crash), *The Whole Town's Talking*, and *The Informer*, based on Liam O'Flaherty's novel about an Irishman who betrays a fellow countryman to the British during the Sinn Fein rebellion in 1922. Victor McLaglen starred as Gypo Nolan.

The Informer has become a Hollywood legend. Ford and script writer Dudley Nichols had wanted to make it for years. Apparently RKO finally allowed Ford to make the film as a reward for the success of *The Lost Patrol* when the director agreed to take a percentage of the profits (if any) instead of a salary. The picture didn't cost much (\$218,000) and was filmed in three weeks; but it was an enormous critical success—the first Hollywood talking picture to receive serious attention as a work of art. It won Ford his first Academy Award and New York Film Critics' Circle Award, as well as Oscars for Nichols, McLaglen, and Max Steiner (composer of the score).

Ford had to wait a while to repeat his accomplishment. Despite the honors heaped on *The Informer*, the seven pictures Ford made during the next three years are among his least remembered talking features, although Ford maintains that two of his favorites among them—*Mary of Scotland* starring Katharine Hepburn and the film version of Sean O'Casey's play *The Plough and the Stars*—were ruined by cutting after they left his hands. In 1939, however, his chance came to firm up his place among the immortals.

During the 1930s Ford had had no chance to direct any of the Western epics with which he had been associated in silent film days. With the coming of talkies, emphasis shifted from outdoor action films to urban stories—both drawing-room comedies and gangster pictures—and to pompous historical and biographical spectacles.

Westerns—contemptuously called “horse operas” and “oaters”—were filmed on a “rehearsal’s the shot” basis by marginal filmmakers on Hollywood’s Poverty Row, chiefly for showing on double features in small towns and at Saturday afternoon matinees.

Ford changed this whole situation overnight when for the first time he went on location in Monument Valley, Utah (where he has made many of his later pictures) and returned with what may be his most important picture—*Stagecoach*, which catapulted John Wayne to stardom. Filmmakers and critics were skeptical of Ford’s revival of the major budget Western; they said sophisticated filmgoers would no longer accept the clichés of the Western tradition. Ford’s hunch, however, was vindicated at the box office, and major stars began tramping out of the drawing room and into the saddle to capitalize on the rediscovered popularity of the old West. Even Marlene Dietrich in a comeback effort (*Destry Rides Again*, 1939) and W. C. Fields and Mae West (*My Little Chickadee*, 1940) found box-office gold in deliberate spoofs of the traditional horse opera. Andrew Sarris’s list of the major Hollywood productions for 1938 contains not one Western, though it is heavy with such historical schmaltz as *Marie Antoinette*. The list for 1939, however, contains four besides *Stagecoach* (including Cecil B. DeMille’s *Union Pacific*, which goes over the same ground as Ford’s *The Iron Horse*). The list for 1940 contains seven—a trend was underway, though Ford himself made no more Westerns until after World War II, when he revitalized the trend with *My Darling Clementine* (1947).

Meanwhile, also in 1939, he directed two historical films, *Drums Along the Mohawk* (his first color film) and *Young Mr. Lincoln*, both starring Henry Fonda. In 1940, as well as *The Grapes of Wrath*, he made *The Long Voyage Home*, based on Eugene O’Neill’s “S. S. Glencairn” cycle of short plays.

Although *The Grapes of Wrath* employs the Western settings that Ford has always handled well, it is distinctly not in the tradition of the Western, nor did Ford attempt to assimilate it to this tradition. The film is much more nearly related to his social protest works with European settings (*The Informer* and *How Green Was My Valley*, a 1942 production about a Welsh mining town based on Richard Llewellyn’s popular novel) than to his elaborate, ritualistic Westerns. Most of the film was not even shot on location, but on studio lots; and the occasional shots of imposing Western land-