The Plow That Broke the Plains: An Application of Functional Americanism in Music

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This dissertation titled

The Plow That Broke the Plains: An Application of Functional Americanism in Music

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ABSTRACT

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The Plow That Broke the Plains: An Application of Functional Americanism in Music

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This dissertation explores the nature of American musical identity in the score from the 1936 documentary film The Plow That Broke the Plains, directed by Pare Lorentz, scored by Virgil Thomson, and created under the auspices of the New Deal’s Resettlement Administration. While the score offers a study in modernist music and compositional musical Americanism, other approaches may be more suited to positioning this New Deal cultural artifact within its historical context, thus revealing its cultural sources and social intentions. In the spirit of contemporary musicology, this project proposes a new category through which to undertake such studies: functional Americanism. Functional Americanism evaluates American identity in music through the function or utility of music operating in an American setting or for an American purpose. Using this approach to engage with The Plow, this study draws from social history, cultural studies, and musicology in order to understand The Plow within its historical moment as an articulator of American identity.

Approved: ____________________________________________________________

Dora J. Wilson

Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family and friends. I cannot image completing this without your love, support, inspiration, and patience. I must single out my partner, Carissa Massey, for her unswerving faith in me.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to those who labor in the arts to bring about positive social change, a beauty far more precious than others.
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INTRODUCTION: APPROACHING THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS

Composers, critics, and scholars since the middle of the nineteenth century have engaged in a twofold project central to American musical life: the creation of a distinctively American style of classical music and the articulation of that which is distinctively American, or musical Americanism, in classical music. Indeed, we may observe similar phenomena in other American arts with European lineages. More specifically, their histories are marked by periods of self-reflection set against Old World traditions and, especially in the fine arts, with an interest in forging an identity that is somehow distinct from and often superlative to those traditions. This study focuses on the 1930s, a decade when American classical music unprecedentedly engaged with socio-national American identity. After the postwar prosperity that marked the United States’ emergence as a world power, it was during the following inward looking moment that American classical music came of age.

Much of this era’s classical music claims functional and historically unique characteristics external to the score that distinguish it from earlier music. Because of these qualities, music interacts with American society in a manner more characteristic of non-classical genres. Such a connection was largely absent in the Second New England School or in Americanist works and composers scattered throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they faded as concerns in American classical music culture after World War II. While composers during 1930s utilized an expanded, modernist musical vocabulary alongside new technologies and media, their music was also –
sometimes more so – shaped by dire societal conditions prompted most notably by the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl.

American music historian H. Wiley Hitchcock offers a conventional overview of the decade, explaining that composers held “a new and persistent preoccupation […] with their relationship to the broad musical community and to society at large.” Also representing a broader demographic than previous generations through religion, class, geographical origin, and sexuality, these composers critically engaged with the history and politics of the United States as well as the identities of the country’s people, both in their musical and socio-political pursuits. Their music was therefore useful beyond aesthetic contemplation or beyond, as nineteenth-century American music critic John Sullivan Dwight believed, “familiarizing men with the beautiful and the infinite.”

Although cultural figures continued to promote aesthetic appreciation and espouse classical music’s moralizing potential for the masses, understanding classical music from these perspectives does not fully address the relationship between American classical music and American society during the 1930s.

In light of this relationship, this study investigates the nature of this moment’s musical Americanisms as manifested in the New Deal documentary film The Plow That

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2 Qtd. in Hitchcock 59. Sullivan’s comment on the nature of music comes from an essay extolling the virtues of music as a fine art, as opposed to “that severe protestant spirit” that undermined American religious music.” See John Sullivan Dwight, “Sacred Music,” American Monthly (July 1836): 447-448.

3 Even the director of the New Deal’s Federal Music Project, Nikolai Sokoloff, held such beliefs, in spite of being in one of the most important positions in terms of bringing classical music to a diverse audience.
Broke the Plains (1936), directed by Pare Lorentz, scored by Virgil Thomson, and created under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration (RA). The Plow’s music may be approached from several directions. Classical music is applied to a dramatic medium, the documentary film with synchronized sound, which was a machine age creation unavailable to previous generations of composers. The score reflects high aesthetic sensibilities through its modernist musical language while simultaneously integrating numerous vernacularisms. However, the music violates modernism by functioning propagandistically for the RA, both in the agency’s quest for political survival and in helping to realize its social agenda. As such, it also enters the fray of partisan politics by its association with the New Deal. Accompanying the narrator’s socially inclusive pleadings for compassion about class, the score also assumes a role in racially exclusive episodes in the film’s plot. As a film whose subject is history, the music contributes to inspirational and indicting lessons from the film’s reconstruction of United States history. In these ways, this quintessential piece of American classical music captures the crisis of American identity during this tremendous decade.

The Plow’s setting within a social-historical context offers insights into the nature of American cultural objects from the Great Depression. It also exposes a type of American musical identity, which I identify as functional Americanism, generated by the score but inaccessible through formal or stylistic analysis. Functional Americanism is defined by social utility and context for a given musical work, and it arises from newer ideas about the scope of musicology vis-à-vis cultural studies, historiography, and interdisciplinarity. It is intended as an alternative to Barbara Zuck’s limiting

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4 The film will be referred to subsequently as The Plow.
classification of musical Americanism into only two groups, those of compositional and conceptual Americanism.\(^5\) In Zuck’s system, compositional Americanisms spring from compositional gestures and often utilize pre-existing musical materials to establish or evoke identity through their quotation in a contemporary work. In these ways, they are more closely aligned with traditional musicology. Conceptual Americanisms “[denote] a pro-American-music stance in lectures and writings or through activities in behalf of American music.”\(^6\) It is inferred that these activities have musical implications, but the connection is left unquantified.

This project is a repositioning of The Plow’s music from a purely formalist or stylistic music historical valuation to that of a social and historical artifact by viewing it through the lens of functional Americanism. Functional Americanism reveals the political and social processes that constitute the matrix of The Plow’s inception and deployment. Traditional musicological models for understanding both American music history and documentary film music are not focused on contextual matters. Such approaches are better suited for seeking stylistic relationships with other American classical works and for defining structural relationships with narrative. It is not that musicology based on formal analysis is irrelevant; rather, it is incomplete in addressing the questions posed here.


\(^6\) Zuck 8.
Our Especial Gift

The pretense is that there really is such a thing as “the United States,” subject to occasional conflicts and quarrels, but fundamentally a community of people with common interests. It is as if there really is a “national interest” represented in the Constitution, in territorial expansion, in the laws passed by Congress, the decisions of the courts, the development of capitalism, the culture of education and the mass media.\(^7\)

Howard Zinn

It is important to acknowledge that most of this era’s prominent composers were invested in contemporaneous aesthetic ideas and developments in music theory. Composition, after all, had moved well beyond the common practice period by 1930 with Modernism having long been established.\(^8\) In some cases, this manifested in compositional gestures deployed for their shock or satirical value, as was by now well-trod modernist fare. In other cases composers explored a more socially detached, self-contained means of expression following the maxim *l’art pour l’art*, renewed as a


reaction to the increasing politicization and commodification of the arts. Prompted by early-century experimental composers but realized by those trained in France, a third track of American composers utilized a newer, international modernist language to dislodge the stifling German-Romantic style practiced by their elders. Acknowledging that these descriptions are overly simplified due to the scope of the present study, these modernisms are important components of American music history, necessarily prompting a heightened interest in formal analysis and stylistic comparison.

It should also be noted that composers themselves presented messages at odds with the present study for understanding that which makes their music American. When Aaron Copland wrote the familiar phrase “I felt that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn’t say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms,” he, along with subsequent historians, invited readers to downplay the reason why – to reach a broader audience – and focus instead on the compositional, formal realization of “the simplest possible terms.” Wearing his critic’s hat, Virgil Thomson was already describing Copland’s American qualities – and all American composers’ American qualities – in formalist terms. In his early essay “Aaron Copland,” he poetically explains:

The quality that distinguishes American writing from all other is a very particular and special approach to rhythm. It is in these composers when they forget Stravinsky; it is in all American music whatever its school or

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origins. It is a quiet, vibratory shimmer, a play of light and movement over a well-felt but not expressed basic pulsation, as regular and as varied as a heartbeat, and as unconscious. It is lively but at ease, quiet, assured, lascivious.\textsuperscript{11}

Thomson continues shortly thereafter, “I think our gift, our especial gift, is the particular rhythmic feeling I have described.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, American classical music throughout its relatively brief history is unified by what may be identified as an American approach to rhythm, according to Thomson. By combining Thomson and Copland’s ideas on rhythm and simplicity, we have a straightforward formula for understanding American music that appears to further justify formalist methods of appreciation and research.

This formula, coupled with Modernism’s emphasis on form, may prompt the reader to question the necessity of looking beyond these when defining American musical identity. However, Marxist historian Howard Zinn, quoted in this section’s epigraph, provokingly reminds us of the modifier “American” as he points to negotiations of identity that take place in history and historiography. From his critical retelling of United States history, we extract the lesson that American identity is a formulation of competing political and social efforts that coalesce into a national self. This process occurs through the linkage of philosophical, political, economic, and cultural moments, both as they occur in the past and as they are shaped and reflected upon in the present. Thus, we cannot simply treat “American” from within the score because it is also a socially and


\textsuperscript{12} Thomson 21.
historically negotiated identity. American music is so named not only because works may share common stylistic components but also because they are woven into the fabric of American history. That we refer to a particular body as classical perhaps only limits elements of the stitching but does not remove it from participating in the metahistorical striving towards a coherent national identity. As radical as it may seem, form may even be irrelevant when examining the position of music within this process.

Positioning in a Shifting Discipline and Society

The United States’ bicentennial anniversary prompted reappraisals of American identity throughout society, and the Bicentennial Horizons of American Music and the Performing Arts Festival addressed this in music. Composer William Schuman presented the following observation as the introductory salvo of a “printed symposium on music in American society” from the festival:

At this late date, our country’s two hundredth birthday, one might wonder why it should seem necessary to attempt to define (or redefine) the characteristics that make American music American, yet even now the undertaking is not a simple one: there are many questions to be asked, and more than a few allow for a plurality of valid answers.¹³

In the first half of this statement, Schuman suggests that the “characteristics that make American music American” are self-evident to his audience. The study of such characteristics is redundant, as conclusions about it have long been accepted.

The second half of Schuman’s observation suggests that the conventional arc of American music history includes only a small part of what should be known. The future of this historiographic endeavor would yield a “plurality” of results, by which it is unclear if he means there is more than one right answer to the question at hand or if the whole undertaking itself is steeped in subjectivity. Schuman thus articulates a problem between conventional knowledge and that which is ignored, is perspectively mutable, or has yet to be examined. From this contradiction, relationships are created with more than is written on the page.

Schuman’s historiographic reflections occur within a broader context of change, or a paradigm shift as one scholar describes it, in the arts and humanities, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century and continuing into the present. In music history, this shift began roughly around the same moment as Schuman’s remarks and is marked by such works as Harold Raynor’s A Social History of Music and Richard Leppert and Susan McClary’s Music and Society. Extending into the present day, these and newer studies in this lineage continue to expand that which is permissible to include

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in traditional music histories, from the expanse of the canon’s periphery to questioning
the canon as the definitive guide to historical understanding. The traditional canonical
model views fine art as autonomous from socio-historical circumstance. It privileges
stylistic development, espouses a linear model for that development, and utilizes a
philosophic tradition of artistic genius. Further, these components were developed upon
exclusivities of race, gender, and class. By the second half of the twentieth century, this
model no longer yielded sufficient results. Newer studies, for example, reject the
inherent value judgments in “high” and “low” art while instead engaging with social,
cultural, political, economic, religious, philosophical, and scientific contexts, movements,
and institutions.\textsuperscript{16}

This is not to say that traditional methods faded away quietly or even at all or that
they are without merit, but the simultaneous existence of tradition and change has
generated conflicts that spill out of academia in into society. Some provocative
traditionalists challenge the shift, characterizing it as a liberal, politically correct gambit
to “rape the masters” and demonize the Western intellectual tradition, thereby distorting
history for the promotion of a present-day interest group’s agenda.\textsuperscript{17} A less-politicized,
more scholarly account questions the replacement of traditional fine arts models with
those from cultural studies and sociology. In this way, the fixed boundaries of arts

\textsuperscript{16} I am reminded here of the aghast reaction by a member of my Master’s thesis
committee upon seeing the phrase “historical development” in a thesis draft, the lesson
being that the logical chain of causes, influences, and effects is now suspect, especially as
musical styles go.

\textsuperscript{17} For example, read Richard Kimball’s essays or books on academia or the nature
of art history, such as “The Rape of the Masters,” \textit{New Criterion} 22.4 (December, 2003):
28-32.
disciplines, along with those qualities which make an art object unique, give way to non-arts disciplinary approaches which de-aestheticize art objects and ignore or discount that which makes art art. Offering a twist on discourse of plurality, other voices, such as David Horowitz, characterize these academic changes as an attempt by the liberal professoriate to strip students of their academic freedom by willfully leaving out valid conservative viewpoints, which are often aligned with the older paradigm.\(^{18}\)

Conversely, those critical of the traditional system confirm its persistence. In music, they analyze its entrenchment in college and university music departments, in musicological historiography, and in classical music performance, criticism, and connoisseurship. Recently, I was privileged to hear noted ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl describe the paradigm shift’s slow nature in Midwestern university music departments.\(^{19}\) Among his observations was that ethnomusicology, non-Western ensembles, and popular music studies, while more prevalent today, are increasingly compartmentalized as separate from the hallowed spaces and curricula of Western classical music. Other notable contemporary voices include Timothy Taylor and David Gramit. Taylor begins with discussions of the “fetishiz[ation] of form and style” by traditional musicology at the expense of other interdisciplinary or holistic approaches, the religion of the “classical

\(^{18}\) From my time debating this idea in the Graduate Student Senate at Ohio University, I am most familiar with Ohio, Senate, 126\(^{th}\) General Assembly, “A Bill to Enact Sections 3345.80 and 3345.81 of the Revised Code to Establish the Academic Bill of Rights for Higher Education,” Bill 24, 2005, Ohio Legislature, 8 March 2010 <http://www.legislature.state.oh.us/bills.cfm?ID=126_SB_24>.

music ideology” and its dogma, and the “absence of attention to history as a material force” in music history, a glaring contradiction inherent in traditional musicology.\textsuperscript{20} Gramit links such practices with capitalism’s effects on musicology, suggesting that the “abstraction from social relations to objects” reflects traditional musicology’s expulsion of history and social relationships from music history.\textsuperscript{21} Such perspectives inform this project, albeit less provocatively, in my approach to the musical work in question and in locating the appropriate situation of this work both in history and among musicological scholarship. In these ways, this project refocuses on music’s real conditions as a cultural product crafted and deployed to execute social function in a range of contexts.

Aligning with newer approaches to music history, American musicologist Richard Crawford explains, “Years of studying [American music] had taught me that standard musicological approaches left certain key issues unaddressed.”\textsuperscript{22} He suggests that the trajectory of American music historiography has shifted from chronicles of American composers and their “works for the concert hall,” as exemplified by John Tasker Howard’s \textit{Our American Music}, to scholarship centering instead on performance.\textsuperscript{23} Such a position rejects the “aesthetic hierarchy” that distinguishes between such categories as

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Crawford ix-xi. See also John Tasker Howard, \textit{Our Contemporary Composers: American Music in the Twentieth Century}, 1941 (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1943).
\end{itemize}
classical, popular, and folk. For Crawford, this is an appropriate way to approach American music because of the effects of “our unprecedented democracy” – a phrase he borrows from composer Arthur Farwell – on the scope and nature of historiography. In other words, that which should be included in a history of American music cannot be limited to one tradition because of the egalitarian sensibility of the country. While he acknowledges that historically specific perceptions of and distinctions between classical, popular, and folk are themselves dynamic players in American music history, the implication is that the writing of this history becomes problematic when the author bases scholarship on outmoded hierarchies of taste.

In relation to Schuman’s “plurality of valid answers” and specifically in determining the degree of American and European dispositions in the music of Edward MacDowell, Crawford turns to the ideas of Gary Tomlinson. He writes:

Conundrums such as this have led [Tomlinson] to propose a parallax perspective, which recognizes that because each vantage point yields its own insight, different answers to the same question are not only inevitable but can be highly informative. Applying this perspective allows us to keep the question of Americanism in music open in a way that encourages

\[24\] Crawford xi.

\[25\] Farwell’s quote, quoted in Crawford xi, comes from his 1915 *Music in America*. 
reflection and comparison where partisanship and dispute have often prevailed.\textsuperscript{26}

In this way, music histories from the past should not be discarded but must be recognized for both their foundational qualities as well as their limitations in answering new questions. Perhaps rather than aligning with one camp, music histories should be set beside one another in order to gain insight from their parallax viewpoints. However, parallax histories must be written before they can be compared.

**Re-\textit{visioning American Music History: A Plurality of Answers or Nothing More Than Feelings}**

What was once a rather tidy narrative of stylistic development and general historical context has become an exciting but intractable array of discursive possibilities.\textsuperscript{27}

Mary Ann Calo

In *American Music Since 1910*, Virgil Thomson wrote that Aaron Copland and Roger Sessions’ early music left “American music with a beginning repertory of


modernistic orchestral works, many of them recognizably American in feeling.” An unexamined assumption in 1970 when Thomson wrote this passage is that “American in feeling” is a universal experience, open to all not only in 1970 but from the 1920s through the present day. Another unexamined assumption, made evident when this passage is read along with the rest of chapters one and two, “America’s Musical Maturity” and “American Musical Traits,” is that this “feeling” is appropriately defined in formalist and stylistic terms, just as it was four decades earlier in “Aaron Copland.” Such an approach seems a safe choice for music critics and historians, allowing them to avoid critical studies of history and context through the tempting simplicity of a universal measure of cultural objects. Thomson’s music, despite his critical opinion, and other classical music from the 1930s offer much more on “the characteristics that make American music American.”

During the Great Depression, classical music was a vehicle for ideologies intended to permeate society, not only in the form of philanthropic cultural ideals of the previous generation but now for the aid of those affected by the national tragedy. In this way, American society conversely permeated classical music, sending ideas from the bottom up, into the artist’s mindset and into the government employing the artist. This was certainly no simple dance. In addition to the general malaise caused by the Depression, Americans committed cruelties against Americans, with farmers and laborers receiving considerable scorn (although they, too, were not always innocent). The arts both reflected and addressed these problems. The New Deal produced a wealth of arts,

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many of which were intended to heal the nation culturally through both beauty and persuasion. Far from simple expressions, these arts can be complex and problematic. As records of artists’ responses to the crisis, they may be shaped by political viewpoints and sponsoring institutions. This dissertation, while only able to skim the surface of possibilities, seeks common ground for these cultural movements, institutions and organizations, and people as they revolve around a documentary film score. The result will be an exploration of a purposive, functional musical Americanism as it was deployed in a range of social contexts.

With these issues in mind, Chapter One engages in a metacritical investigation of attitudes on musical Americanism. The chapter moves swiftly throughout American history, sampling and juxtaposing ideas from composers, critics, and scholars. Drawing especially on quotations and texts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these materials are treated as primary sources. From the cultural awakening of the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of an American classical music is a powerful motivational force in classical music culture. Rather than focusing on specific sounds that are said to be American, it is equally important to re-examine the assumption that a sound can be American by re-examining those who make the assumption.

After presenting the historical body of ideas from which an American classical music could emerge, Chapter Two turns its attention to the art object in question – The Plow. This chapter examines the relationship between context and structure by introducing the cultural and political conditions surrounding the film and relating those to the existence of multiple versions of The Plow. Versions One, Two, and Three, distinguished by the presence or absence of a mysterious epilogue and the internal
ordering of content, present historians and audiences with challenges in understanding The Plow. I investigate how this problem resonates in scholarship on the film and its music.

Chapter Three begins a reading of The Plow through its midpoint, and Chapter Four takes us through the end of the film and into the recently rediscovered Epilogue. Beginning with pre-Prologue materials, music, image, text, narration, and film are analyzed alongside composer, director, producer, history, contemporaneous events and contexts (political, social, etc.), and subsequent scholarship in order to begin the unfinished process of creating an interdisciplinary study of The Plow. While music is the focus of the present study, it is inextricable from this matrix if its meaning is to be fully understood.

Chapter Five closes this study with my own thoughts on the nature of musical Americanism as exemplified by The Plow. Functional Americanism can reach beyond the musical score, beyond ideas, and beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries of music. Through such an understanding of musical Americanism, this chapter concludes by considering the possibility of The Plow as a musical work in an American classical idiom of function rather than style.
CHAPTER ONE: MUSICAL AMERICANISMS AND ATTITUDES

What is “American” in American music is only peripherally (if at all) measurable by the criteria of scholarly investigation. 29

William Schuman

What, then constitutes distinctively American music? Is it a matter of style? nationality? Indigenous quotation? the composer’s intent? subject matter? performance history? the commentator’s position? some combination of these factors and others? […] So many different criteria have been used to measure musical Americanism – aesthetic, stylistic, historical, political – that there seems little prospect of finding a definition satisfactory to all. 30

Richard Crawford

A Tale of Pale Copies

Schuman and Crawford, whose thoughts span the musicological paradigm shift described in the Introduction, present ideas that do not offer promise for the task at hand. The former issues a warning of sorts to scholars while the latter suggests a failure for the

29 Schuman 16.
30 Crawford 381.
plethora of investigations that did not heed Schuman’s words. Schuman’s solution, discussed later in this chapter, for defining musical Americanism is important because it continued a common way of thinking about American music into the late twentieth century. Crawford, while likely including ideas like Schuman’s in his assessment, fails to take his own advice. In grand fashion, he posits the parallax perspective described earlier. Composers, critics, and scholars of earlier eras had their own questions and doubts, less about the prospect of defining musical Americanism and instead about the ability to create it. This chapter, rather than measuring or defining, will survey the history of and attitudes on musical Americanism. In doing so, it will not only establish a historical framework from which to proceed but also obtain metacritical understanding of this problem. The point of this chapter is not to reveal musical meaning in The Plow but rather to position musical Americanism from the 1930s in this broader context.

The phrase “musical Americanism” has been used in this study to describe the practices of expressing “America” in music and evaluating the results in criticism and scholarship. As traditionally understood, homegrown styles, media, and genres or distinctly American stamps on pre-existing styles, media, and genres distinguish musical Americanisms from European traditions and influences on American practices and tastes. As mentioned above, similar phenomena may be explored throughout American arts cultures inherited from Europe. These are especially prominent at specific historical moments, including the young United States’ assertion of its independence from all kinds of European models (political, religious, social, economic, etc.), its maturation into an international economic and military power, and finally today’s reassessment of the traditional assumptions of the American experience.
First in this twofold pursuit is the music itself along with the historical statements by composers, critics, and audiences on American identity in American music. Second are reflections on and studies of the past by notable cultural figures and scholars. When combined as articulated in the Introduction, musical Americanism becomes the synthesis of an after-the-fact field of study within musicology and the compositional and critical practices from history. In other words, composers attempt to write music that is somehow “American,” critics evaluate the “American-ness” of that music, and musicologists sift through it all for historical meaning.

The primary thrust of studies in musical Americanism focuses on a single musical tradition: American classical music. At its core is the establishment and maturation of an American cultural identity in music, usually limited by or measured against race, gender, class, nationality, genre, and style. The result is a collection of American sounds and compositional techniques within classical music, or what Hitchcock defines as the “cultivated tradition,” in the United States. Such music’s American style is said to speak in an American idiom and express an American sensibility and outlook. However, there exists less information on the relationship between classical music and the broader society it serves. Functional rather than stylistic musical Americanisms have not been adequately studied, since “function” and “art” have been set into conflict by the

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31 Hitchcock explains, “I mean by the term ‘cultivated tradition’ a body of music that America had to cultivate consciously, music faintly exotic, to be approached with some effort, and to be appreciated for its edification – its moral, spiritual, or aesthetic values.” He sets this against vernacular music: “By the ‘vernacular tradition’ I mean a body of music more plebeian, native, not approached self-consciously but simply grown into as one grows into one’s vernacular tongue; music understood and appreciated simply for its utilitarian or entertainment value” (56).
prevailing methodologies of former music histories, as exemplified by Hitchcock’s own cultivated-vernacular dichotomy.

Barbara Zuck suggests that musical Americanism originated as a reaction to “a kind of socio-artistic discrimination that discouraged the development of a vital American creative musical culture” inherent in the label “American composer” before 1930.32 She places its beginnings in the awakening of American cultural self-identification during the nineteenth century, “when American musical culture was just becoming active enough to manifest conflict between native and foreign ideals.”33 Barbara L. Tischler contextualizes this discrimination, writing “The history of concert music in the United States has been punctuated by periodic calls for a compositional idiom that reflects the American experience.”34

By studying the histories of these two currents, we see that while those making “periodic calls” wanted American American music, they did so against a backdrop of negative judgments concerning the American music which already existed. Musical Americanism thus begins as a problem of identity: those American classical composers who strove to engage with American ideas, ideals, experiences, and musics could not rise above their well-established European counterparts – counterparts whose music shaped the taste of American audiences.


33 Zuck ix.

The 1930 American Supplement to the Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians, a timely work summarizing attitudes immediately preceding the era concerning the present study, explains that in “the first two-thirds” of the nineteenth century, “original impetus in the fields of science, letters and several forms of fine arts first became notable.” Throughout this century, American fine arts cultures existed at varying points along an uncomfortable continuum. Americans desired praise from abroad and hoped to achieve a competency on par with Europe while they also rejected European conventions and tastes and attempted to create uniquely American traditions. The desire to forge things uniquely American, perhaps a carryover from the revolutionary era, is thus set into motion against European tastes and traditions imported and cultivated in the New World.

Ralph Waldo Emerson provides an example of this sentiment, demonstrating a cultural zeitgeist that classical music would not immediately follow. In “The American Scholar,” his famous address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society, he suggests that American scholarship, philosophy, and literature were “the parrot of other men’s thinking.” He warns, “We have listened far too long to the courtly muses of Europe” and predicts that through his Americanist prescription, “We will walk on or own feet; we will work with


our own hands; we will speak our own minds.” In an instant, he both condemns American culture and calls its practitioners to action.

Wanda M. Corn provides a summary of similar attitudes as they relate to American visual art. She explains:

The roots of [inferiority] run deep, stretching back into the eighteenth century when the first American artists and intellectuals voiced their doubts whether a country as young and unsophisticated as theirs could breed fine arts: “A taste of painting is too much Wanting,” lamented John Singleton Copley in the 1760s. […] From the Englishman Sydney Smith, who in 1820 asked disdainfully, “Who looks at an American picture and statue?” to the Art Nouveau entrepreneur, Siegfried Bing, whose treatise of the 1890s on the American arts judged local painting and sculpture ambitious but unoriginal, to the influential Marcel Duchamp who in 1917 proclaimed American contributions to world culture to be bridges and plumbing, foreign critics have ignored or maligned the achievements of New World artists.

Though today we view these arts histories much differently than they were experienced by the historical figures quoted here, these attitudes reveal a cultural atmosphere that was

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37 Emerson.

both hostile and hopeful. Americanist works would have to negotiate these attitudes, and few did so successfully in music.

American art music lagged behind its cultural peers. Zuck suggests that “as a movement [musical Americanism] sputtered on and off throughout the 1800s.”

Composer Edward MacDowell confirms this view self-deprecatingly; while consciously attempting to write American music, he conceded in the 1890s, “Our music thus far is mainly a scholarly restatement of Old World themes; in other words it is derived from Germany – as all my earlier pieces were.”

Shortly before MacDowell’s assessment, Frederick Grant Gleason, after attending an all-American concert, pronounced that “the time is at hand when the native artist or composer will be granted equal rights with his brother from over the sea.” Still earlier, composer William Henry Fry expressed his own hopes and worries:

It is time we had a Declaration of Independence in Art, and laid a foundation of an American school of Painting, Sculpture, and Music. Until this Declaration of Independence in art be made – until American composers shall discard their foreign liveries and found an American

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39 Zuck ix.

40 Qtd. in Crawford 378.

School – and until the American public shall learn to support American artists, Art shall not become indigenous to this country.\textsuperscript{42}

Although the United States claimed competent, well-trained composers, the criteria on which their music was created and received depended on European styles and tastes. Also, it may be argued that nothing about their musical output suggested a nationally diverse or representative American identity or uniquely American advancement of the inherited and imported European tradition.

Before the Revolutionary War, upper class tastes followed those across the ocean as late as the conclusion of the French and Indian War. These were largely British subjects after all. Even George Washington ordered his formal clothing from London tailors, distrusting of his fellow Virginians’ knowledge of the latest European styles. In the post-revolutionary era, the urgency of nationalism gave way to a renewed interest in European culture; the first rejection of American culture was at hand. Irving Lowens describes this period: “After the first wave of national pride had subsided in the 1790s and the new born ‘Americans’ began to rediscover the virtues of Old World culture, a reaction against nationalism set in – or, at least, what was ‘made in America’ was considered inferior, ipso facto, to what was made abroad.”\textsuperscript{43} On American music, Lowens writes:

\textsuperscript{42} William Henry Fry, “Mr. Fry’s ‘American Ideas’ about Music,” Dwight’s Journal of Music 2.23 (March 1853): 181; qtd. in Zuck 18.

This state of affairs [...] resulted in the repudiation, by “scientific”
musicians from such centers of learning as Dartmouth College, of the
“crude, naïve efforts” in composition undertaken by American citizens.
The anti-American reaction was particularly pronounced along the Eastern
seaboard, as commerce with the mother country once again picked up
momentum and those responsible for the first “golden age of American
choral music” fell silent and allowed their music to be supplanted by the
latest tunes from England and Europe.44

This lineage of calls for American music and criticisms of whatever
already existed appears throughout critical writings from American history and is
reiterated by countless historical surveys and studies. The period drawing the most
disdain stretches from the late nineteenth century through the early 1930s. In 1929,
Irving Weil wrote one of the most poignant examples in Modern Music:

Nothing new and nothing different from what we already have is now to
be expected, we suppose, from the Chadwicks, the Loefflers and
Converses, or even the Masons, the Hills and the Carpenters of America.
And we believe no one would have enough hardy pessimism to consider
their output the highest achievement possible in the growing history of
native music. It follows inevitably, then, that the creation of essentially
American and truly important music still lies ahead and that our hopes are

44 Lowens 4-5.
perforce bound up in the young men of the moment and still younger ones already discernible behind them.\textsuperscript{45}

Weil’s hopes for American music were strong but remained unfulfilled. Yet again, Americans looked toward the future and discarded the present.

This example emphasizes a historical consciousness that underscores the next decade, which may be observed in Virgil Thomson’s criticism. In his characteristic straightforward style, he evaluates American classical music writing, “Our highbrow music [. . .] is notoriously ineffective. It is the bane of audiences at home and abroad [. . .].”\textsuperscript{46} Though not directly a comment on what makes American highbrow music \textit{American}, this quote is taken from a context ripe with commentary on what American music is and should be. Thomson wrote this a few months before the Presidential election in 1932, after Black Friday but before the bond tying classical composers and performers to society during the 1930s and 1940s was realized in the wake of the growing national crisis caused by the Great Depression.

Writing a few decades later in \textit{American Music Since 1910}, Thomson extends his judgment of the past further to the second half of the nineteenth century. He duplicates MacDowell’s assessment of himself and his peers. He explains that though they “were the grandfathers of us all,” omitting Amy Beach, and despite “all the charm and


competence of their music,” it was nonetheless “a pale copy of its continental models.”

Thus, Thomson’s respected critical voice preserves this stream of evaluation into the last third of the twentieth century.

So, despite nineteenth-century rally cries for American arts, nineteenth and twentieth century appraisals found the results in music to be lacking. Remarkably, this seeming failure was quite different from that of the rest of the Western world. As Charles Hamm explains, while “musical nationalism was one of the great issues of the nineteenth century such matters were of little concern to American composers until the very end” of that century. He continues, “[. . .] those Americans who were seen as ‘serious’ composers were convinced that the Germanic style was the only basis for successful composition.” Hitchcock summarizes the prevailing “Germanophilia” of this generation:

American music of the cultivated tradition from the end of the Civil War to the end of World War I was largely dominated by the attitudes, the ideals, and the modes of expression of nineteenth-century Europe, particularly Austria and Germany. Our leading composers almost to a man were initiated into music by first-generation Americans emigrated from Europe; they were trained professionally during sojourns in Europe;

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49 Hamm 413.
and when they came back their music was played by ensembles, choruses, and orchestras led either by Europeans or Europe-trained conductors.\textsuperscript{50} From this we can extract a disconnect between audience taste and education on the one hand and criticism on the other. American classical music was locked into a conservative mindset, resting its fortunes on the achievement of a competency in a well-established and respected Germanic idiom.

World War I had a profound effect on Americans’ attitudes toward German culture. Additionally, the infrastructure necessary to cultivate homegrown music was largely in place. That said, Thomson and his generation continued the pattern of studying in Europe; however, their interests were principally in newer developments led by French and Russian music. It is difficult to say whether or not this training would have produced notable musical Americanisms were it not for the Great Depression and the social awareness it forced upon them. Nonetheless, American music was on a new course, and by the time we arrive at Schuman’s solution for defining musical Americanism critical assessment had also changed. Despite suggesting problems concerning investigations of musical Americanism in the epigram, Schuman offers a path forward, writing, “We can, however, at least proceed from the acknowledgement that there is a more or less generally recognizable American character in music, as distinctive in its way—or ways—as the music, say, of Spain, Russia, France, or Scandinavia.”\textsuperscript{51} Such music “unarguably

\textsuperscript{50} Hitchcock 148.

\textsuperscript{51} Schuman 15.
exudes the pulse and flavor of the land and its people.‖\textsuperscript{52} This is quite different from earlier assessments; American classical music was no longer judged as inferior.

**Limitations of Conceptual Americanisms**

Schuman’s definition confirms his warning to scholars. Despite its positive bent, quantifying such intangible qualities may be difficult. He makes this task more challenging when he explains that he is not referring to folk materials but instead to “simply feeling the national spirit and breathing with it, however loosely or vaguely that may be defined.”\textsuperscript{53} Similar sentiments are actually quite common in pronouncements on American musical identity. For example, Zuck recounts this exchange between composer Roger Sessions and a student:

> As part of Sessions’ presentation, a recording of his cantata *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d* was played. With the brazenness only a student possesses, someone asked the composer how his setting “compared” to Hindemith’s. Sessions commented on the two works’ diverse styles, firmly concluding that only an American could treat the poem appropriately because only an American could understand it. No one challenged his response.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} Schuman 16.

\textsuperscript{53} Schuman 16.

\textsuperscript{54} Zuck ix.
Sessions implies the existence of a shared body of American memories and experiences which is lost on Hindemith, a non-native interloper. These ideas may be further connected to the universality of experience touched on in the Introduction though Virgil Thomson’s description of works that were “recognizably American in feeling.” Still more, these are reinforced though the de-historicization attempted by adherents of the classical music ideology described by Taylor. As classical music is removed from historical context, it becomes easier to attribute to it intangible, immeasurable characteristics. The end result sees the relationship between experience, nationality, and style explained by unsubstantiated concepts applied as if they are universal in American classical music.

Such universalisms are commonly expressed by composers, critics, and scholars both past and present. While they attempt definitively to link style and concept, they are actually historically and culturally relative sentiments and usually are more poetic than precise. In the American classical music setting, we might read of Stephen Foster, who “achieved national expression wholly unconsciously.”55 Or of Charles Seegers’s “post-Brahmsian piano writing” that “is spacious in an American pioneering vein.”56 Or of Dvořák’s African-American musical inspiration, which was “the product of the soil.”57


56 Mellers xiii.

Or of Aaron Copland, who in addition to being “recognizably American in feeling” is also “a prophet calling out her sins to Israel,” is “the god of battle, the Lord of Hosts, the jealous, the angry, the avenging god who rides upon the storm,” and whose “gentler movements of his music are more like an oriental in contemplation of infinity.” 58 Or, to return to Schuman’s comprehensive analysis, that a composer becomes American by “simply feeling the national spirit and breathing with it.” 59 The tendency for composers, critics, and scholars to use these conceptual Americanisms is a fact of history no matter how much we may now question their usefulness in understanding that history. In this way, their totality becomes its own historical phenomenon, capable of being studied metacritically as a kind of historiographic body. Nonetheless this totality relies on an inarticulate methodology which fails to transcend opinion, taste, and moment despite claims of universality.

Schuman, like Thomson, asserts the existence of an American quality in classical music. However, he does not root it in a formal element as Thomson did with rhythm, and he believes it to be comprehensible by almost anyone, or that it is “generally recognizable.” 58 59 Given the historically important occasion of his remarks and his comparison to national styles of European classical music, we can assume that Schuman is reaching into history, perhaps even into the previous century when Romantic composers began distancing themselves from the so-called international style of the Mythology of the American West, 1895-1945,” diss, U of California, Berkeley, 2002, 1-9.

58 Thomson, Reader 19.

59 Schuman 16.
eighteenth century. Following his logic, this American character may continue to be recognizable in current American classical music, leaving us with a considerable period of time to investigate. Schuman supports such an extended timeline by continuing, “When enough beholders perceive the product to be indigenous, then so it becomes. A body of recognizable characteristics has emerged through the collective experience of listeners over a long period of time, and we call the result American.” The consensus argument would seem to match a people defined by their constitutional right to vote, but there are two problems with this method of determining American musical identity. First, by using this argument, Schuman contradicts his and others’ assertions that American identity is inherent in American music rather than conferred upon it. Second and more generally, the consensus argument does not appear to match the historical reality of American classical music’s audience demographic.

Hitchcock, in tracing the “two bodies of American music” – his “vernacular” and “cultivated” traditions – that developed through the nineteenth century, writes that in the second half of the century, classical music was “by no means widespread throughout all segments of the [American] populace.” Richard Crawford also says of American composers of the late nineteenth century that “[their] encounter with democracy was marked, most of all, by a refusal to give in to it – if giving in required any compromise

60 Schuman 16-17.

61 Hitchcock 57.
with artistic seriousness.” These observations by two key figures suggest that classical music did not typically meet with a general audience.

Performance logistics and audience taste from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries actually retarded the American composer from reaching an audience large enough to test the consensus argument. As late as the 1930 edition of the American Supplement to Grove, the author comments on the state of affairs in musical taste. He laments that in spite of the “advancement” in the “proportion and importance of native musicians [. . .] the persistence of the old tradition in favor of music and musicians from overseas has since 1900 become increasingly unfortunate.” Crawford summarizes another problem for the American composer, writing, “Nineteenth-century Americans struggled to build and maintain” the “musical infrastructure” necessary to support classical music performance, though he notes that these conditions changed by the end of the century. In addition to American tastes during this time, American composers also lacked the means to reach large audiences for much of the nineteenth century.

In his examination of performance culture in the United States through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Nicholas Tawa provides insight into the culture surrounding possibly the first coherent group of composers articulating an American identity in classical music, those of Second New England School. Through “the excellence of its composers, schools, performance opportunities, and a social milieu that

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62 Crawford 354.

63 Pratt 81, 82.

64 Crawford 351.
encouraged fellowship among composers,” as evidenced by “the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the finest permanent orchestra of the time; the superb musical instruction available at Harvard University and other schools; and the city’s active intellectual and cultural life,” this School achieved international recognition. It was thus able to “bring forth a [musical] culture, creating the living chain that we call tradition.”65 In spite of Tawa’s supportive description, their biographies and styles seem at odds with a nationalistic spirit, and their music would have a short shelf life.

All of these composers were trained in either in Germany or Boston, “which had given itself over to German music and German ideas on music,” or to the Germanophilia described earlier by Hitchcock and lamented in Grove.66 Specifically, theirs was an identity linked to class – and one with wagons circled. Tawa, certainly aware of this, explains:

Large urban centers made possible the variety of cultural resources essential for art music but also produced a sense of transition and social instability in Americans of an older Yankee stock with some education


66 Tawa 2.
and pretensions to high culture. Among these last were our six [New England] composers.\textsuperscript{67}

While they may have been articulating an American identity through subcultural musical Americanisms, both their audience and future influence were narrow and would not seem large enough to support a historical consensus in determining any sort of universal musical Americanism. Further, there is a disconnect between this group and the next noteworthy generation, who were schooled in French and Russian modernism and who were writing for a very different audience during the 1930s. Differences in context and in compositional assumptions and choices separate these two groups, rendering impossible any sort of consensus.

Interestingly, classical music itself was not foreign in the lives of Americans outside the Northeast. Far from the cloistered existence of classical music culture in New England against all kinds of modern threats, Michael Broyles explains:

\begin{quote}
In the second half of the [nineteenth century] art music went from being nowhere, an oxymoron to most Americans, to being everywhere. Once the notion caught on, art music could be found in every state, city, territory, or even mining town. Far from being an urban phenomenon limited to a few cultural centers or large eastern cities, by the end of the century art music has become a familiar if not common aspect of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{67} Tawa 4.
American life throughout the country. As the frontier pushed westward, it was never far behind.⁶⁸

However, despite the proliferation of art music, the American composer’s role in this movement was peripheral. Broyles confirms what others quoted here have stated, that “throughout the nineteenth century the American public continued to assume that if a composer was American, he was inferior,” and that the American composer faced the additional difficulty of being heard in his or her own country.⁶⁹

Rather than establishing an Americanist tradition for future generations of composers, performers, and audiences to reference and build upon, perhaps the more important story from the nineteenth century is that classical music gained a foothold in the country. It may be expecting too much from a country with such a short history and with largely non-native origins to so quickly and successfully create a classical music, let alone one that is somehow tied to national identity. On the other end of this timeline, the appropriate moment for an Americanist classical music with a broad audience seems to have passed as audiences have long since gravitated toward popular music. Thus, musical Americanisms in classical music founded on conceptual universalisms of style are impossible to confirm, and those founded on audience consensus may actually be historically impossible to achieve.

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⁶⁹ Broyles 235, 236.
Limitations of Compositional Americanism

If the trademark of nationality is indispensable, why cover it with the badge of whilom slavery rather than with the stern but at least manly and free rudeness of the North American Indian?\textsuperscript{70}

Edward MacDowell

Compositional Americanisms are rooted in the Romantic practice of setting folk and other vernacular music in classical contexts, which lasted well into the twentieth century. In Europe, while commonly used as a means to originality and the exotic within a formerly ordered musical language, this practice also focused on politics and the state. Folk and vernacular quotations were often prompted by movements of self-determination and utilized as legitimizing cultural expressions. Similarly, a state could legitimize itself through an association with a folk heritage, thereby giving its music a veneer of national universalism through the co-opting of folk traditions predating the constructed culture of the nation-state. Even well-established nations found such practices useful in jingoistically rallying their peoples around government policies and actions. Beyond simple expressions of national pride, it became necessary to emphasize a nation’s authority in the face of a militarizing Europe and an ever shrinking globe to colonize, lest Europe turn on itself.

\textsuperscript{70} Edward MacDowell on Dvořák’s prescription for American classical music, qtd. in Crawford 384.
The United States emerged as a leading industrial power in the early twentieth century. At the same time, Dvořák’s famous sojourn in the country produced a model for using native and homegrown American musical materials in his Ninth Symphony. Despite the common perception of being a few steps behind Europe culturally, the composers of this moment had an opportunity to capitalize on non-classical sources. Indeed, they had already begun doing this before Dvořák in the mid to late nineteenth century. As Tischler explains, these composers believed “that America could find its musical identity in local versions of transplanted English folk ballads, Indian tribal melodies, and spirituals and works songs of Afro-American slaves.” However, she believes this project was a failure through “the absence of a homogenous population” and the lack of its “common heritage,” which “could provide music recognizable by an entire population as American.” Her assessment is only partially correct.

The quotations of such folk materials or mimicking of folk styles in the American context brings with it unique problems: those of otherness and empire. While white folk cultures may also be put through an othering process, we can usually draw distinctions between European classical music’s borrowing of its own folk materials and its encounters with non-Western materials. In the United States, however, these were often not separate. The articulation of American identity, or better of American selfhood, in classical music thus becomes entangled in several problems, including the European-versus-American identity crisis, indigenous cultural identities and their relationship with

71 Tischler 5.

72 Tischler 6.
white America, westward expansion and its effects on the national consciousness, empire building, and a tonal system forged in the fires of colonialism and imperialism, as some scholars have suggested.\textsuperscript{73} We might also add to this list scholars and critics who insist on evaluation of style, thereby overlooking other possibilities for meaning.

Composer George Whitefield Chadwick and his treatment by scholars serves as an example. He is credited by Hitchcock for “his sympathy [. . .] for the American vernacular tradition’s music [. . .].”\textsuperscript{74} Hitchcock relies on Victor Yellin’s study of the composer, expounding on Yellin’s summary that his late works from the twentieth century display “a gradual discard of the German conservatory style [and] a more mature musical language, combining pentatonic melody, subdominant-modal harmony and syncopated rhythmic elements.”\textsuperscript{75} In earlier works such as his Symphony No. 2, he prefigures “the ‘Negro’ themes of Dvořák’s much discussed ‘New World’ Symphony,” other works utilize “a folk-like pentatonicism,” and his opera Tabasco features a “plantation ballad.”\textsuperscript{76} Even Crawford, cited earlier for his use of newer approaches to classical music’s history, joins in, exploring the “recent” idea that Chadwick created an “American symphonic style” and stating that the “Yankee Composer” is so-called because he was “a musician fully at home in European genres but approach[ed] them

\textsuperscript{73} See Taylor, who also includes a list of such scholars in his first footnote and is himself one.

\textsuperscript{74} Hitchcock 153.


\textsuperscript{76} Hitchcock 154, 156.
through an American sensibility.” Included in Crawford’s exegesis of style, he mentions that “traits of his style include a fondness for pentatonic and gapped scales” and “African-Caribbean dance syncopations,” as well a few Anglo-American traits that distinguish his music from German models. However, Hitchcock ultimately levels a common condemnation on Chadwick, writing that despite the occasional successful (and he does not define what this would be) assimilation of classical and folk, “often […] they are lodged in a lushly harmonized and orchestrated matrix that contradicts their very nature.” Much like the contemporary practice of remixing a popular song often overlooks an original melody’s harmonic implications, his unsympathetic aping of indigenous elements in a late-Romantic-but-still-Germanic context does not work, according to Hitchcock. In these two major texts representing the past fifty or so years of American scholarship, style is still the fundamental component of analysis for these authors, and it is style that undermines Americanist intent.

Moving to twentieth-century music and to a major work of music history preceding Hitchcock, John Tasker Howard generalizes the tendency described by Hitchcock and Crawford in a different light. He notes that the “extremely vocal demand that we become nationalist overnight” made “anything that derived from the North American continent […] fair game for adaptation.” He argues that in this scramble to appropriate “songs of the American Indian” and the “‘spirituals’ of the Negro,” composers overlooked one key issue: “Nothing in the composer of European antecedents

77 Crawford 358.

78 Hitchcock 154.

79 Howard 5.
gave him any racial sympathy for these melodies.”

Thus, an American composition incorporating non-white musical materials “was bound to approach them objectively and self-consciously,” and “Indian and Negro Melodies” to the white American “were almost as exotic as Chinese or Moroccan.” In other words, Howard is implying that if one does not have roots in a particular folk culture then one cannot correctly appropriate its music.

The legitimizing potential of folk music is thus called into question by Howard.

While these style-based descriptions of a Europeanized setting of a non-Western melody may be correct according to the logic of the Western tonal system, perhaps something else is responsible – rather than being the passive result of lacking “racial sympathy.” There were forces at work in the social consciousness of the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries based especially on race but also class. Tischler is closer to the truth when she explains that the American composer “invited disapproval, even scorn, for bringing the vulgar music of poor southern white settlers, Indians, and slaves into the respectable concert hall.”

In the same decade Dvořák was making his famous recommendations that a “truly national music might be derived from the negro melodies or Indian chants” and despite earlier attempts to do just that, American society by and large was not ready for such cultural miscegenation, even if the balance of power was tipped heavily toward classical music.

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80 Howard 5.

81 Tischler 7.

Although my brief treatment here will not do justice to racial attitudes defining this period, a few events support the argument that racism and a crisis in white identity combined to hinder the perceived effectiveness of certain compositional Americanisms. For example, in May of 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States heard a case involving Homer Plessy, an octoroon and member of the Citizen’s Committee to Test the Separate Car Act. In violation of Act 111 of the Louisiana state government, he deliberately boarded a white car belonging to the East Louisiana Railroad. In the majority opinion (seven to one) of the now infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Justice Harry Billings Brown wrote:

> Legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts or to abolish distinctions based on physical differences, and the attempt to do so can only result in accentuating the differences of the present situation. If the civil and political rights of both races be equal, one cannot be inferior to the other civilly or politically. If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them on the same plane.\(^8^3\)

Thus, even the legal system continued to direct a separation of races. Beyond the obvious justification for racial purity in music, such separations were sure to reinforce critics of nonwhite folk quotations in classical music as violations of the Romantic ideal of “folk.”

Racism extended beyond African Americans. Six years earlier, more than 300 Sioux were murdered by the US Army at the village of Wounded Knee, a few days after Sitting Bull was killed by tribal police acting on orders from the United States government to arrest him for participating in the Ghost Dance movement. Beyond the United States’ borders, hundreds of thousands of Asians, South Americans, and Caribbeans were killed as the result of American military intervention and empire building in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, the 1890 census and subsequent Turner Thesis announced the end of the American frontier, creating a crisis in white American identity forged since the earliest colonists eeked out an existence. Against such a backdrop, the possibility was minute for success of an American musical identity based on quotations of non-white folk music in the late nineteenth century.

Opinions did not change dramatically after the century mark. The 1930 edition of the American Supplement of *Grove* provides an example of attitudes supporting a race-based compositional Americanism. In answering “a question that has been more urgent since 1900 than before,” or the question on how an “American ‘type’ or ‘school’ of composition” should take shape, the authors suggest that “a ‘national’ type should rest upon something in the nature of folk-music.”

African- and Native-American music are the two solutions:

On the one hand, the songs of the Negroes of the South have been emphasized. Thoughtful attention to these began at the time of the Civil War and especially about 1870, when the original ‘Jubilee Singers’ were heard at home and abroad. Of course, the picturesque sentiment in such

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84 Pratt 82.
melodies had been felt long before and artistically used, as for example, by Foster as early as 1845. But in 1885 Negro themes were put to orchestral use by Chadwick and in 1894 more ostentatiously by Dvořák. Since then the latent richness of this vein of melodic and rhythmic ore has been diligently searched out by many composers, with results most interesting and often impressive.

On the other hand, the songs of the Indians of the West have also been emphasized. Attention to these was first called by the original study of Theodore Baker in 1882 – a study which in part inspired the drafting of MacDowell’s ‘Indian Suite’ some ten years later. Since 1901 the value of this source has been valiantly upheld by a circle of enthusiasts led by Arthur Farwell. The result is that this vein, too, has been worked with great ability and increasing tangible results. It has the obvious advantage of bringing into view not only tonal patterns, but the literary or dramatic quality inherent in Indian fantasy and legend.85

Upon first reading, it may seem like the author of this authoritative reference work approves of using non-white folk music in a classical context.

We must always be sure to recognize the roles African- and Native-Americans played in this system: very little. White American and European audiences perceived such “literary and dramatic qualities” and “picturesque sentiments” seldom through self-representation by these raced minorities but through the mediation of white artists and

85 Pratt 82-83.
commentators. Even when self-representation could occur, it was impossible to transcend the legalized, institutionalized, and socialized systems of oppression and hatred, and often performers instead gave white audiences what they expected to see. It may even be important to question the term “folk” in these cases, given the geographical and racial differences in the United States, resulting from colonialism and Manifest Destiny, as opposed to European folk models utilized for classical appropriation.

Timothy Taylor concludes, “Representations of otherness in music [. . .] were in effect akin to the colonial exploitation of natural resources,” suggesting that the dehumanization of the non-white American continued well into the twentieth century by American classical music. In the quest to establish a quantifiable, compositional identity in American music, social contexts become as important as the melodic fragments and harmonic systems. On its own, then, this Romantic method of musical syncretism does not instantly imbue the musical result with the identity of a nation or a people, though it can eventually as it begins functioning as a cultural object. In this process, Beth Ellen Levy adds that composers’ “selection of source materials reflects their views on race and class, and their manipulation of these sources mirrors the power relations among American population groups. In short, their music encodes the same tensions and resolutions embodied in the nation they represented.”86

Thus, the identity created is far more complex than stylistic analysis alone reveals. In the American context the baggage of racism and classism cannot be whitewashed through a de-historicizing discussion of style. If we do not want to deal with history, then

compositional Americanisms still can provide a partial means for discovering and articulating the nature of American classical music. However, the sole reliance on analysis of compositional Americanisms only has significant usefulness in matters of musical mechanics and style, and as this chapter demonstrates, it is wholly inappropriate to draw conclusions for music history based only on these.

“*What, then constitutes distinctively American music?*”

In Howard’s survey of American music history, once an authoritative text, he begins impenitently with assessment of American classical music’s state of affairs before Thomson, Copland, and their generation entered the scene. He proclaims:

> The time for an apologetic attitude towards our music has passed. [...] To admit that we have produced no Beethoven or Wagner is not to belittle our musical product; as a nation we were in our musical infancy [...] when these giants were active, and since their time Europe itself has not produced their equal. [...] Nor is it a confession of present-day mediocrity to admit that in past years American composers leaned heavily on European models. 87

Thus, as a tradition imported from Europe, it was entirely logical for American classical composers to study the foundations on which their fledgling music was based.

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87 Howard 3.
Perhaps it is anachronistic, then, for twentieth-century authors to apply their critical standards to music of the nineteenth, when education, inspiration, audience, and many other factors were significantly different. Further, it may be ludicrous to compare a musical tradition with such a short gestation period to Europe’s which, according to the historical narrative, begins with the theoretical knowledge of music from the ancient Western civilizations that is transmitted through the Middle Ages and finally into the Renaissance, where Western Civilization makes its triumphal rebirth and resumes global domination.

However, after suggesting this different method of interpreting the past, Howard changes his tune and backslides into the familiar pastime of judgmental criticism: “Suffice it to say that periodically over the past three centuries native elements in our music have been overwhelmed by wholesale immigrations of foreigners and foreign ideas [. . .]. For many years Americans were content to tolerate such a state of affairs.”

He assesses that composers were content with “having little that was individual to say for themselves.” Using the familiar American identifier of individualism, Howard moves from a descriptive rather than qualitative assessment of the past, an unusual approach among his peers, to suggesting that past composers were passively weak. While the reason may be different from other opinions surveyed in this chapter, his negative judgment of the past is the same.

American identity in American classical music is a study in contradiction and misdirection. It is an identity pulled simultaneously toward the grand ancient tradition of —

88 Howard 4.

89 Howard 4.
Europe and toward the limitless possibilities offered by the United States, at least in concept. It is bound with the history of a rapidly maturing nation, growing too fast to reconcile its Enlightenment ideals concerning the condition of humanity with its legalized dehumanization of its non-white population and its unequal class structure and wealth distribution. It is a story of a class-based artform occasionally courting the masses but usually satisfying the capitalist aristocracy. Its critics and historians, rather than investigating social context, instead turned to the mechanics of music composition and the theoretical underpinnings of Western tonality, where only aesthetic contemplation could penetrate. The realities of the 1930s, as suggested by many passages in this study thus far, confirm that many of these attitudes continued through that decade and persist still today. Most recently, the ways we approach the past have diverged into seemingly contradictory camps.

For a brief time beginning in the 1930s, classical music enjoyed an unprecedented connection to American society, one that studies in style cannot adequately describe or explain. The next three chapters will examine The Plow in light of the models and thoughts on musical Americanism described thus far through an integrated examination of its narrative, function, and context. Problems of race will not go away in Virgil Thomson’s music nor do analyses based on style by music historians, but during the 1930s, American classical music finds a large and diverse audience and takes on national demands, the causes and magnitude of which were unknown to earlier composers.
CHAPTER TWO: WHICH PLOW BROKE THE PLAINS?: CONTEXT, CREATION, AND IMPLICATIONS OF CONTENT

Executive Order 7027 created the Resettlement Administration (RA) on 30 April 1935. New Deal historian Sidney Baldwin explains that the RA “inherited an astonishing diversity of projects, programs and problems: rural and urban resettlement projects, suburban community projects, migrant labor camps, loans and grants to purchase land and to help equip farmers, farm debt adjustment, soil erosion, stream pollution, seacoast erosion, [and] forestation and reforestation.” These responsibilities were ripe with big government implications, and, as with most of the New Deal, many viewed the RA with concern in relation to centralized socialist and communist governments in Europe. Despite ongoing humanitarian and environmental crises like the Dust Bowl, the RA nonetheless needed justification not just to the opposition party but also to those unaffected and to taxpayers.

For the RA then, The Plow was very much a work of propaganda intended to both explain the problems of the Dust Bowl and show the country how the RA was already helping. It was one component in a public relations campaign including radio and photography and utilizing such artists as Roy Stryker, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange. The RA’s radical and experimental attempts to regulate land use and settlement activity were not lost on the President’s foes during the 1936 national elections, and thus The Plow was quickly injected into electoral politics by detractors and supporters alike.

The Plow’s conspicuous and propagandistic overtones were not wholly in service to Roosevelt and the RA nor was the film simply cinematic documentation of RA facts. Several of the film’s collaborators had their own ideological agendas as well as sophisticated aesthetic visions. Lorentz, primarily a film critic, had written many articles on the relationship between music and film. He also railed against corporate capitalism and its effects on American regionalism and media censorship. An outspoken critic of Hollywood, his co-authored first book blamed corporate America’s ownership of major movie studios for the inability of American cinema to divorce itself from mass entertainment in order to tackle serious contemporary problems. His second book, The Roosevelt Year: A Photographic Record, chronicles the dysfunctional nation inherited by the new president. Already concerned about the plight of American farmers, Lorentz contemplated a film on the Dust Bowl but had no luck pitching his ideas to Hollywood. At the same time, the federal government was formulating plans for movies which would, as paraphrased by Richard Dyer MacCann, “show something of the bankruptcy of the land and the bankruptcy of the people on the land when that land had been ignorantly,

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91 Biographer Robert Snyder writes that Lorentz left West Virginia University before graduating, intending to become a music critic in New York City.

92 Morris L. Ernst and Pare Lorentz, Censored: The Private Life of the Movie (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1930).

93 Pare Lorentz, ed., The Roosevelt Year: A Photographic Record (New York: Funk and Wagnall, 1934). This book’s decidedly Democratic tone is presented overtly in stark images of America’s shanty towns and rural shacks, police brutality against strikers, and the dichotomous sum of problems and frivolities that came to a head in 1933.
carelessly, tragically misused.”

Through a complicated network of marriages, neighbors, and colleagues, Lorentz was able to pitch his idea to a receptive Rex Tugwell, administrator of the RA.

In a 1935 review of a communist film event for *Town and Country*, Lorentz remarked that the event organizers had brought “one authentic Russian note…: the smell.” His commitment to Rooseveltian ideals was firmly rooted in patriotism, and his leftism stopped there. Lorentz nonetheless recruited Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand, and Leo Hurwitz from Nykino, a left-leaning activist film group with roots in the communist Worker’s Film and Photo League, to film *The Plow*. Influenced heavily by Soviet models, a communist documentary movement was active though not well-organized in the United States during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Steiner explained that Nykino’s mission was “making documentary-dramatic revolutionary films – short propaganda films that will serve as flaming film-slogans, satiric films, and films exposing the brutalities of capitalist society.” The conflict between creating a documentary record for rapid mass consumption and creating a persuasive, aestheticized work of art was a

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95 For a more thorough account of how this meeting came about, Lorentz, *FDR’s Moviemaker* 36-37.

96 Qtd. in William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 97. Alexander discusses the cool relationship Lorentz had with Nykino, being familiar enough with its quality work to hire its members while also keeping its ideals at arm’s length.

source of internal disagreement among such artists. Lorentz’s Nykino recruits favored the latter, which significantly shaped the visual style and content of the film. However, their practical experience and pre-developed aesthetic ideals, instead of facilitating the creation of *The Plow*, resulted in frustration and tension with the inexperienced but single-minded Lorentz.

William Alexander writes that “Lorentz is a familiar American type.” After a “ritual schooling” in American nationalism and idealism, Lorentz found himself “surrounded by the jungle of racism, governmental and institutional corruption, consumer exploitation, military adventurism, and injustice that lies so closely behind the façade of our slogans about freedom and democracy.” While Lorentz’s analysis (via Alexander) of his country perhaps sounds similar to Nykino’s, their motivation and ends differed. After shooting began, an argument over the film’s conception threatened the project; the vision of “capitalism’s anarchic rape of the land” clashed with Lorentz’s search for the lost but salvageable America of his ideals. Still hoping the end results would have a national impact not contradictory to their ideological perspectives, Hurwitz and Strand agreed to finish their work but refused screen credits.

Thomson’s motivations are murkier. In his autobiography, he sparely recounts his nonchalant answer to Lorentz’s proposal: “My answer was, ‘How much money have

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98 Alexander 94.

99 Alexander 94-95.

100 See Alexander 97-102 for a more thorough summary of the relationship between the Nykino cameramen and Pare Lorentz. They ultimately changed their minds and accepted screen credits upon viewing the final product.
you got?”101 After Lorentz’s modest offer, he replied, “Well [. . .] I can’t take from any man more than he’s got, though if you did have more I would ask for it.”102 That he agreed despite Lorentz’s underwhelming offer discounts this as a simple business transaction. If that were the case, then Thomson would have rejected the offer. Perhaps it was the opportunity to gain experience composing for film that drew Thomson to the project. Despite being the twelfth composer approached for the project, he and Lorentz collaborated closely throughout the rapid scoring process and by all accounts complemented each other perfectly through the scoring and editing processes.103

Biographer Anthony Tommasini indicates that the film’s political implications were not among Thomson’s motivations, quoting Thomson as stating that for him, politics were “a matter of supreme indifference.”104 Tommasini believes, however, that Thomson was nonetheless pleased by the film’s success and controversy, implying that they brought Thomson much needed attention. Tomassini contextualizes The Plow among earlier New Deal work, interestingly positing that Thomson “welcome[d] WPA work” from the Federal Theater Project (FTP), not because he was suffering financially from the Great Depression but rather because his talents and interests aligned with the FTP’s needs.105 Perhaps it is because of this and his good relationship with Lorentz that

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102 Thomson 259.

103 For Example, Snyder thoroughly recounts their “unusual” professional relationship as they simultaneously composed and edited (33-37).

prompted Thomson to return for the filmmaker’s next New Deal project, *The River* (1938).

While Thomson may have benefitted professionally from his government work through the experience it gave him and while he may have been indifferent to New Deal politics, it is difficult to believe that this savvy player would be oblivious to *The Plow’s* potential controversies and their potential effects on his reputation. Thomson was not on relief rolls, so these were not jobs of immediate necessity, nor does the compensation seem enough to make Thomson overlook the implications of working for the government. From this we may assume that he must have been comfortable with New Deal politics because of his prolonged association with them. Though he could (and arguably did) engage in damage control if the film’s reception or his association with the RA threatened his career, such an after-the-fact action would seem to have only limited effect on changing either the role the music plays in the film or the role it played for the RA.

*The Plow* premiered on 10 May 1936 in Washington, DC, at the Mayflower Hotel. It immediately began receiving positive reviews, and despite a Hollywood boycott, it would play in over one fifth of the motion picture theaters in the United States in 1936.¹⁰⁶ It was certainly no blockbuster, but as the first government film intended to compete with Hollywood, its entry into the American consciousness far outpaced all earlier documentaries created by the government.

¹⁰⁵ Tommasini 275-276.

¹⁰⁶ This number is from MacCann 71.
Politics and Content

Near the end of The Plow in the episode “Devastation,” the narrator appeals to the audience on behalf of those displaced by the Dust Bowl. Addressing their basic needs, he states, “All they ask is a chance to start over / and a chance for their children to eat, / to have medical care, to have homes again." While this occurs we see three women unpacking a family’s trailer. They had been shown moments before among the “tragic parade” of migrant vehicles turning into a makeshift camp (see figures 2-1 and 2-2). While the words are recited, the music moves through one of its quietest, least complex moments as if to avoid detracting from the profundity of the characters’ (in this case actual migrants) situation.

We softly hear the first statement of the melody from the final tango, its character here much different from what follows. This melody is derived from a fugue in the film’s Prelude that is also restated at the beginning “Devastation.” It is played here first by single flute accompanied by pizzicato strings then restated again by the full ensemble. Each subsequent restatement is louder and more unrestrained than the


In order to provide the most accurate quotations of The Plow’s narration, it will be necessary to consult the transcript reprinted in the Study Guide. As The Plow’s narration is predominantly poetic, which is affirmed by its arrangement in the Study Guide, its punctuation and phrasing are sometimes not easily discerned through listening. The Study Guide’s authenticity will be discussed later as it is preferable to other transcripts.

108 The phrase “tragic parade” is used to describe this shot in Study Guide 31.
Figure 2-1: Unpacking the trailer at the migrant camp. Film still from “Devastation.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
Figure 2-2: The tragic parade approaches a migrant camp. Film still from “Devastation.”

The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936.


previous. After the simplicity of the appeal and the somber final narration, “The sun and
winds wrote the most tragic chapter / in American agriculture,” the full-forced tango
takes over from the narrator and mirrors musically the profound circumstances
necessitating the appeal.\textsuperscript{109} Images of defunct farms, the migrant camp, and landscapes

\textsuperscript{109} Narration from “Devastation,” Rpt. in \textit{Study Guide} 32.
without vegetation accompany the building tension, and the chapter ends by juxtaposing the final chord’s Picardy third with a dead tree set against the sky.

Given the apparent simplicity of the narrator’s appeal and the unextravagant solution, one may wonder why it was necessary to make. As we well know now, the displaced residents of the Great Plains, whose troubles began long before they left, were not welcome in many of the places to which they migrated. Even three years after The Plow was released, The Grapes of Wrath continued to expose anti-migrant sentiments to the nation. As the Joads pull away from the last gas station before the desert, one shocked attendant remarks to the other, “Them goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live like they do. A human being couldn’t stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain’t a hell of a lot better than gorillas.”

John Ford’s film adaptation from 1940 keeps much of this exchange, the juxtaposition between the crisply attired attendants and the haggard Joad crew being more pronounced through the characters’ visualizations in film (see figure 2-3). While it is tempting to view these as exaggerations for the commercial market, states continued to pass anti-migrant legislation, police continued to use violence against migrants, and migrants continued to be ostracized wherever they stopped.

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111 For a summary of California’s sometimes shocking attitudes and treatment of migrants, see Chapter 1 “At the Crossroads of Whiteness: Antimigrant Activism, Eugenics, and Popular Culture” in Peter La Chapelle, Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music and Migration to Southern California (Berkeley: U of California P, 2007).
Figure 2-3: Getting gas before entering the desert at night. Film still from The Grapes of Wrath. Dir. John Ford. Twentieth-Century Fox. 1940. DVD. Studio Classics Series. Twentieth-Century Fox, 2004.

In both personalizing the Dust Bowl drama and giving voice to migrants, Ford’s feature film outpaces Lorentz’s efforts. However, The Plow served different ends, walking social and political tightropes as a New Deal product. The simple appeal addressed above seems to underscore the need for precision in The Plow’s overall message: its goal is to remind the audience of the migrant’s humanity and their victimization by forces beyond control. These forces become heightened as the camera
maintains a distance from its human subjects, not allowing them to speak for themselves. If *The Plow*’s goal is political persuasion, then it might be counterproductive to overtly condemn one of the primary groups who needed to be persuaded – who Steinbeck and Ford more freely criticize. That the final chapter is set to a tango ironically reinforces Lorentz’s careful political footwork. The music’s overt emotion after the narration ends suggests that it could assume and project more persuasion than the text, which had to remain restrained.

In addition to the dehumanizing attitudes toward the migrants held by some in the far west, economic ideology complicated relief efforts nationwide. The question of who will give them what they need underscores a fundamental problem in the American system still today. Should there exist a socialized safety net provided by a strong federal government, or should there be individual state and free market solutions encouraged by a small federal government and its *laissez-faire* economic policies? The RA, among its many tasks, took on the search for solutions to the migrants’ problems and the reversal of the myriad underlying causes of the Dust Bowl. Thus, the final appeal is not simple after all; it implies a solution that required widespread social change and controversial political action.

Occurring near the end of *The Plow*, the appeal becomes the summation and climax of twenty-four preceding minutes of artistic and propagandistic content. Lorentz creates a narrative that re-tells the history of the Great Plains in such a way that satisfied the needs of the day or at least of his sponsor, and Thomson’s music plays along throughout. The conflict between history and the present becomes the driving force of analysis for understanding how *The Plow* functioned in its original and subsequent
contexts. All the while, we should keep in mind endgame elements of the film’s narrative, which include eliciting public sympathy for displaced former residents of the Great Plains and bolstering public support for the RA and the New Deal. Ultimately, the achievement of these goals is arguable and at times seems self-thwarted by those creating and utilizing the film, but it is in the class-driven ideals and attempts at realizing them that distinguish The Plow and other Depression-era arts.

As a New Deal cultural product released just after the mid-decade mark, The Plow is most obviously situated in the 1930s among post-Black Friday historical events. However, the displaced farmer’s troubles began before the stock market crash; indeed, The Plow’s narrative suggests the whole endeavor of settling the Great Plains was doomed from its inception. Further, the present that the film addresses, which is the realization of this history of poor decisions and exploitation of the land and farmer, was a story unresolved in 1936. The Great Depression, agricultural problems, and anti-migrant attitudes would last through the end of the decade and into the next. Thus, it is appropriate to begin where The Plow begins by considering the relationship between history and narrative and to dig into topics surveyed by the film. The film offers its own structural schema for engaging with the socio-political context. Its narrative, in addition to being chronologically historical in nature, is organized in an episodic fashion. Following this plan, I will take cues from the moments, activities, and problems it presents.
Approaches and Endings

Surprisingly, *The Plow* receives extended treatment in only a handful of studies, most of them non-musical in nature. Neil William Lerner’s study of select documentary scores from the 1930s and 40s provides the only significant analysis of *The Plow*’s music; that it remains an unpublished dissertation complicates its usefulness.\(^{112}\) Dealing with *The Plow* less extensively and primarily through documentary film history are Roy Snyder’s *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, Richard Dyer MacCann’s *The People’s Films: A Political History of US Government Motion Pictures*, and William Alexander’s *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942*.\(^{113}\) Charlie Keil’s article “*The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The City*” and Vernon Carstensen’s article “*The Plow That Broke the Plains*: Film Legacy of the Great Depression” are among the few direct studies of the film, with Carstensen’s being even rarer due to its historical analysis of the time period in question.\(^{114}\) Additional studies into New Deal and Great Depression history offer a one-dimensional sentence or two on...


The Plow or The River and Lorentz, and the Photographic Section of the RA is more likely to receive notice for its well-known images.\textsuperscript{115} The varied nature of these scholarly works invites metacritical analysis of their findings and also presents opportunities for further studies into places they do not look.

One problem underscores all research that precedes the present study. The film may be viewed today in at least three historical versions along with variations on these, and a few authors appear unaware of this. Thus, it is necessary to discuss and clarify these issues because a cataloguing of versions is missing from the scholarly record.

There exists the original 1936 film (Version One), an edited second print probably created shortly after the first as frenetic New Deal needs and policies dictated (Version Two), and a third possibly created either as a sixteen millimeter print or through careless copying as the film was transferred into newer formats (Version Three).\textsuperscript{116} Versions Two and Three both omit the Epilogue, and Version Three also places the Prologue before the title cards but retains the original order of the music (see figure 2-4 for the ending image of Versions Two and Three). For the contemporary viewer, who has unprecedented access to online reference databases, interlibrary loan services, and giant Internet retailers such as Amazon.com, all are available within a few days and at least one (a variant of Version Two) instantaneously via Google Video.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{115} The most famous of these is Dorothea Lange’s iconic “Migrant Mother.”

\textsuperscript{116} These versions designations are mine.

\textsuperscript{117} As of 3 January 2010, the film is available at this Google Video web address: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1119800966783091956&ei=nkSpSpPyIZDCqQKkp4W0Aw&q=the+plow+that+broke+the+plains&hl=en#>.
This analysis is based on viewings of two sixteen-millimeter prints, both of which have library records indicating their creation in 1936. Both begin with the same title cards, and both contain the Epilogue. These are Version One. The National Archives, in a partnership with Amazon.com’s CreateSpace to make available thousands of its films,
released its own edition of *The Plow* on DVD in 2007.\footnote{The Plow That Broke the Plains, dir. Pare Lorentz, Resettlement Administration, 1936, DVD, US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.} While it claims to use a print from 1936, it too omits the Epilogue. However, it does place the title cards before the Prologue, which supports my proposed timeline of creation for Version Two. Version Three could have been created earlier than I propose, even alongside Versions Two, and, further, it remains ubiquitous today. It is because of this ubiquity that, when combined with Version Three’s longevity and its use by other scholars, establishes it as a historically justified version rather than a small-scale variation on Version Two. Further research needs to be undertaken into this timeline and into the creation of multiple versions, but these distinctions are nonetheless necessary when discussing the film until such research is completed.

Interestingly, the copy available via Google Video has its own modifications. While the rest of the film follows the same structure as Version Two, there is material which precedes the starting point of Version Two. For about two seconds, we see this text: “This film is considered of historical value and does not necessarily reflect current policy or plans of the sponsoring agency.”\footnote{The Plow, Google Video.} It is unclear who the sponsoring agency was. The RA barely progressed to a point where it could change policies and instead was folded into the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937. This text may refer to the FSA, which remained in existence until 1946 and would have certainly been engaged in policy planning in light of changing agricultural conditions. The image quality, even after adjusting for poor conversion to a digital format, also suggests significant age. The
young United States Film Service, created in 1938 and led by Lorentz, assumed storage
and distribution responsibilities in 1938, so it may refer to this agency. However there is
a disconnect between an agency concerned with government film making and an agency
concerned with problems in agriculture in that the policy and plans of one would seem to
be clearly distinct from the other. Interestingly, the Film Service stopped circulating The
Plow in April 1939, citing changed conditions in the Great Plains that rendered the film’s
information obsolete.\textsuperscript{120} Plans were proposed then to revise the film, but lack of funds
and perhaps also political will meant that this was never realized. Thus, it is possible that
the Google Video copy’s pre-Prologue statement was created in the late 1930s. For the
purposes of this project, it suffices to refer to this one as a variation on Version Two,
although again further research may clarify these distinctions.

Post-ending materials vary between versions as well. The Epilogue is unique to
Version One, and this version also features an RA emblem and surrounding text reading
“The End” during the final musical chord (see figure 2-5). Figure 2-4 shows an ending of
Version Two, cut directly from Version One’s fadeout between the last episode,
“Devastation,” and the Epilogue. The National Archives edition features this ending, and
its final chord coincides with the image’s fade out. In one variation, however, a new
image appears after that shown in figure 2-4. The background image of this ending,
which is discussed in detail later as the title card image from the beginning of the film,

\textsuperscript{120} See materials cited Snyder 76 and Lerner 80-81 concerning a report by
Addison Foster, executive officer of the Office of Government Reports and the ultimate
fate of The Plow – at least under its caretaking agency. The Plow continued to be
available for “educational distribution” according to Snyder, eventually found its way
into university libraries, and finally became available for purchase from a variety of non-
government sources.
appears briefly along with superimposed text reading “The End” (see figure 2-6). No music sounds here in this variation. Again, the image quality suggests its insertion into older prints as does this ending’s ubiquity among available copies. Version One’s ending, along with the Epilogue, clearly establishes provenance as an RA production, while later endings obscure this relationship along with the political nature of the film.

Figure 2-5: Version One’s ending. From The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. Author’s Photograph.121

121 The poor image quality is unavoidable. Because no known copies of Version One exist in a newer format, I made a digital recording of the Epilogue directly from a sixteen millimeter reel-to-reel print played on a projector with significant wear.
Figure 2-6: A variation on the non-Epilogue ending. Film still from The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. Google Video.¹²²

To further complicate a cataloguing of versions and variations, individual reproductions have made their own changes to the version they used. The example that

Unfortunately, the digital compression format did not permit screen capturing, so I had to take a digital photograph of my computer screen with the film paused. All subsequent images from the Epilogue have been created in this manner. Creating a quality digital copy of the Epilogue is beyond the scope of the present study; however, it is imperative that this be accomplished before it is lost forever.

¹²² See footnote 13 in this chapter for the web address.
departs furthest from the original three versions is the 2007 Naxos DVD production.\textsuperscript{123} Naxos used a significantly altered Version Three, adding a newly recorded sound track with extended music, newly recorded narration, redesigned and new title cards along with new background images, and stills of images from the film placed in an extended Prologue. Lorentz edited Thomson’s score in the cutting room, most notably removing seventeen measures from the Prologue’s music. This cut included a prefiguring of a motive that later occurs in the episode “Dust Storm” as well as a quotation of “Old Hundredth,” a hymn appearing throughout the score. Naxos restores this cut, along with eight measures cut from the Prologue’s map segment.

In an age concerned with the digital remastering especially of the visual content of film, it is striking that The Plow’s score and narration – its aural elements – have received such attention and yet the projected, speckled, yellowing images continue to jerk and jump from frame to frame while cut scenes – most notably the Epilogue – remain missing in newer recording formats. Perhaps this speaks to the longevity of and appreciation for Thomson’s music well beyond its historical moment. What may be more important are the implications of the existence of versions and re-recordings on both audiences and researchers. As the original print is disregarded and becomes lost in a sea of revisions, concrete historical relationships may become difficult to pinpoint thus necessitating timely research and preservation. This also supports the argument for a music history of contexts and contingencies in order to understand the changing boundaries of art objects as they become unfixed according to new circumstances of

\textsuperscript{123} The Plow that Broke the Plains and The River, music by Virgil Thomson, cond. Angel Gil- Ordóñez, Naxos, 2007.
In this case, the film changes as New Deal critics censor content, as publishers create out-of-order and embellished copies, as audiophiles seek a clarity no sixteen millimeter projector offers, and as historians speculate about Lorentz and Thomson’s intentions.

One example of this final point manifests in unwitting scholarship on The Plow. Lerner writes of a “lost” Epilogue, believing, “Of Lorentz’s proposed Epilogue, only the final idea of ‘a dead tree at sunset,’ survives in the existing copies of the film” (see figure 2-5). Lest Lerner receives criticism for this error, numerous if not most copies today end at this point; my own initial viewings of the film in VHS and DVD formats confirmed his belief, as I was initially unaware of the Epilogue’s existence when I first became interested in the film. Further, the Picardy resolution after the emotional tango, when combined with several preceding images of death and desolation, reinforce this moment as the film’s ending. The final frames of the Epilogue’s ending offer a much different prognosis which will be described in Chapter Four.

Through the assistance of Adrian College’s interlibrary loan services and Educational Resource Center, which continues to maintain two sixteen millimeter reel-to-reel projectors, I was able to locate, request, and view prints of The Plow, from two different lending institutions nonetheless, and each included the Epilogue. One does still exist, despite several decades of scholarship to the contrary. The Epilogue’s “solution segment,” a summary of the RA’s goals and footage of successfully

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124 Lerner 83.

125 The two lending institutions that were willing to send the film were William Paterson University and Southwest Minnesota State University. Their library records are available on WorldCat.
relocated farmers, will be addressed later, but it is important for the reader to know of its existence, that it was cut from the film, that it became difficult to locate, and that it has resurfaced. This is important not only for the reader’s own viewing but also when considering both the different experiences of early audiences watching the two versions as well as the trajectory of *The Plow* in scholarship.

When reading the works mentioned above that discuss *The Plow*, it quickly becomes clear that most authors never viewed this epilogue despite offering analysis of political reception of the film. When it does appear, it is relegated to a single sentence or footnote, its existence and apparent relevance having long passed. Snyder, possibly the first to give *The Plow* extended treatment, follows this scheme, writing only that the “epilogue of the film shows how the RA was relocating 4,500 stranded families in new houses on small farms in ten states.”\(^{126}\) He then includes in a footnote without explanation, “This epilogue was eventually cut from the film.”\(^{127}\)

Next chronologically, MacCann’s only discussion of the Epilogue occurs in footnote forty-five of Chapter Four, where he does nothing to move beyond Snyder. He writes, “Snyder reports (p. 37) that there was originally an epilogue showing ‘how the RA was relocating 4,500 stranded families in new houses on small farms in ten states,’ but it was cut from the film.”\(^{128}\) Other authors continue this pattern without adding much on the nature of the Epilogue. Despite including statements from politicians, editorial reviews, letters from private citizens, and other reactions to the film during its first year of existence, when the

\(^{126}\) Snyder 37.

\(^{127}\) Snyder 37.

\(^{128}\) MacCann 82.
Epilogue may have still been circulating, this information is all we get from Snyder, MacCann, and others. While their discussions of *The Plow* are nonetheless invaluable, one can only imagine how their depths of understanding and analysis would be enhanced by viewings of Version One and its Epilogue.

Surprisingly, it is Lerner’s dissertation that gives the most space to the Epilogue. Tantalized by The Virgil Thomson Papers in Yale University’s archives, which reveal notes on a mysterious final chapter of the *The Plow*, he summarizes:

> In Thomson’s’ sketches for the score, there are pages where he listed times for various scenes and sequences from the film. After the numbers for “Devastation,” the sequence that is currently the final cue in the film score, Thomson has listed something called “Reconstruction” that was to run for three and a half minutes. From the notes he has written elsewhere on this page, like suggestions to add percussion at one spot or repeat a cowboy melody at another, it appears that these notes referred to music that was already written and needed further refinement, informing us now that Thomson wrote a section of music entitled ‘Reconstruction’ that has not surfaced with that name, nor is it used in the film.”

So, these notes confirm additional music meant to accompany an additional segment depicting reconstruction efforts. However, upon viewing the actual Epilogue, “Reconstruction” music is not used and remains either lost or unwritten. Instead, after more than two unaccompanied minutes of informative rather than poetic narration

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129 Lerner 82-83. The archives are MSS 29/29A in The Virgil Thomson Papers, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
accompanied by maps and footage of a new RA farm in Nebraska, we finally hear a repeat of the tango, this time more subtly and with different images to accompany it. The juxtaposition of devastated migrants and defunct farms (from the previous episode) with the reconstruction of their lives through government patronage (in the Epilogue), all unified by the same emotionally charged music, offers an ending entirely different from Version Two. We may speculate on the effects that different Epilogue music would have on audience reactions and critical interpretations, though such contemplation may be only a distraction since the actual Epilogue still exists.

On the creation of Version Two, Lerner ventures, “The Farm Security Administration did not exist until 1937, and since the surviving narration is recorded on a document originating from that agency, one conclusion is that the changes occurred sometime after the initial release of the film in May 1936, and before the film’s removal from the FSA’s distribution in 1939.” His theory, though now partially invalid in detail because of the existence of earlier RA prints (or Version One), may nonetheless be useful. A new government agency, with a revised mission, may have had new uses for the film. The nature of solution segment’s information – along with credit given to the defunct RA – dates Version One quickly.

Alexander confirms this but also proposes another theory for the Epilogue’s removal. He suggests that it was “because critics on the left were quick to point out how little the government was actually doing at a time when 50,000 families each month were

130 Lerner 83.
being forced off the plains.”\textsuperscript{131} He offers a small bit more, explaining in a footnote that “the epilogue was removed sometime in the second or third year after \textit{The Plow’s appearance},” but he does not explain how he knows this information.\textsuperscript{132} At least we may begin to construct a timeline for the Epilogue’s life and death.

\textbf{The Grapes of Wrath} actually engages with this problem, confirming Alexander’s reasoning. Tom Joad, while disbelievingly sorting through the circumstances that landed him in the RA’s Weedpatch Camp (called Farmworkers Wheat Patch Camp in the film), quizzes the camp watchman, “Well, for Christ’s sake! Why ain’t they more places like this?” The watchman “looks sullen” and responds, “You’ll have to find that out yourself.”\textsuperscript{133} Weedpatch is clearly revered by the book’s characters, and readers and viewers too may read into the creators’ positive depictions of camplife. This exchange between Tom and the watchman, however, mirrors the criticism set forth by Alexander. In this way, the Epilogue’s content could be an embarrassment. While the book’s government run migrant camp clearly offered the best situation for migrants, in the eyes of many this unprecedented federal consolidation and execution of power was failing to help more than a handful of people.

As an advertisement for the RA, the Epilogue was also was an easy target for political opposition. Even criticism from the left – that of the Roosevelt administration

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{131} Alexander 103.
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\textsuperscript{132} Alexander 140.
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\textsuperscript{133} Steinbeck 370. The film alters their dialogue slightly but to no less effect. Joad instead asks, “Well why ain’t they more like it?” The watchman, who seems to have more authority in film, responds, “You find out. I can’t.”
\end{flushright}
making too little progress – was similar to condemnation from Republicans, although they opposed such large expenditures of money and resources given such meager results.\textsuperscript{134} There was such hostility to the RA that its legality was challenged in course, and it was ultimately declared unlawful by the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia in May of 1936, the same month \textit{The Plow} was released.

Snyder cites this ruling as icing on the cake for Hollywood’s refusal to distribute the film. Their opposition was twofold. On the one hand, \textit{The Plow}’s conception, production, and distribution represented government encroachment into the private sector. Snyder explains that “for the first time [. . .] the government was using highly professional talent” and that “Lorentz had shattered Washington film-making precedents by adding drama to a government film,” concluding, “He had added precisely what Hollywood had for sale.”\textsuperscript{135} On the other hand, \textit{The Plow} was as much partisan as it was informational or artistic. Many in Hollywood were reluctant to be associated with such an overtly political message. Removing the Epilogue meant eliminating the low hanging fruit, thereby tempering Republican criticism. This rendered the film less problematic for distributors and theater owners worried about being associated with partisan politics.

In regards to the formal and rhetorical requirements of a plot, the Epilogue gives balance to the wrenching depiction of desperate and displaced peoples from the last third of the film. It strategically offers a satisfying glimpse of hope without offering complete resolution; the audience, after all, should be moved to action, sympathy, and support

\textsuperscript{134} Snyder and MacCann included extensive discussions of \textit{The Plow}’s political life. For political criticism and opposition to the RA, see Baldwin, \textit{Poverty}.

\textsuperscript{135} Snyder 44.
rather than to a cathartic purge of worry for their fellow Americans. However, given such weighty requirements, the Epilogue ultimately had to focus on events, attitudes, and politics specific to 1935 and 1936, thus anchoring it to a specific moment. If the film were to have a political function beyond its immediate context, then the Epilogue had to be removed. This would allow the film to be repositioned from a solution specific in time and place to a more generic portrayal of the problem at hand. Further, as discussed above, the RA’s demise was complete by 1937. References within the film to the government agency would seem to compromise its usefulness to the FSA.

Without the Epilogue, Version Two became a more abstract call for support and only implicitly for government intervention. To be sure, the title cards confirm that The Plow was unmistakably a production of the federal government, but Version Two becomes more focused on the agricultural history of the Great Plains rather than on the necessity of government intervention. It ends with a general plea for recognition of a problem rather than with an overt advertisement for the New Deal. Interestingly, by rejecting any structural aesthetic requirements for a decrease in tension (in this case though the information heavy and non-poetic solution segment), The Plow’s social function is heightened at the expense of its political function. We are left to ponder instead the fate of the Dust Bowl migrants. Version Two would become the de facto “official” version of The Plow that later schoolchildren watched, scholars viewed, and stores stocked. But even with such edited and consumed fixity, making a politically correct version established a precedent for changing the film, intentionally or unintentionally, sloppily or polished-ly.
The score itself was lifted and condensed into a suite for orchestra as early as 1942, although such a move was and is commonplace in film and other dramatic genres. However, without experiencing the accompanying images and narrative, the suite becomes only a vague suggestion of The Plow’s subject matter, made evident only through its title and section headings. Divorced from its filmic context and edited for autonomous continuity, it is situated somewhere between programmatic and absolute music and ceases to bring attention to the Dust Bowl migrants and the work of the RA. It becomes appreciated for Thomson’s playful juxtaposition of musical Americana and modernist atonality. Whatever the case for the film and its music, every incarnation at least affects meaning in relation to the context that changed it.

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CHAPTER THREE: THE MACHINE IN THE GARDEN: FROM PRELUDE THROUGH “HOMESTEADER”

Settler, plow at your peril! 137

From “The Homesteader” in The Plow That Broke the Plains

Prompted by The Plow as both a retelling of history and a work of propaganda, this chapter begins to study The Plow’s narrative, musical, and visual content and relationships with its historical context and the events of history it recreates. In this way, we may begin to uncover the meaning making processes at work in the film and to understand its articulation of and relationship with American identity. We will visit each episode, beginning with the non-chronological Prologue and ending with “Homesteader,” and the remainder of the film will be discussed in the following chapter.

For the purposes of this study, episodic divisions are taken from the “Sequence” names in the Study Guide, which circulated with the film after the guide’s publication in 1938. 138 I chose this source because it offers possibly the earliest existing published section listings from anyone with a hand in the creation of the film, in this case the US government and quite possibly Pare Lorentz himself. The Study Guide was created by the United States Film Service during its first year of existence, and Lorentz was the


138 More specifically, they are from the section “The Narrative of The Plow That Broke the Plains,” Study Guide 24-32.
program’s first director. This suggests that he almost certainly had a hand in the
document’s creation, and it is conceivable that he even wrote the document. The origin
of this document lends its organizational scheme authorial credibility, though
unfortunately it does not mention its author. The Plow itself offers no names for its
internal divisions. Although these sections do not begin and end in a consistent visual
manner, it is clear from Lorentz and Thomson’s correspondences and notes, that they
conceived of and organized it into distinct sections. Thus, the Study Guide provides an
early description of the film’s organization from an authorial point of view.

Other studies and productions use different criteria, according to their own needs
or perspectives. Using archival materials, Lerner takes his structural cues from “Source
Ten,” or Thomson’s full score, which rests unpublished in the Yale University library.\footnote{139}
Exemplative of the countless copies available for purchase, the DVD Our Daily Bread
and Other Films of the Great Depression seems to reject authority and precedent
altogether. It reduces the film to six chapters and creates its own titles.\footnote{140} A surprising
six chapter division comes from the National Archives, discussed in Chapter Two. While
we might expect an authoritative, polished reproduction of Version One with well

\footnote{139} Lerner lists these in Table 3 on page 75. The only differences with the Study
Guide are the first post prelude section, which Lerner titles “Pastorale (Grass)” instead of
“Grass,” a middle section titled “War and the Tractor” instead of “War,” and the next-to-
last section (excluding the Epilogue), titled “Wind and Dust” instead of “Dust Storm”.
He also notes that “These titles correspond to the sections delineated by Lorentz in his
three surviving written correspondences to Thomson regarding Plow scenes” (75).
However tempting it may be to use the music’s titles, the final product was created in the
editing room by Lorentz and mediated by government production.

\footnote{140} These are Ch. 1: The Plow That Broke the Plains, Ch. 2: The Great Plains, Ch.
3: Progress Marches On; Ch. 4: New Hope, Ch. 5: Reaping the Golden Harvest, and Ch.
6: The Barren Land. This copy does not include the Epilogue.
researched and reasoned chapter divisions, the editors simply divide the chapters into five five-minute segments with the sixth containing the remainder.\textsuperscript{141} Keil’s study relegates names to parentheses, titling sections as segments one through eight, and sometimes combines two episodes into a single section.\textsuperscript{142} The Prologue is titled such, though the Epilogue is instead “Section Eight (Reconstruction),” and as an example of episode combining, “Grass” and “Cattle” become “Segment One (Initial Settlement).” In a chart he delineates, along with the sections, phrases summarizing narrative events, things that are physically moving, tone or mood, and how sections begin and end. He explains, “[The Plow] \([\ldots]\) uses a pattern of discrete yet interrelated segments, characterized by advancing chronology, cause and effect, and a tonal variation determined by alternative positive and negative events.”\textsuperscript{143} Thus his calculus for analysis moves beyond simple chapter titles to a combination of formal, narrative, and visual information.

Lastly, Lorentz did ultimately provide a list of sectional divisions but not until 1992, fifty-six years after The Plow was released. His book, FDR’s Moviemaker: Memoirs & Scripts, nearly confirms the Study Guide’s divisions, only substituting the title “Blues” for “Speculation” and omitting “Dust Storm,” possibly because it is not

\textsuperscript{141} And, to reiterate the travesty, it omits the Epilogue.

\textsuperscript{142} Keil 124. His divisions are Prologue, Segment One (Initial Settlement), Segment Two (Continued Development), Segment Three (Development), Segment Four (Desolation/Return to Activity), Segment Five (The Golden Harvest), Segment Six (Return to Desolation), Segment Seven (Aftermath), and Segment Eight (Reconstruction).

\textsuperscript{143} Keil 124.
Another difference occurs in the transcription of narration. For example, in “Grass,” the narrator repeats the phrase “high winds and sun.” However, in Lorentz’s book the phrase is only written once. A minor difference admittedly, it nonetheless compromises the integrity and reliability of the book when measured against the Study Guide.

It is necessary to touch on this variety of organizational schemes, not only for offering the reader clarity in understanding my own approach and those they may encounter elsewhere but also because it highlights the dynamic life of the film, both in scholarship and in copies. Whereas each new viewer’s experience depends partly on which version they view, each new researcher’s process and conclusion may depend on which sources they uncover. The problem of multiple division schemes echoes the problems of versions and variations.

It is also important to mention researcher schemes as an acknowledgment of precedents to the present study and as a caveat to the reader who may find quirks here. As discussed previously, The Plow, its process of creation, and its early life have been studied from a variety of perspectives, most often as a cultural or aesthetic object in film history, and Lerner’s study is the most comprehensive in terms of exploring relationships between music, narrative, and history. I have attempted to avoid unnecessary duplication of well-known stories and lore surrounding the film and previously trod research paths into the film. In some places, I will pick up where others left off or shine a brighter light on a topic only skimmed, while in other places I ask different questions of the materials

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altogether. Also, I have deliberately downplayed formal analysis and description in favor of historical analysis, partially to avoid duplicating previous studies and partly as a methodological decision to foreground cultural elements over aesthetic ones.

The Plow’s organizational scheme is as follows:

- the Prologue, which follows the title cards and the introduction of music, which includes introductory poetic text and cartographic animation describing geography and climate, and which sets up human interaction with the Great Plains,
- “Grass,” which offers an idealized, pre-white-settlement vision of the Great Plains, albeit conspicuously without native inhabitants,
- “Cattle,” which rapidly moves from cattle driving to open range ranching and finally to the threat of encroaching cow towns and which also previews the technological advances that make such human interaction with the environment possible,
- “The Homesteader,” which also moves rapidly from wagon train to land rush and from settling the land to large scale harvesting,
- “Warning,” which pauses on an unidentified period of drought, possibly that of the late 1880s and early 1890s,
- “War,” which summarizes the Great Plains’ contribution to World War One but within the context of the film’s narrative,
“Speculation,” which offers the final agricultural prosperities of the Roaring Twenties and equates a range of economic and cultural activities with over farming,

“Drought,” which presents drought-stricken farmers and fields in a manner that suggests a direct link between the stock market crash of 1929 and climate,

“Dust Storm,” which proceeds without narration and dramatizes footage of actual dust storms and their aftermath,

“Devastation,” which summarizes The Plow’s plot along with the destruction of the Great Plains while visualizing the submission of the Dust Bowl’s people to their fate, and finally

the Epilogue, which moves from “Devastation’s” elicitation of viewer sympathy to information on the Resettlement Administration’s (RA) efforts to remedy the problem.

Both the Epilogue’s content and the reasons for its deletion are important facets in a more complete understanding of the film; Versions Two, Three, and contemporary productions are incomplete documents if studying the early history of the film.

Interestingly, while the Epilogue is not mentioned by the Study Guide, the document remarkably exceeds the Epilogue in discussing solutions to the Dust Bowl and describing activities already underway by the federal government. I will compare these two epilogues in the next chapter. On the opposite end of the film, pre-Prologue materials also need to be addressed; tone and narrative begin at once, even before the title cards.
Omitting “Grass,” arguably the most historically inaccurate or at least the most historically ambiguous of the nine Sequences, The Plow’s time frame spans approximately one century, roughly from early nineteenth-century settlement through the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. However, the coincidences of drought, land overuse, widespread devastation, and national awareness were not historical possibilities until well after the mid-century mark. Thus, in actuality the historical problems addressed by The Plow only span approximately fifty years, though they are presented with an epic monumentality required by the immense destitution of contemporaneous circumstance. Remarkably, this complex narrative is condensed into just over twenty-five minutes.  

**Before the Prologue: Title Card Image**

Before the Prologue begins, Version One provides considerable commentary alongside conventional information on people and institutions involved in creating the film. The Plow begins with sound: hurried timpani pulses evoke a Native American presence, a common film music device for such, and a flute melody beginning in A minor is overlaid. The first visual material confirms this foreboding ambiance: a still image condenses the history of the settling of the Great Plains by white citizens of the United States (see figure 3-1). Lorentz described the image as “a wash drawing of pioneers

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145 The Epilogue adds additional length, but since “Devastation” ends in the present, the Epilogue does not expand the historical scope. Conceptually, it does project into the future, suggesting Resettlement Administration solutions and warnings of what could happen if its recommendations are not taken, although such analysis is beyond the scope of this project. Ultimately, these solutions were folded into the Farm Security Administration or eliminated due to political pressure.
going across the horizon, Ford and trailer bringing up the rear."\textsuperscript{146} Parallel cloud edges converge diagonally on the pioneers, who lead their followers uphill and into what appears to be a coming storm. Each segment in the symbolic wagon train stands in for an episode in the film.

Figure 3-1: The opening image: Wagon Train. Film still from Prologue. \textit{The Plow That Broke the Plains}. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.

\textsuperscript{146} Qtd. in Lerner 86.
Several factors contribute to a multi-directional reading of the image. At first it is even difficult to determine the direction in which to read the image; the pioneers move from left to right, into the foreground, but this movement also leads from the present into the past, with the foregrounded past leading the present. What is especially foreboding about this still are not simply the storm clouds – which are later shown to be a dust storm, for rain would be positive in this scenario – engulfing the screen from the direction the train is heading. Rather, it is in the historical lesson implied by the arrangement of people and fate. In this introductory still image, along with its musical partner, Lorentz is visualizing the outcome we already know and foreshadowing its inevitability. Text and narration will too join in the idea of the Dust Bowl’s inevitability, though these occur later in the film. “Primitive” evocations by the music offer a commentary on the task of taming or civilizing the landscape, perhaps not in opposition to Native Americans themselves, since we never see them, but in opposition to what they represented in the contemporaneous mindset: the “savagery” of the natural order.

As described earlier, some variations of Versions Two and Three repeat the title card image at the end of the film, re-emphasizing its potency; however, the film’s first audiences would have only seen the title card image before the Prologue. The viewer of Version Three loses the connections between the wagon train and the music since they are out of order. Instead, the timpani sounds as “PROLOGUE” fades in, along with written text (see figure 3-2). It is a full seven seconds before the text begins scrolling upward, and the wagon train and subsequent title cards do not appear until fifty-one seconds into the film.
This presents a significant conceptual difference: Version One begins with image and music and Version three with text and music. Without an awareness of Version One, the present-day viewer of Version Three immediately has a different experience than an audience member in 1936. For example, Lerner seems to have based his analysis of the musical score not only on a version without the Epilogue but also on a version that begins with the Prologue – on Version Three. He also fails to mention the wagon of the train image, perhaps because of the version he views and because of his interest in matters of

music theory. Thus, his discussions of musical rhetoric in the Prologue, while still helpful, are only fully applicable to Version Three. The extent to which viewing different versions affects viewers’ experiences and interpretations may be immeasurable, but it is clear that the differences appear in scholarship.

Leading the wagon train into the Great Plains are early white pioneers, who historically date from the early nineteenth century, with upright guns resting against their shoulders. Although all copies I have viewed are too grainy to pick out minute details and in some cases even obscure some of the larger components of the image, these men appear to wear buckskins. They may also be trappers, whose heyday peaked during the 1820s and 30s, just before overhunting, the spread of disease to their trading partners, and large-scale white migration ended this way of life. They boldly lead the group toward the edge of the frame and toward an unfortunate life in the future, presented by this image and reinforced later in the film as inevitable. Absent are earlier non-Anglo European explorers and trappers, English colonists, and other United States citizens who earlier explored or homesteaded west of the Appalachian Mountains.

Following chronologically in history and behind the pioneers in the image are two covered wagons pulled by teams of oxen, evocative of the great wagon trains that carried easterners to all points west. Historically, an ever compressed Native American presence existed throughout the West (and still throughout the East in pockets), though they are absent here, along with those white groups just mentioned. This revisionist move is reinforced by “Grassland,” the first episode of The Plow, which focuses on just that: only the grass and land that lies before the group in the title card image. For the citizens of
the United States, the vast region east of the Appalachian Mountains remained an inexhaustible, uncivilized land with a spiritual mandate to be settled, and it seems to be this almost mythic idea that guides Lorentz. The juxtaposition of the land in its “natural” state with destructive human intervention, after all, is one of the primary plotlines.

Riding alongside is a man on horseback, likely a cowboy based on the content of “Cattle.” Large-scale cattle ranching in the Great Plains did not occur until after the mid-century mark, when Eastern demand could be met by an adequate transportation infrastructure. The film, however, goes on to obscure the timelines of ranching and settlement in presenting “Cattle” before “Homesteader.” Thus, the wagons beside the cowboy here come after cattle ranching in the film. Perhaps these wagons recall instead the settling of the Great Plains after the Homestead Act of 1862; it is accurate that extensive settling of the Great Plains occurred after the Civil War. However, many easterners had already settled the plains and other points west before 1862, so the title card image’s placement of the two side by side is more historically accurate. The narrative has different requirements, as we will see.

Next in line is the plowman. He, his family, and his ancestors were drawn to the Great Plains by a multitude of reasons, including Eastern poverty and overcrowding and potential Western opportunity. Establishing and maintaining a farm were not easy tasks, yet millions clung on despite droughts, plagues, economic slumps, and the greed – both real and perceived – that characterized the Eastern corporations who took crops from farmer to consumer. If only the plowman could turn around and see his poverty stricken descendants following him.
Bringing up the rear in the image is a sanitized version of one of the most emblematic symbols of the Great Depression: the migrant’s automobile. Thousands carried departing residents of the Great Plains, finally displaced by one too many economic and environmental catastrophes, along with the remainder of their worldly possessions. In this case, while again the image quality prohibits close inspection, we can at least observe that this car and trailer are a far cry from the Joads’ exaggerated, overloaded barge (see figures 3-1 and 3-3). The automobiles shown later in the film, especially those of the family leaving their home and the tragic parade in “Devastation,” also emphasize the title card image’s lack of both material possessions and people stacked and crammed (see figures 2-1 and 3-4).

To be sure, documentary evidence produced by the FSA and others shows vehicles both lightly loaded and heavily burdened. However, those that enter the public memory tend to be the latter. For example, the photograph in figure 3-5, taken by Russell Lee and published by the FSA in 1939, is one of the myriad images of displaced people and their questionable and questionably loaded transportation. While still not as bad as the Joads’, the image is nonetheless suggestive of destitution and more burdened than The Plow’s vehicles. Three factors may influence the abundance of images of heavily loaded and well-used vehicles. First is the reality of destitution; if one had finally reached the point of having to leave a home then the conditions of one’s vehicle and belongings were probably poor. Second, dirty and overpacked vehicles presented more compelling subjects for Roy Stryker’s team of photographers than clean and neatly packed vehicles. The political function of the FSA cannot be ignored, and it is now
Figure 3-3: The extremely overloaded Joad vehicle – the Ford-Steinbeck version of the Dust Bowl migrant’s vehicle. Film still from The Grapes of Wrath. Dir. John Ford, Twentieth-Century Fox. 1940. DVD. Studio Classics Series. Twentieth-Century Fox, 2004.
Figure 3-4: Leaving the farm for the last time in Lorentz’s version of a Dust Bowl migrant’s vehicle. Film still from “Devastation.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.

It is common knowledge that they sometimes posed their subjects or manipulated their photographs for dramatic effect. Third, for contemporary viewers of electronic images from the Great Depression, such images also are still compelling as they illustrate and reinforce familiar Dust Bowl narratives.

The Plow does not quite fit into this paradigm. Rather than engaging in an effort to emphasize the migrant’s poverty through overburdened transportation, The Plow’s cars
and trucks are consistent with Lorentz and company’s visual treatment of their subjects: as destitute but without an abundance of visual evidence from the people themselves. Useless farm implements and barren landscapes become equal if not greater indicators of destitution. This demonstrates sensitivity to the challenge of walking the tightropes between reality, emotional appeal, and respect in order to present a highly controlled message to both politicians and citizens. It is not that the film is lacking in its presentation of the reality of its contemporary subjects; rather, visual emphasis on poverty may debase the subject and viscerally repulse the audience through the power of such images. Instead, the rhetorically manipulated state of the Joads’ poverty and fate is transposed by Lorentz into history, the landscape, the poetic narration and even into the music.

Returning finally to the title card image, the sun projects light from just above the horizon behind the auto, adding another element of drama to this fateful scene. Of course, the sun was one of the primary villains in the Dust Bowl drama in this “country of high winds and sun,” as The Plow’s Prologue text and episode narration reminds us more than once. However, since the settlers are headed west, this may be the eastern rising sun, a symbol of future hope, instead of the high baking sun. If we read the image directionally, the approaching dust storm threatens to engulf the entire scene and snuff out the sunlight along with any hope it offers. If we read the image chronologically, the rising sun occurs at the end. Thus, there is hope not at the end of the day but in the future, and it is a hope offered by the producers of the film, a salvation via the New Deal. As the future had yet to be determined, this image immediately engages the viewer, both benevolently and politically. The wagon train persists, becoming the background for the
title cards and inviting the viewer to ponder its meaning. The music settles into a gentle cadence at the presentation of last title card, and the next section’s music begins a few seconds prematurely.

**Prologue**

Slowly scrolling upward, two stanzas of text set on a blank, dark background poetically introduce the Prologue, setting forth the purpose of the film alongside information on history, geography, and climate. As we might expect from poetry and as we today skeptically have come to expect from the documentary genre, this information is not entirely factual nor is it without tone. It does not simply appear poetic because of the confines imposed by sixteen-millimeter film; one needs only to observe the division of text in the last three lines of the first stanza to see its deliberate divisions. The text reads:

This is a record of land . . .

of soil, rather than people –

a story of the Great Plains:

the 400,000,000 acres of

wind-swept grass lands that

spread up from the Texas

panhandle to Canada . . .

A high, treeless continent,

without rivers, without streams . . .
A country of high winds,
and sun . . .
and of little rain . . .

By 1880 we had cleared
the Indian, and with
him, the buffalo, from
the Great Plains, and
Established the last frontier . . .
A half million square
miles of natural range . . .
This is a picturization of
what we did with it.”

An animated map then outlines the Great Plains and delineates the states contained within its boundaries, reminding viewers of its size and suggesting the scope of the problem of “what we did with it.” Real grass suddenly appears in the outlined areas, and the Prologue ends as “Grass” begins (see figures 3-7 and 3-8).

The Prologue plays with two complementary rhetorical threads: inevitability, already presented by the title card image, and inclusivity. Both must be managed carefully to avoid being counterproductive in regards to the RA’s activities. Inevitability threatens to assign blame to those who should have known better; “those” being at worst the contemporary migrants and at best their ancestors. Inclusivity involves the

147 Text from Prologue, The Plow.
assignment of blame to everyone in order to dilute it and to encourage everyone’s participation in the solution. Blame may alienate audiences if it is perceived to be balanced too heavily toward them. Keil expands on the first

Figure 3-6: Informational map outlining the Great Plains. Film still from “Prologue.”
Figure 3-7: Transitioning from the Prologue to “Grass.” Real grass appears in the map’s “Great Plains Region.” Film still from Prologue. *The Plow That Broke the Plains.* Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.

component of this strategy in relationship to Lorentz’s choice of historicizing his subject, writing, “*The Plow* invokes history as a means of authorizing its narrative while also asserting the inevitability of the solution it proposes.”\(^{148}\) Thus, inevitability, if wielded correctly, also uses historical cause-and-effect to justify government intervention.

\(^{148}\) Keil 125.
Audience inclusion not only calls them to share in the blame but also to support government solutions.

The automobile at the end of the wagon train and the impending dust storm, both from the title card image, introduce inevitability right away. Though these may also be understood as stand-ins for moments in history, their collective display and common direction also suggest a cause-and-effect relationship. The scrolling text’s description of the land – being treeless, waterless, windy, and sunny – suggests a willful disregard of these variables into the minds of the first settlers and continues the idea of inevitability into the Prologue. Farming this land is thus presented by the film as a doomed endeavor, and a possible subtext is that the settlers are to blame. This is confirmed by the title card’s wagon train and through poor choices made by early settlers.

Still more, as the Study Guide explains, “The Resettlement Administration employed Pare Lorentz to write, direct and produce a film which would portray a great social and economic problem in a dramatic manner. He wrote a scenario showing what has happened to the grasslands at the hands of plowmen pioneers.” This more than suggests that these “plowmen pioneers” are responsible for the entirety of ills that affected the grasslands from their settling through the 1930s – it blames them outright as occurring by their hands. Granted, this assertion moves us a couple of years beyond the film’s initial screening audience, but audiences were still watching The Plow, New Deal programs were still spending money, and farmers continued on under dire circumstances. Thus, audiences could still be swayed for or against the government activities. At the

\[149^{149}\] “How The Plow was Made,” Study Guide. 4. Italics are mine.
very least, when this Study Guide assertion is combined with the information presented in the film’s Prologue, it could provide easy fodder for the criticism. At the worst, it is a mistelling of history, distorting the image of the very group The Plow tries to help. With such early potential counter-productivity, the film quickly needs counteraction.

Though a strict musical analysis would be counterproductive for the present study, it is nonetheless important to consider the Prologue’s music in relation to this current of inevitability. Given the prescriptive nature of the fugue form, however creatively Thomson utilizes it, and the imitative contrapuntal texture it creates, we hear answers persistently following the logic set forth by subjects. Modulatory sections, passing dissonances and changes in instrumentation and volume also add variety and reinforce the Prologue’s grim tone, but the cause-and-effect chase of fugal materials persists throughout the section. It may be impossible to know whether or not Thomson had the Prologue’s rhetorical themes or the title card image in mind, but in composing a fugue for this section he supplied music that reinforces the theme of predictable consequences.

The Prologue does not end with inevitability nor does the film end at the Prologue. The Plow, after all, is a picturization of what we did with it. In a single phrase Lorentz assigns blame to all Americans, from early settlers to the film’s audience. The Plow also moves on to depict deceptive climate patterns that sometimes encouraged farming, to depict the ill effects of corporate farming, to assign blame to government encouraged overuse and overproduction, to suggest a connection with the stock market crash of 1929, and to indict the culture of excess that characterizes the 1920s. The country demanded too much of the Great Plains, and thus the blame for the Dust Bowl is
distributed to history, to Mother Nature, and to the entirety of the country’s population, both past and present.

Mother Nature’s blame prompts analysis since the Prologue explicitly describes geography and climate. Conceptually, in the ways The Plow presents itself and was presented by Lorentz and the federal government, emphasis is placed on the centrality of land and weather to the narrative instead of or at least alongside people. The Prologue begins, “This is a record of land . . . / of soil, rather than people – / a story of the Great Plains: [. . .].” People are explicitly subordinated straightaway. In an article he wrote for McCall’s in 1936, Lorentz also forefronts non-human elements:

“[. . .] it tells the story of the Plains and it tells it with some emotional value – an emotion that springs out of the soil itself. Our heroine is the grass, our villain the sun and the wind, our players the actual farmers living in the Plains country. It is a melodrama of nature – the tragedy of turning grass into dust [. . .].” 150 “Plains,” “soil,” “grass,” “sun,” “wind,” “nature,” and “dust” swirl around the lone human element in Lorentz’s description. Although heroines and villains are also players in a dramatic work, they are specifically set apart from the “actual farmers.” Still more, a government promotional pamphlet titled “The Plow That Broke the Plains: A Documentary Musical Movie” begins, “The Plow That Broke the Plains is a saga of the land of the Great Plains area of the United States.” 151


Each of these examples does move on to depict or describe humans’ roles in the story, and it is arguable that *The Plow* is instead a record of people despite claiming otherwise. Land and weather are important not only because they are said to be or because this is a film set in the Dust Bowl but also because such descriptions remove at least some blame from humans. Rhetorically, emphasizing land and weather allows Lorentz to soften the blow of human fallibility, of both farmers and audience members, when it enters the story. Also, since the film ends in the present, the culmination of these combined narrative and promotional elements may make one of the underlying functions of this film – to educate the public on the state of migrants and the environment and, more controversially, on what the government is doing about it – more acceptable to audiences.

In light of this reading of the Prologue, the nature of the title card’s wagon trains shifts as the narrative unfolds and also as the film’s creation and context are explored. This train may not be a singular unit on a singular path, or else the victims at the end share equally in the blame for initial settlement in an inhospitable place. The film would contradict one of its primary objectives and even confirm some anti-migrant sentiments, all before the first episode begins. The wagon train’s components must only be representative of historical episodes in a people’s history lest the film may fail to persuade audiences. History, then, is what unifies the image instead of an inherent or inherited lacking of the settlers’ descendants. The mistakes made by historical figures instead take the blame, or at least most of the blame, for contemporary circumstances. At the end, the rising sun offers a positive outlook for the present.
“Grass”

“Grass” appropriately begins with a sequence of grass, at first without a horizon and blown by wind then from afar as part of a vast, rolling Great Plains vista (see figure 3-8). A human presence, a man riding atop a horse, occurs only after a minute into this section. Lorentz offered ideas to Thomson for scoring this: “The music is a Peer Gynt pastorale … the beginning of the world.”

Thomson achieves this with a gentle two-voice canon beginning in E major; a flute takes the lead followed by a horn dutifully offset by two beats. This is a notable contrast to the agitated, foreboding counterpoint accompanying the Prologue’s maps. Poetic recitation begins after twenty seconds, proclaiming:

The Grass lands [sic] …

a treeless wind-swept continent of grass

stretching from the broad Texas Panhandle

up to the mountain reaches of Montana

and to the Canadian border.

A country of high winds and sun …

high winds and sun …

without rivers, without streams,

with little rain.\(^{153}\)

\(^{152}\) Qtd. in Lerner 99.

Figure 3-8: Opening image of blowing grass. Film still from “Grass.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.

In appropriate fashion, Thomson’s music supports the narration and visual information. It advances tonally and with ease through the initial shots. Then, as the poetic tone shifts to emphasize the bleakness of the region in line six, the music begins to center around the parallel minor. Initially, this mood change maintains spare instrumentation, but the texture and orchestration thicken and harmonies begin to destabilize when the narrator concludes. Finally, the lone rider appears – a reassuring cowboy – ascending a hill, and the music follows suit by triumphantly returning to E
major, reinforced with an overt authentic cadence. After the Prologue’s foreboding tone, didactic presentation, and potentially confusing message, the audience is prompted by “Grass,” both visually and musically, to feel awe and be distracted by the sublime, eternal landscape. Finally, they are assured by the rugged, masculine cowboy within it.

These conventional narrative devices of visual and musical foreshadowing occur alongside other more suspicious manipulations of time and history. The lone rider does not belong with the rest of “Grass.” The next episode, “Cattle,” begins, “First came the cattle [. . .]”; hence his home episode overlaps the end of “Grass.”

When combined with Lorentz’s vision of “the beginning of the world,” as realized through shots of open grasslands and the two-part canon, the pre-lone-rider segment of “Grass” becomes a primordial, virginal landscape. But the lone rider is not the point of this analysis; he is simply a chronological reference point as the “first” human, along with his cattle, to inhabit this vast space.

The Prologue already dispensed quickly with reality in stating, “By 1880 we had cleared / the Indian [. . .].” While Thomson’s introductory sounding of a Native American presence recurs later in “Warning,” it too is notably absent in “Grass.” Thus, while it could be argued that the film’s focus on Dust Bowl refugees necessitated such short treatment by the Prologue of pre-white inhabitants, “Grass” wholly rewrites history. It omits Native Americans and instead presents only a dramatic contrast between nature and white civilization. Where are Native Americans between the arrival of cattlemen and 1880? Where are they before the arrival of open-range ranches?

\[154\] Italics are mine.
If the region were actually without a native presence, the plant life so emphasized by “Grass” may have been entirely different, as portions of these grasslands were actually cultivated by natives. M. Kat Anderson explains:

Native peoples around the world spent much of their day walking in grasslands or grassland-woodland ecotones: stalking and driving animals; harvesting edible seeds, bulbs, and greens; setting fires; and domesticating grain plants and ungulates. [. . .] Most if not all of the great grasslands of the world, from the Serengeti Plains to the prairie bioregion of the contiguous United States, were maintained with fires set by native peoples.155

Native Americans had been shaping the ecology of North America for centuries, well beyond conventional depictions as hunters and gatherers.

Through the intensification of federal and state Indian removal policies during the Jacksonian era, as exemplified by the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and the persistent westward march of white settlers, the native presence in the Great Plains became even more pronounced as resettled Indians from the Mississippi valley and all points eastward, many having already been resettled, were forced into the plains. Many were moved to the Indian Territory, defined by the Indian Intercourse Act of 1834 as:

all that part of the United States west of the Mississippi, and not within the states of Missouri and Louisiana, or the territory of Arkansas, and, also,

that part of the United States east of the Mississippi river, and not within any state to which the Indian title has not been extinguished, for the purposes of this act, be taken and deemed to be the Indian country.\textsuperscript{156}

This legislation corralled them within the Great Plains and even onto lands that lie within what would become the Dust Bowl. Lorentz cannot be said to have merely ignored this presence; in “Grass” he creates an alternate historical universe in which his narrative can be told for maximum rhetorical effect through the juxtaposition of a perfect, untouched landscape alongside the effects of civilization on that landscape.

Moreover, our lone rider would not have been the first white presence in the Great Plains, nor would his horse have preceded European entry into the Americas. As mentioned earlier, pre-ranch contact with parts of the Great Plains had been made by European explorers and colonial settlers. As early as the middle of the sixteenth century, the Spanish explorer Coronado travelled through portions of present-day Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado, and by the end of the next century, the French had claimed and sailed the Mississippi River. While the French and Spanish by no means established the extensive presence achieved later by United States settlers after the Louisiana Purchase, French and Spanish colonists spent over two centuries in portions of what would become the Great Plains of the United States. Further, by 1840, four-and-a-half-million Americans had already migrated beyond the Appalachian Mountains, and Missouri had

been a state for nineteen years. Texas would become a state in five years. In addition to
the well-established native presence, Europeans and later United States settlers also
traversed and sometimes lived in the Great Plains; it was not unblemished by human
contact.

In this light, “Grass” is no pastoral, and its music no pastorale, despite Lorentz’s
wishes. Beyond this historical problem, there is a literary problem with these terms. A
human presence, and probably a white human in this context given Western literary
traditions, would be needed to satisfy the demands of this musical-literary idea. The lone
rider, who is actually a time-travelling cattleman from the future, and the Indian are
notably absent, and this is, after all,

“A country of high winds and sun …
high winds and sun …
without rivers, without streams,
with little rain.”

Even the archetypical noble savage is absent; this is not a rural idyll. The grasslands
instead become an anti-pastoral, or a region inhospitable to settlement, whose setup by
Lorentz is later confirmed by the narration quoted in this chapter’s epigraph. “Grass”
lacks a human element living harmoniously with and in nature, and the land is far from
Eden.

What Lorentz instead presents may be more akin to the nineteenth-century
sublime. Though numbers and linesbound the Great Plains in the Prologue in a sort of
pedagogical “magisterial gaze” that renders the region, along with the scope of the Dust

Bowl, comprehensible to the audience, the edges of the film seem arbitrary in “Grass” as the Great Plains spreads out before the audience. Here Lorentz perhaps emphasizes the role of the land in the narrative – an example of the plains taking its share of the blame. Awe of size is mixed with fear of geography and climate in “Grass.” It is almost as if the plains will break the settler rather than the other way around.

“Cattle”

Accompanied by “I Ride an Old Paint,” a widely known American cowboy song here even scored with a guitar to lend authenticity, the first shot from “Cattle” visually repeats the overlapping of the lone rider with the grasslands, though this time it occurs in reverse. “Grass” now lingers for ten seconds into “Cattle,” though not simply for the obvious reason that grassland provides a setting for cattle ranching. Rather, in “Cattle’s” first shot, grass dominates the foreground of the screen, while cattle, cowboy, and sky are relegated to a horizontal sliver at the top (see figure 3-9). “Cattle’s” narration reinforces this emphasis on grass, almost immediately describing it as “an unfenced range a

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159 Unless otherwise indicated, I defer to Lerner’s archival work for source material identification in this chapter and the next.
“First came the cattle….‖161 Perhaps, then, in this version of history, cowboys replace shepherds of ancient pastoral literature, and their guitars replace pan flutes.


Also appearing in this episode’s score are “Cowboy’s Lament” and “Git Along Little Dogies.” Transcribed for orchestra, these cowboy songs contrast considerably from the original music and classical forms of the first two sections of the film. However, they are no less rhetorically important. For the film’s audiences then and perhaps still now, these songs evoked an idealized version of frontier life during the cowboy’s era.⁶² When paired with images of grazing cattle and their contemporary shepherds, “Cattle” becomes the literary pastoral, and cowboy songs become the realization of the musical pastorale previously mismatched with “Grass.” Now we begin to move toward the more familiar American West of ideal and imagination.

However, stopping at this identification of compositional Americanism fails to address their larger implications for the function of the film. Certainly the cowboy did not break the plains, so what is this American spin on the rural idyll and its folksong accompaniment accomplishing? As a history of white interaction with and settlement of the Great Plains, information on cowboys and cattle ranching is simple necessity and need not be loaded. Coming after the ominous Prologue and ambiguous “Grass,” perhaps it is dramatically functional, giving the audience a break from doom and gloom, and this break may be a component of the process of persuasion through nostalgia and myth reinforcement. The audience, having experienced filmic distress while also actually living through trying times, may long for this powerful, mythic figure.

With its pastoral theme, we are also presented with an appropriate relationship for civilization and the Great Plains. This is supported by the narration, which continues,

\[\text{\footnotesize ⁶² Lerner aligns this episode’s music with Hollywood conventions for the then-young Western genre, and he speculates that The Plow helped cement such scoring conventions for future Westerns.}\]
“the southern range for winter grazing / and the mountain plateaus for summer. / It was a cattleman’s Paradise” (see figure 3-10).\textsuperscript{163} From archival materials, we know that Thomson’s instrumentation in this episode and the next, Homesteader, was suggested by Lorentz, likely for its rhetorical effects.\textsuperscript{164} To take this one step further, guitars, banjos, accordions, and fiddles would engage audiences across the nation – audiences whose support the Resettlement Administration needed.

With the pastoral/e finally established and the foundational myth of the West recalled, the tone of the narration shifts as cattle begin pouring in from all sides:

“Up from the Rio Grande…

in from the rolling prairies…

down clear from the eastern highlands

the cattle rolled into the old buffalo range.\textsuperscript{165}

They did not appear in the plains naturally, of course; demand for food led more people into the cattle industry as driving shifted to ranching and finally to corporate domination of the entire system. This process transpired through the entire second half of the nineteenth century, but \textit{The Plow} conveniently squeezes it into a single episode, creating

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[163] Narration from “Cattle,” \textit{The Plow}, Rpt. in \textit{Study Guide} 25. Figure 3-10 shows the image that accompanies the word “paradise.”
\item[164] Lerner 113-114. He quotes Lorentz from a note written to Thomson, “[I]f the instrument of the herder was the guitar, the banjo certainly was the music brought from the South and the highlands by the homesteader, along with the accordion brought by the Norwegians into the Northwest […]”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
a logical cause-and-effect relationship with the next chapter, “The Homesteader.” As previously noted, the plains were already being settled, and the great settlement boom of the second half of the nineteenth century occurred alongside the development of the cattle industry – not because of it.

As the narration continues, the rhetorical purpose of The Plow’s retelling of history becomes clearer. The narrator explains:
Fortunes in beef!

For a decade the world discovered the grass lands
and poured cattle into the plains.
The railroads brought markets
to the edge of the plains…
land syndicates sprang up overnight
and the cattle rolled into the West."166

Civilization and its technology have begun to enter the plains, forever destroying the pastoral idyll. Perhaps because our cowboy is still a player – albeit historically a decreasingly powerful player – the music fails to convey the impending loss of paradise as we hear successive cowboy melodies, first tossed among solo instruments with guitar accompaniment then set symphonically. Against this carefree backdrop, the narrator continues, “The railroad brought the world into the plains… / new populations, new needs crowded the last frontier.” Figure 3-11 shows the visualization. Cattle and dust fill the screen, and we are no longer in the cattleman’s paradise. Railroad tracks run along the top edge of this shot, the harbinger of civilization. “New populations” and “new needs” did not neutrally enter or fill the plains; they instead “crowded the last frontier.”

Leo Marx writes, “Since Jefferson’s time the forces of industrialism have been the chief threat to the bucolic image of America,” an image that became ingrained in European conceptions of the New World – a new Eden in which Europe could be reborn.167 Marx’s seminal work, The Machine in the Garden, examines the ancient

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Figure 3-11: A changed industry: cattle ranches and the railroad. Film still from “Cattle.”

The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936.

literary theme of the “pastoral ideal” as it is retold under uniquely American circumstances and in light of industrialization’s creation of an alternate reality. He explains, “For more than a century our most gifted writers have dwelt upon the contradiction between rural myth and technological fact.”168 Thus far, Lorentz appears to fall within this artistic tradition, and he even uses the railroad as a villain, a common


168 Marx 354.
symbol in nineteenth-century American literature and painting of industrialization and the
destruction of the pastoral ideal. “Grass” begins to make more sense when put into
Marx’s system. Marx explains that “the pastoral ideal is an embodiment of what Lovejoy
calls ‘semi-primitivism’; it is located in a middle ground somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a
transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature.” A landscape
without Native Americans is necessary in this scheme, and “Grass” abides. Most of the
remainder of the film chronicles the fifty-year fall and the other side of Marx’s
continuum after the pastoral ideal is transmitted from the cowboy to the plowman in the
next episode. The phrase “the plow that broke the plains,” then, refers to the machine in
the garden. The plow will become increasingly complex, becoming drawn by teams of
horses and finally powered by gasoline, and civilization will unceasingly demand more of
the plains. In this reading, civilization is the villain; through its industry and technology
it destroys the Great Plains and defeats the descendants of its mythic inhabitants.

“Homesteader”

“Homesteader” is schizophrenic in its portrayal of the “first” non-cowboys who
settled the plains. Its characterization actually begins near the end of “Cattle,” with
another instance of thematic overlapping of sequences, as the narrator proclaims, “Once
again the plowman followed the herds / and the pioneer came to the plains. / Make way

169 Marx 23. He expands on this idea in Chapter Three, “The Garden,” especially
examining its resonance in Thomas Jefferson’s thinking.
for the plowman!\footnote{Narration from “Homesteader,” The Plow, Rpt. in Study Guide 26.} This exclamation point appears in the Study Guide’s transcript but is not echoed by the narrator. Instead, he noticeably delivers the imperative flatly over an off-putting, dissonant trumpet fanfare that marks the entrance of the homesteader. With the preceding chapter’s suggestions that cattle ranchers were overpopulating the plains and that the coming of settlers represented the beginning of the end of paradise, the common historical narrative of the manifest destiny of American expansionism is turned on its head.

What follows is initially not ominous or anti-settler; Lorentz and company give the audience a more familiar story. Instead, a prolonged celebration of historical heroes continues as the myth is transferred to the “plowman,” accompanied by banjo strumming and folk melodies. A generic folk melody exuberantly begins “Homesteader,” and this soon gives way to “Way Out in Idyho,” which rapidly swells from a banjo-picked melody to a full orchestral treatment. Equally rapid is the progression of the historical moment, which is subdivided into the first three shots. Taking cues from the final narration of “Cattle,” settlers literally appear to follow cattle into the plains (see figures 3-12 and 3-13). The first shot, lasting approximately ten seconds, recreates a wagon train entering the plains from the right, presumably the East. Mule drawn wagons ride at least three abreast and are tightly arranged, an unlikely configuration that is nonetheless consistent with an imagined West rather than the West of reality.\footnote{The astute observer will notice that the title card image features oxen pulling the wagon instead of mules. Though inconsistent here, both mules and oxen were used to pull wagons.} The second shot, lasting approximately seven seconds, watches from behind as cattle recede into the distance and...
over a hill, as if the viewer of the wagon train turned around to watch the cattle exit the plains. The third and longest shot, lasting approximately fifteen seconds, recreates the beginning of a land rush (see figure 3-14). Although now the viewer is taken to a new location as settlers move from left to right, the land rush too recalls an imagined West. Certainly there were dozens of land rushes, but iconic images of these obscure the slow, steady migration of settlers to all points west, a process taking decades rather than seconds. As quickly as the film’s settlers enter the West and stake their claims, the mood again shifts; now the process of destruction, foretold by the narrator, can begin in earnest.

As the music bounces its way to the end of the final strains of “Way Out’s” melody, the camera noticeably lingers for a few seconds on the dust left by racing land rushers, as if to emphasize its existence. This is only the second instance of dust shown after the title card image’s dust storm – the first dust is kicked up by corralled cattle but not dwelt upon by the camera. It now becomes difficult to determine the perspective of “Homesteader” toward these settlers. Do they share in the heroism of the cowboys, or do they negatively mark the entrance of civilization and the beginning of the destruction of paradise?

The narration confirms the arrival of civilization in the garden, noting, “The first fence… / progress came to the plains.”\(^{172}\) As the next shot begins, it is interesting that the Study Guide notes, “Music like a distant tom tom [sic] beats as a close-up of a fence post being driven is shown.”\(^{173}\) As the first object that pierces the plains, the fence post


\(^{173}\) Study Guide 26. It is important to briefly draw attention to the use of the word “tom-tom” by the Study Guide in its description of this section of “Homesteader.” While
Lerner soundly argues that Thomson’s compositional choice is consistent with film music conventions for evoking Native Americans, but he must ultimately admit that he is speculating on this relationship. He confesses, “Neither Thomson nor John Cage, the two most vocal commentators on Thomson’s music, ever make any statements linking the parallel fourth and timpani to the sounds of the “Indians” or the Plains, and if pressed, both would probably be quick to point out the more obvious connection, musically-speaking, to organum. Thomson’s style in the 1920s contained what Cage and others called an “ecclesiastical character” through parallel fourths and fifths and pedal points [. . .] (Lerner 91-92).” Lerner was only aware of the Study Guide through its mention in MacCann’s study, which itself includes only limited analysis, so he was unaware of the tom-tom’s mention by the Study Guide. If indeed Pare Lorentz wrote the Study Guide or even at least supervised its production, it is now possible to make a more confident analysis of Thomson’s musical rhetoric, since the two worked closely together during the compositional and editing processes. Based on this evidence, Thomson deliberately used conventional devices for suggesting or evoking Native Americans.
Figure 3-13: “Make way for the plowman!” Cattle exit the Great Plains with homesteaders in hot pursuit. Film still from “Homesteader.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
inaugurates the long fall, although the narrator briefly seems to withhold judgment through his word choice. However, the tom-tom’s sounding is not neutral; it introduces a restatement of music from the Prologue and is accompanied by the following repeated narration: “High winds and sun… / high winds and sun… / a country without rivers and with little rain.” In addition to the restating of Prologue music and text, audiences may

Figure 3-14: Moments before the land rush. Film still from “Homesteader.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
be reminded of other familiar themes: the inevitability of failure and the ignorance of the settlers in not noting the apparently obvious climatic problems haunting the plains. Consistent with Lorentz’s rhetorical strategy, the settler is simultaneously mythologized and blamed.

It is also in these moments in “Homesteader” that the film’s title gets its first visual treatment, which occurs exactly as the restated Prologue melody begins. Seemingly without effort, the first animal-drawn plow slips into the fleetingly rich earth, and the camera tracks its motion back and forth (see figure 3-15). As the farmer takes a break and leans against his plow, the narrator repeats his description of climate and geography and continues, “Settler, plow at your peril!”175 The narrator then suddenly belts out the final words of Homesteader: “Two hundred miles from water… / Two hundred miles from town… / but the land is new.”176

In light of the negative tone of the middle section of “Homesteader,” which sharply contrasts the boisterous initial entrance of settlers to the plains, the last section is surely a synthesis of the two. Notable for capturing the energy of this section, the Study Guide explains, “A field of waving wheat is shown and a horse-drawn reaper comes toward the camera. 38-horse reaper [sic] is shown from a distance and in close-ups. Wheat pours into a pile as the harvest of the plowman is shown [. . .].”177 Musically, the


175 Narration from “Homesteader,” The Plow, Rpt. in Study Guide 27. Again, the Study Guide concludes with an exclamation point whereas the narrator is far from exclamatory in his delivery.

cowboy songs continue as banjo, xylophone, and orchestra unite to present a carefree accompaniment to the agricultural abundance.

Lerner believes that the music for this section “contains Thomson’s purest expressions of musical joy in the entire score” and even registers his surprise that it is not
tempered by Thomson’s characteristic irony. When considered in relation to the preceding sections of “Homesteader,” this is not pure joy at all. Lerner is looking for stylistic irony instead of conceptual irony; simply using joyful music is the joke here, given the warnings issued by the film – “Settler, plow at your peril!” – and the eventual outcome known to audiences.

Before Keil, mentioned earlier for his structural divisions, moves to his analysis of The Plow, he discusses the relationship between persuasion and expression in American documentary films of the 1930s. He writes about connections between “creative representation” and “social argumentation” and discounts any standardized, dichotomous correlation between visual and aural, such as creative elements always belonging to the visual side and the persuasive elements always being in the sound side. He concludes that:

> sound in these films is never restricted to voice-over narration, as music and sound effects also occur throughout; the films’ stylistic systems depend upon an oscillating relation between sound and other techniques, which can vary from the absolute correspondence to deliberate and ironic counterpoint [. . .].

In this complex section of Homesteader, we have two additional elements not addressed by Keil: narrative and audience. Through overt foreshadowing, the narrative has prepared the audience to be wary of the bountiful harvest, and much of the audience

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178 Lerner 115.

179 Keil 122.
already knows the ending of the story – a prolonged economic depression, the Dust Bowl, and the displaced farmer. The joyful music and visual materials, or Keil’s sound and image, are in “absolute correspondence,” but they are set in an ironic counterpoint to the ominous narrative and to audience expectations. In applying his own ideas to The Plow, Keil adds that this “considerably more complicated interplay of sound and image” is better understood as an “integration of sound and image [that] exists in a state of ongoing negotiation.” In this case, the negotiation becomes even more complex as it also includes narrative and audience.

Keil’s ideas may be brought to bear on Lerner’s analysis of “Homesteader.” If only a stylistic Americanism, as Lerner identifies, then the music here is simply Thomson’s creative use of folk songs in a cultivated, orchestral setting. American identity is thus joyfully evoked, and our analysis may stop. The music may be echoing the emotional state of the historical farmer, but to the contemporary audience member it is an irrational fantasy accompanying the absurdly rapid growth in size and complexity of the farm machinery. There is another element to this compositional irony. By quoting the folk songs “Walking John” and “Way Out in Idyho” in this section, Thomson is making a joke using the farmer’s own materials. The destruction of the land has begun, and everyone knows it; the historical farmers depicted ought to know it, too, and are plowing on borrowed time set to borrowed music.

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180 Keil 122.
Confirming this darker reading, “Homesteader” finally closes with a steam locomotive, that common cultural symbol of civilization which had previously marked the beginning of the end of paradise in “Cattle” (see figure 3-16). The Study Guide notes, perhaps sarcastically given the content of “Homesteader,” that as it moves “low and far across the horizon” it is “marking the path of progress.” Historically this

Figure 3-16: The economic take-off is now underway. Film still from “Homesteader.”


\[^{181}\] Study Guide 27.
moment is confirmed with the rapid expansion of the transportation network that was well underway after midcentury, forever linking the West to the rest of the country as a market for Eastern goods and as the producer of the nation’s food. Four golden spikes secured the meeting of the Central Pacific Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869, marking the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. In just two decades the United States Census would need to revise its methods due to the absence of a frontier. In The Plow, the land has now been thoroughly settled and the plow has broken into the plains. The beginning of the end is now complete as this dynamic episode fades out.
CHAPTER FOUR: PENNILESS AND BEWILDERED: FROM “WARNING” TO THE EPILOGUE

We had two prime objectives in making the picture: one, to show audiences a specific and exciting section of the country; the other, to portray the events which led up to one of the major catastrophes in American history – to show, in other words, the Great Drought which is now going into its sixth year.\(^{182}\)

Pare Lorentz

The original scenario of The Plow That Broke the Plains embodied a concept of epic implications: capitalism’s anarchic rape of the land, and – by extension – the impoverishment of all the natural resources of America: mines, forests, men.\(^{183}\)

Peter Ellis

At this point in The Plow, approximately nine minutes into the film, the foundation has been laid for present conditions known to the film’s early audiences.

\(^{182}\) Pare Lorentz, “The Plow That Broke the Plains,” McCall’s July 1936, Rpt. in Pare Lorentz, Lorentz on Film: Movies 1927-1941 (New York: Hopkins and Blake, 1975) 135.

\(^{183}\) Ellis, the pen name of Irving Lerner, is describing his fellow Nykino colleagues’ understanding of their new project. Pete Ellis [Irving Lerner], “The Plow That Broke the Plains,” New Theatre (July 1936): 18-19. For reader clarification, this is not scholar Neal William Lerner.
Familiar characters have been set into a traditional mythic history of the West, taking cues from the Western ideal of America, in this case its grasslands, as a pristine new Eden through which Western civilization could rejuvenate itself. Cowboys, pioneers, and settlers filled the land, realizing their god-given Manifest Destiny as citizens of the United States. The historical period beginning with “Warning” and ending with “Devastation,” the final chapter before the Epilogue, lasts approximately fifty years and is bookended by convergences of economic depression and drought. The scale of the second convergence is larger than the first and combines with poor farming practices, and it is foreshadowed by the closing images of “Homesteader” and the repetitive warnings of the narration.

Historical details and periods were manipulated or left out entirely by Lorentz because they were inconvenient for and inconsistent with both the story audiences already knew and the story Lorentz and company wanted to tell. The cameramen too were edited – rebuked by Lorentz for advancing a far-too-critical viewpoint of the entire American system, as summarized by Ellis in the epigraph. Thomson and Lorentz collaborated much more closely, and the musical score dutifully endeavors to embody the ideas and emotions needed to generate the desired meaning and to move the narrative effectively from episode to episode.

Lorentz departs from traditional tellings of American history in one crucial aspect. Technology and industrialization, two components of modern concepts of progress, are straightaway implicated in the creation of the Dust Bowl and in the general telling of the West’s history. The emergence of the United States as a world power in the early twentieth century is predicated on its technological and industrial might, so Lorentz
implicates one of mainstream American identity’s sacred cows. As previously discussed, his published works, biography, and filmography, suggest a measured environmentalist impulse and confirm a healthy suspicion of corporate capitalism. As the film moves closer to the present it is ultimately addressing, these personal motivations will have more resonance as the Dust Bowl begins to be created.

Perhaps more striking, *The Plow* creates a complex image of the heroic pioneers and settlers from American history. They are celebrated but also assigned blame for choosing to develop land that is depicted as obviously unsettleable. This is not as complete a departure from tradition as with the film’s depiction of technology and industrialization. These are instead implicated straightaway by the film’s title (a plow is breaking, not a person), and their celebrations are consistently presented with irony. The first white cowboys, however, are blameless, and the first white settlers, while amply warned and chastised, are nonetheless treated nostalgically. As we will see, *The Plow* carefully creates a difference between the methods and motivations of small- and large-scale farming. Using this tactic, the settlers’ progeny will be developed further in such a way that obscures a relationship with ancestors and their shortcomings and instead realigns them with the present state of the Dust Bowl migrants, who audiences are prompted to feel compassion for instead of disdain. The tension pitting blame, 

184 In doing so, Lorentz joins the lineage of subversive American cultural icons, as described by Marx in *Machine*, who are suspicious of the forces of progress.

185 For example, see his discussion of utility company monopolies and working for the Edison Mazda Lamp Company in his book *FDR’s Moviemaker: Memoirs & Scripts*, pp.11-16; the book he co-authored with Morris Ernst, *Censored*; and his description of his own environmentalism in a letter to William Alexander excerpted in Alexander’s *The People’s Films*, p 62.
inevitability, and criticism of history alongside nostalgia, patriotism, and the potential for hope – all set forth in the title card image and constantly negotiated through this point – continues through the end of the film. Ultimately it will prove too difficult a dance when it combines with contemporaneous politics that lead to the Epilogue’s cut.

“Warning”

Following “Homesteader,” “Warning” offers a brief, unsettling glimpse of the fruits of late nineteenth-century agricultural decisions, although only climate is blamed overtly. Lerner places the end of “the idyllic nostalgia for a mythologized frontier” here, although I argue that this idea began to come under attack even as far back as “Cattle’s” implied depiction of corporate cattle ranching. The end was certainly well underway once settlers began to plow at their peril. What “Warning” does mark is not in dispute; it shows us the first drought of the film – the first evidence of the destruction of the plains (see figure 4-1).

Locating this historical moment is somewhat challenging given The Plow’s earlier manipulations of time and given its tendency thus far to avoid using national events as chronological reference points. By the end of “Homesteader” we can safely conclude that our timeline has moved into the late nineteenth century. We know this from clues in “Homesteader,” including the several shots of team-drawn combines along with the size of the fields being plowed. Further, as the narration confirms, it would not be until the last third of the decade that national and international markets developed alongside the

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186 Lerner 115.
requisite transportation network to get crops to those markets (made complete by the framing of “Homesteader” with railroads). “War” follows “Warning” on its other side, so we are clearly observing in ‘Warning” a moment before World War I. The arc of American history suggests a period lasting from the 1880s through the end of the 1890s. Drought and a wave of European protectionism hit farmers at the beginning of this
timeframe, and the national Panic of 1893 inaugurated nearly a half-decade of economic depression that further extended farmers’ woes.

One flaw in this positioning comes from the placement of the land rush shot in “Homesteader.” While land rushes were not limited to Oklahoma, their widespread usage was historically limited, and the iconic Oklahoma rushes of 1889 and 1893 make sense for inclusion by Lorentz in his abbreviated history. These land rushes have the added benefit of being geographically associated with Okies, the well-known term that eventually became a generic label for migrant workers in the 1930s. If the episode’s timeline is taken literally, then our wagon train settlers of mid-century are compressed with the rushers near the end of the century. Thus, the race from homesteading and single-plow family farming to large-scale corporate farming could not begin until the middle of the last decade of the century or, more likely, until the next century. Given that this race is also exaggerated by the film, it seems more likely that Lorentz keeps his beginning and ending relatively straight, but the events that occur in between are not necessarily related by cause and effect. Indeed, I have already discussed the reality that western settlement coincided with and even predates, in some cases, cattle driving and ranching, and the selected land rushes would have occurred simultaneously with the events in “Warning.” Instead of presenting a literal timeline, it seems more likely that land rush is included to establish place and era more than giving an exact historical marker. The cumulative effect is a slowly unfolding montage of shots that revolve around the episode title: “Homesteader.” Thus, the timeline I set forth for “Homesteader” and “Warning” is still accurate.
“Warning” departs from previous analyses of the farmers’ undertakings. The narration makes no mention of man-made problems affecting farmers during this period, instead focusing solely on drought. Nor does it again repeat the idea that they should have known better than to settle this inhospitable region. Instead, the narrator explains:

Many were disappointed.
The rains failed…and the sun baked the light soil.
Many left…they fought the loneliness and the hard years…
But the rains failed them.\(^\text{187}\)

Despite “Homesteader’s” excesses, Mother Nature takes the blame here. Also absent is the direct action undertaken by farmers to solve man-made problems and to deal with drought. Regionally and racially organized Farmers’ Alliances addressed systemic problems such as transportation costs and credit. Politically, third parties led and supported by farmers, such as the People’s Party, had short-lived regional successes, and the two major parties were no doubt influenced by farmer activism. “Warning” instead gives audiences passive, helpless farmers and images of despair. The impotent farmer is powerless to the whims of the climate.

Figure 4-1 shows the opening shot of “Warning,” and this is followed by a plow being dragged across dry, baked soil, shown in figure 4-2. Instead of penetrating the ground with ease as it had in “Homesteader,” it now scratches a thin line on the surface. The plow moves back and forth across the screen, carving only a useless, shallow furrow after several passes. Musically, “Warning” begins with a spare, wandering bassoon.

Figure 4-2: The shadows are nearly as deep as the line made by the plow’s first pass.

From “Warning.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement

The melody mostly doubled at the octave by string pizzicato, though occasionally their
intervalllic relationship is punctuated by dissonance. The melody is constructed from
Prologue materials, although through its wandering it strays from the tonal center and
fragments these materials. Rhetorically, as it seems to move without direction or reason,
the music mimics the fickle nature of the Great Plains’ climate and reflects the despair of
the farmer.
Toward the middle of this episode, we are presented with perhaps the most compelling image of the film: an infant on his hands and knees next to a fallen, unused plow (see figure 4-3). One of his hands presses the dry soil to hold itself up, and the other grasps the plow for balance. This well-planned moment completes the family unit, the mother having been shown a few seconds before resting after futilely sweeping dust (presumably once again) from their home’s front steps. With his helpless parents working against the drought, the baby is helpless too. How did he get to the outdoor plow? Do his parents or an un-pictured sibling or caregiver know where he is? What will become of him, left alone under the high sun?

The baby reinforces the despair of the situation. Along with the omission of farmer activism, this serves to create an image not simply of helplessness but instead adds the nuance that these are of people who need help. Let us not forget that the image is in service to a government agency – the RA – whose mission is to help these people’s offspring. An empowered farmer does not need such government assistance. To further this point, if we project our timeline into the future, we can reasonably speculate that the helpless adults are parents or grandparents of Dust Bowl migrants. They conceivably would still be alive or at least still dear in memory, so the connection is much stronger than with the pioneer of the first half of the nineteenth century or the settler of the early second half. The baby of course accomplishes still more. As a symbol of the future with an estimated birth date of 1890, the baby would be fourty-six years old at the time of The Plow’s release in 1936. It clutches its birthright in its right hand and its downfall in its

\[188\] Though it may be impossible to know the gender of the child, its placement next to the plow is suggestive of gendered farming roles.
Figure 4-3: Is the future uncertain or fated? From “Warning.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.

left. Rhetorically, then, the warning issued by this sequence becomes less of a statement of caution with a changeable outcome and more of a fateful compression of history.

A final distinction should be made between “Warning” and “Homesteader.” The lone farmer struggling behind his walking plow presumably is not working the same field as the thirty-eight horse reaper previously worked in “Homesteader.” Although the practices of large-scale farming are not yet indicted, the narrative begins to register a
subtle distinction between the yeoman farmer and the corporate owner. We only see images of the yeoman suffering while presumably the corporate owner simply waits out the drought or profits from its other unaffected land; we do not see a horse team or large, complex machinery. Soon the yeoman will become the tenant farmer, the Dust Bowl migrant, and the corporate owner will join forces with the bank.

Before the film was complete, Lorentz outlined his intent for “Warning,” explaining it to Thomson as “a coda, a brief warning, which should not be over-emphasized—a lull in time, to allow for the excitement of both the war and speculation scenes—a warning, however, which should be related to our first plowman and to our final despair and punishment.” The holder of this study will have likely spent more time reading this section than “Warning” spends on its subject. Accomplishing the described process takes only sixty-six seconds and is suddenly interrupted by World War I, perhaps before audiences can process the profundity of “Warning.” At the end of this episode, the frustrated farmer lashes out, kicking at a wooden piece of the plow, as the narrator glumly says, “Many were disappointed [. . .].” Suddenly at mid-sentence, percussion enters as the film cuts to a new shot that looks uphill at an approaching self-propelled tractor. The narrator continues, now excitedly, “[. . .] but the great day was coming… / the day of new causes--new profits--new hopes.” A bass drum beats a moderate pulse as a ratchet and drum roll compete to obscure it, and the effect sounds like an awkward marching cadence. The approaching tractor threatens to engulf the screen as the percussion begins to rolls in unison, but the sequence ends abruptly with a sudden explosion. With this, World War I begins, and “Warning” ends ambiguously.

\[189\] Qtd. in Lerner 116.
With the suddenness described above, “War” moves the timeline forward two-and-a-half decades, from approximately 1890 to 1914, yet the episode creates the impression that World War I solved the economic and environmental problems of the late nineteenth century. One may wonder how the vast fields being tended in this episode could be grown from the dry ground and single farmer in “Warning,” but “War’s” marching pace moves forward too quickly and anxiously for such reflection. Other inaccuracies, touched on below, also pepper a close reading of the episode, but “War” succeeds in conveying the energy of the period. It pits American agriculture against the Central Powers through contrasting shots of advancing tractors and tanks, complete with sound effects, and additional wartime images, including more explosions, newspaper headlines, wheat harvesting, maritime commerce, and victory parades. Almost two minutes and twenty seconds pass before the narrator joins in, allowing image, music, and text to advance the plot in the first segment primarily through shots of plowing.

Thomson again quotes vernacular sources in the score; through the entry of narration we hear another cowboy song, “The Buffalo Skinners,” and “Mademoiselle from Armentieres,” a popular wartime song. The episode concludes with “Brown-eyed Lee.” Lerner believes that these choices, along with changes in tonality from major to minor, offer commentary, deliberate or not, on the feverishness of both the narrative and Lorentz’s editing. Further, such commentary “would have been perceived by a
contemporary audience aware of the song’s message.” Unfortunately, this is a difficult claim to measure, as musical literacy varies widely from individual to individual and given that the melodies are played on instruments instead of sung. Yet it is interesting to contemplate. In “The Buffalo Skinners,” for example, he equates the employer unwilling to help if the proposed venture fails with Americans if they fail to support the federal government. However, I would add that these lyrics could also be directed toward the Great Plains’ homefront as a subtle way of relieving blame for wartime farming practices. If the Great Plains had turned to isolationism or was swayed by anti-war sentiments, then it would take the place of the shady employer by failing to support American troops. Thus, film audiences should remember the patriotism shown by the Great Plains’ people and thus look compassionately toward its now destitute ex-residents. In either reading, the end result is the same: support your fellow Americans by supporting the RA.

“Mademoiselles” may be simple enough to unpack as a familiar song that helps to establish the historical moment. “Brown-eyed Lee” finishes with a message of betrayal, perhaps mirroring the nation’s betrayal of the Great Plains after its wartime effort.

Returning to earlier assertions regarding compositional Americanisms, we might conclude that all three songs have explanations from Thomson’s alleged commentary. Time and geographically specific music recalls those moments and places. Cowboy

190 Lerner 131.

191 The operative portion of the text of “The Buffalo Skinners” reads, “Yes, I will pay good wages, give transportation too, / Provided you will go with me and stay the summer through; / But if you should grow homesick, come back to Jackboro, / I won’t pay transportation from the range of the buffalo” (qtd. in Lerner 131).

192 See Lerner 133-134.
songs, still a circulating genre then especially through anthropological collections, were representative of their singers, or better the myth of their singers, suggesting an American spirit familiar and desirable to white audiences. The lyrical content of the songs, then, becomes subordinate to the compositional gesture of quoting from them musically. In this case, to revise Schuman’s ideas concerning “enough beholders,” the audience may have at least been familiar with cowboy songs and attracted to the ideas they represented. In this way, Levy argues that “in the cowboy’s bravado – independence and good humor, but also aggression and alienation – America found heroic qualities that could sustain it through both the military conflicts of the Second World War and the ideological conflicts of the Cold War.” Her analysis is equally applicable to the preceding period, when American identity was at its most vulnerable.

One minute and fifteen seconds of dusty, war-motivated plowing passes before a newspaper headline informs, “Wilson Proclaims War / Spy Ring Arrested / German Ships Seized.” In the nearly three years that pass before the United States officially enters the war, The Plow suggests a mobilized American economy fully engaged in assisting the Allies. Another headline only eleven seconds into the episode proclaims, “Wheat Prices Soar.” While it is no secret that the American economy benefitted from this period and that both the majority of Americans and their government were more sympathetic toward the British, Lorentz removes wholesale the complex dance of President Wilson’s neutrality. If the British navy had not blockaded the Central Powers,

193 Although here I would depart from Schuman’s views that this makes these cowboy songs universal Americanisms. Whenever The Plow is viewed today by laypeople, do they even recognize these as cowboy songs?

194 Levy 21.
perhaps American merchant ships would not have been so exclusive in their British destinations. Without getting into the intricacies of World War I’s early years, it suffices to say that patriotic connections between wheat growing and the war effort are not as direct as Lorentz depicts. Rather, making money and rejuvenating the American economy were more important, and the United States continued to trade with the British despite its violations of international law.

Once the audience is made aware of the United States’ official entry into war, an army of tractors replaces the singular tractors of the early war years, and the dust created also multiplies. We observe this army at work for several seconds, then the narrator’s reentry is marked by a firing canon. Excitedly and rapidly, he almost yells:

“Wheat will win the war!

Plant wheat…

Plant the cattle ranges…

plant your vacant lots…plant wheat!

Wheat for the boys over there!

Wheat for the Allies!

Wheat for the British!

Wheat for the Belgians!

Wheat for the French!

Wheat at any price…

Wheat will win the war!”

The Study Guide, an important director of interpretation for some audiences, even joins in the excitement, shifting from its descriptive prose to a more poetic and agitated delivery. We know that this is not the Great Plains of the 1930s, though it becomes difficult to remember that this is the direction The Plow is headed.

When we consider the technological timeline of American agriculture, the film’s exaggerations and even manipulations become glaring. While the number of tractors did grow rapidly toward the end of World War I, they represented a fraction of farm power even into the 1920s. Horse and mule numbers actually peaked during 1918 at 26.7 million and other workstock at 20.7 million in 1923. The horse teams from “Homesteader” would have been more representative of large-scale agriculture during the war, yet as the first mechanized war, perhaps the lure and lore of the tractor makes sense beside the lumbering tank as symbols of the moment.

Another tractor problem begins in the overlap between the “Warning” and “War” and continues throughout the episode. The first tractor that rolls toward the camera at the end of “Warning” seems to be the same model featured throughout “War.” We see its name on the second tractor shown as it too advances toward the camera but then turns toward the right of the screen. The close observer will read along its nose “McCormick-Deering,” a line of tractors first built by International Harvester Company in the early

196 After reprinting the narration for “War,” it reads, “Wheat pours on a pile…another grain ship is shown. Tractors move in fateful procession over the hill. Tanks on the battlefield rush toward the camera…the plow cuts the sod of the plains…a parade of soldiers passes down the avenue as crowds shout before the flag-bedecked buildings. It’s war! War with all its fervor and excitement and restlessness.”

1920s (see figure 4-4). Perhaps Lorentz encountered difficulty finding stock footage from the 1910s, a likelihood given the young age of the medium. Given the numbers in which these tractors will soon travel across the screen once war is declared, we might expect these to be Fordsons, the first mass-produced and lightweight tractor, although they were not manufactured until 1917. Other tractor varieties existed throughout the 1910s, and the big wheat fields in the Great Plains could certainly use such labor-saving devices, but again Lorentz departs from a factual account in order to advance his own story.

Soon our fleet of McCormick-Deerings joins together and advances. As the group of tractors moves from right to left, a crosscut group of tanks appear to counter from left to right, even firing upon the tractors (see figures 4-4 and 4-5). Upon closer inspection, the tanks are not any Axis design; they are instead Mark VIIIIs, a joint American-British design still under construction at the end of the war. Perhaps this is training footage of the one hundred tanks finished and kept by the United States Army. If so, detail is again subordinate to rhetorical suggestion, in this case recalling the American effort in winning World War I. The friendly origin of the tank or even the Mark series may have been known by Lorentz and contemporary audiences, and this would suggest that the shots are not crosscut in contrast but in compliment – a reminder for audiences that farmers joined the fight.


Figure 4-4: A time-travelling McCormick-Deering assisting with the war effort. From “War.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
Figure 4-5: “Wheat will win the war!” McCormick-Deering tractors on the march. From “War.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
If they are opposed, detail would continue to be subordinate to rhetorical suggestion. In this reading, if the tractors are fighting “German” tanks, the audience is nonetheless presented with a nearly identical message. It is difficult to assess Lorentz’s knowledge of military hardware or the accuracy in cataloguing of stock footage, but it ultimately does not matter. In either case, Lerner’s summary of this moment offers adequate commentary: “Lorentz’s ploy [...] creates a rhetorical need for the country to
now come to the aid of the farmer; when the country needed the assistance of the farmers during the war, the farmers did their part, and so now it’s time for the payback.”

The war effort of the Great Plains becomes paralleled by the war effort abroad, and the movement from a single tractor to the fleet signals the wholesale effort on the homefront once war is declared by President Wilson. The eager patriotism suggested by Lorentz’s choice of stock footage obscures the well-controlled war economy directed by the President. Ironically, Herbert Hoover, as head of the Food Administration, controlled the American agricultural economy, overseeing food distribution at home and abroad. He even had popular support and utilized “the same techniques of mass propaganda used to inflame civilian populations,” so reads the biography from his presidential library. He “inspired tens of millions of American to observe ‘Meatless Mondays’ and ‘Wheatless Wednesdays [. . .].”201 The “hooverized” economy doubled its food exports to Europe under his leadership, contributing to his widespread popularity. Wheat did help to win the war, through a combination of patriotism, a centralized economy, and temporary profit for farms large enough to participate. Such production would continue at unprecedented levels as Europe recovered from the war. Lorentz’s and Thomson’s tone is difficult to pin down through this episode. Patriotic themes are no doubt intended to cast farmers in a positive light, but the war itself seems to be a direct cause of the Dust Bowl. In the next episode, however, the foes become clearer as The Plow nearly reaches the present.

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200 Lerner 128.

“Speculation”

Oversimplifying the cause-and-effect of history and without leaving room for nuance and, “Speculation’s” excess combines with “Drought’s” results – or the beginning of the Dust Bowl – in a direct implication of the zeitgeist of the 1920s. “Speculation’s” central idea is sound enough: that the land was misused and this would create problems for farmers. However, other excesses and behaviors not directly related to agriculture are lumped together as the narrative again takes liberties. The majority of the episode depicts large-scale wheat farming at its pinnacle, with machinery stretched across the horizon moving around the clock (see figures 4-7 and 4-8). Printing presses also run continuously, producing enticing land advertisements from groups ranging from the government’s General Land Office to private land speculators, including General Farm Brokers, Inc and the Great Plains Realty Company.202 These are intended to tempt everyone from returning soldiers, following traditional paths westward in search for opportunity, to investors seeking quick fortunes in farmland.

The narration succinctly moves us toward the high point of the decade then allows music and image to describe the final successes of the era and to show the quick fall. It explains:

202 The GLO’s reads, “SERVICE MEN! FREE LAND!! GOVERNMENT HOMESTEADS IN THE PLAINS! OWN YOUR OWN FARM!!” The GFB’s reads, “YOU OWN IT – WE FARM IT! OWN A FARM AWAY FROM HOME!! INVEST IN THE FASTEST-GROWING COUNTY IN THE WEST!! Come to Jonesville and See For Yourself.” The GPRC’s reads, “BARGAINS IN TOWN lots!! THE HEART OF THE WHEAT LANDS!! PRICES TRIPLED IN SIX MONTHS!! ROUND-TRIP INSPECTION TRIP AT OUR EXPENSE / WRITE NOW WHILE THESE BARGAINS ARE STILL AVAILABLE.”
Then we reaped the golden harvest…
then we really plowed the plains…
we turned under millions of new acres for war.
We had the man-power…we invented new machinery…
the world was our market.

By 1923 the old grass lands had become the new
wheat lands…a hundred million acres…
two hundred million acres…
More wheat!203

The last line of narration is set to a shot of farm equipment slowly moving across the
horizon while passing through a setting sun (see figure 4-8).

Although preceded by images of nighttime farming and thus also representative of
round-the-clock operations, a low sun has appeared twice before. Its first appearance
occurs as the sun rises behind the wagon train in title card image. That appearance
foreshadows our “Speculation” sun, which signals the oncoming metaphoric night of the
Great Depression and Dust Bowl. From the title card image, we know that the RA is
poised to offer a new day to those affected. Another sun sets at the end of

203 Narration from “Speculation,” The Plow, Rpt. in Study Guide 29. Although
the narrator clearly says “twenty-three” in the second stanza and although this episode is
set in the 1920s, both the Study Guide and the later FDR’s Moviemaker erroneously use
the date 1933. While wrong, it does suggest a link between the two sources, and this
bolster’s the possibility of Lorentz’s authorship of the Study Guide.
Figure 4-7: Wheat farming in the Great Plains at its pinnacle. From “Speculation.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
Figure 4-8: The sun sets on the Roaring Twenties. From “Speculation.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.

“Homesteader” as a train passed along the horizon. In this instance, it marked the end of the frontier and its shaping of American identity. Now, this “Speculation” sun signals another crisis in American identity. Just as the train sped along without taking note of history so too the farmers here ignore this warning in and continue working throughout the night.
Musically, “Speculation” is accompanied by symphonic jazz, newly composed by Thomson instead of quoted, which steadily grows in intensity and dissonance as the episode unfolds. Thus far, Thomson has presented new music in his own style, utilized existing forms and genres (the Prelude’s fugue and “Grass’s” pastorale), used conventional gestures for evocation (the timpani pulse for Native Americans or even the pastorale as suggestive of prehistoric existence), used specific instruments for specific purposes (the banjo’s invocation of place and of folk culture), and set pre-existing music (popular and folk melodies) in varying textures and complexities of orchestration. Rather than as self-expressions of beauty, in most of these cases it seems more appropriate to investigate music as a mediator between narrative and context. In this way, we can consider how the score engages with other film and non-film elements, from establishing place and moment to advancing the narrative and from evoking and invoking American themes to playing a role in the propagandistic process surrounding the film. Still more, we can also consider how the music reveals elements of society at work during the 1930s.

In this case, jazz first assists in establishing the period. Chronologically, the Twenties are the only decade left after “War,” so this ought to be a simple enough task. One may wonder why Thomson did not turn to a familiar vernacular tune here as he did in previous episodes, if this is all the music needs to do, in order to save time and effort. It quickly becomes evident, however, that the music is also offering commentary on the visual. This is not the happy, danceable music one may expect to characterize the decade or to accompany images of prosperity and abundance. The audience, of course, knows the prosperity ends even before the decade is over. The music perhaps begins from this awareness as it both passes judgment and foreshadows the final event of the episode,
when an overactive stock ticker vibrates itself off of a table and smashes onto the floor (see figure 4-9). This, of course, represents the “crashing” of the stock market and, as the narrative intimates, brings an end to the agricultural activities started in “War.” The music has by this point has already crashed, either mirroring the irrationality of the 1920s or sounding the anger and despair from the next episode.

As commentary, Speculation’s music plays on traditional sectionalist misgivings as they resonated in the modern United States. The long-running rural-urban divide is rooted in colonial America in conflicts between independent-minded backwoods farmers and distant, coastal capitals, and the American Revolution itself may even be characterized in this light. The distance, both geographical and conceptual, between the East and West drove American history for the next decade until the frontier closed. The North and South bickered constantly over the West; as a political entity it played a critical role in their balance of power, and as a social entity it was the battlefield for ideas about American identity. By the 1930s, as the film’s narrative explains, Eastern speculators, marked by the music of their leisure, exploited the grasslands of the Great Plains for their own gain. Urban culture, bankrupt conceptually, bankrupted the West.  

While this East-West tension occurs throughout the film, it becomes increasingly complex as the narrative approaches the present, as past layers pile on top of each other.  

Sectionalist divisions, combining with the persistent myth of the frontier, continue to shape American cultural life as we witness each election cycle in debates over the “real America.” For example, in the very first paragraph of her book, Sarah Palin writes, “With the gray Talkeetna Mountains in the distance and the first light covering of snow about to descend on Pioneer Peak, I breathed in an autumn bouquet that combined everything small-town America with rugged splashes of the Last Frontier” (1). See Sarah Palin, Going Rogue: An American Life (New York: HarperCollins, 2009)
and as the characters and forces become real and grounded in the present. This negotiation was easier with historical figures, no longer alive to contest their depiction, but now Lorentz risks being caught while manipulating the facts. He also risks alienating the audiences he is condemning.

In their condemnation of American patterns of behavior, Lorentz and Thomson come together in a manner problematic today but conventional in 1936. Near the end of
“Speculation,” the Study Guide explains, “A negro orchestra drummer beats out a ‘hot’ jazz number typical of the frenzied period” (see figure 4-10). Lerner briefly notes “a swing band featuring stock footage of a black drummer,” but he instead discusses the rhetorical use of a jazz style. His conclusion is that in this case, jazz is not invoking race per se but rather a descriptive element in establishing the privileged villain, who would have enjoyed such performances, and his lifestyle in opposition to that of the small farmer.

This analysis only applies to the music; the image of the drummer seems unnecessary in Lerner’s scenario. The problem begins with the disconnect between the drummer and the music; both move at different tempos and express different moods, and the diegetic music remains silent. Although we cannot hear what the drummer is playing, we can at least observe his enthusiastic striking of a cymbal while grinning in a seemingly oblivious manner. He may be playing jazz, too, but it is an entirely different performance. If anything, Lerner’s analysis of the idiom is more apropos to the image – the oblivious music of an excessive culture.

Despite opportunities to depict African-American dimensions (or Mexican and Hispanic, given the geography) in the national and regional histories of the land or even as co-victims of the Dust Bowl, Lorentz omits them entirely except for this single image and Thomson’s music for “Speculation.” Is this a calculated omission, given the white control of positions of power and influence to which the RA appealed, or is The Plow perpetuating a conventional white history, despite many of its otherwise unconventional

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205 Study Guide 29.

206 Lerner 138.
narrative threads? Jazz’s inclusion is partially akin to the almost non-treatment of Native Americans, save for the few conventional musical gestures evoking negative, violent stereotypes in relationship to the forces of nature. In this case, however, Lorentz goes further by giving us an image, and a problematic image as well. The “happy-go-lucky” stereotype, long a part of American visual and performance culture, is invoked and juxtaposed with the over-stimulated stock ticker and modernist harmonic dissonance,
emphasizing the irrationality of moments immediately preceding the 1929 crash. It is one thing to identify the problems of capitalism and economic excess and to join them with changing social values (which the film only portrays through a one-dimensional association with excess). It is an entirely different matter to use stereotyped images to reinforce a point that could otherwise be made without them. Jazz, or perhaps simply the enjoyment of jazz, becomes more than a sound of place or a symbol of excess with the introduction of the drummer; attitudes on race become intertwined with historical and political values. It remains a sad commentary on the era that such a gesture finds its way into a film at least partly about compassion. It also suggests, along with his treatment of Native American music, that Thomson did not advance from racial attitudes that characterized earlier American classical music.

However, within the systems of meaning-making in white American culture of the Depression era, could Thomson’s music alone shoulder the responsibilities of “Speculation”? Assuming an unproblematic reception in terms of race among large portions of the audience, the music must establish period, provide commentary on that period, create a relationship with the next episode, and tap into sectional identity. Lest the film’s audience fails to follow Thomson’s descent into chaos via his modernist interpretation of jazz, the image of the drummer provides a guidepost at the most historically absurd moment. Music and image cooperate as effectively in this moment as in anywhere else in the film despite the playing of different music.
“Drought” begins disturbingly; the first image after the stock market crashes is scattered animal bones set against a dry, cracked Dust Bowl ground (see figure 4-11). Visually, the broken ticker and the bones are separated by only a fade out and a fade in, creating a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the two moments. After this, the two primary visual subjects are fields of dirt, presumably where crops once grew, and fields of farm machinery in various states of disrepair (see figure 4-12). A scampering bug and a nearly motionless and sickly dog punctuate these shots. The only human presence is a walking man shown from the waist downward, kicking up dust with each step (see figure 4-13).

If this were a film about the land, as Lorentz indicated in a self-review quoted earlier, “Drought” could serve as its final episode. However, while these images may serve to characterize the present, they remain entirely impersonal and somewhat abstract in the reality of causes and effects leading to the Dust Bowl. Two episodes and the Epilogue remain, and aside from disembodied legs, we have yet to see the human toll and the government’s solution, arguably the primary reason for the film from the perspective of the Resettlement Administration. “Drought,” instead of closing The Plow, begins the present with a sense of dramatic pacing as the first of three episodes depicting different aspects of the Dust Bowl.

The narration duplicates what we see:

A country without rivers…without streams…

with little rain…
Figure 4-11: The fruit of the Jazz Age? From “Drought.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
Once again the rains held off
and the sun baked the earth.

This time no grass held moisture against the
winds and sun…this time millions of acres
of plowed land lay open to the sun.
The first two lines paraphrase language already heard in the Prologue, “Grass,” and “Homesteader.” Visually, the disembodied legs in figure 4-13 bring to mind the vainly plowing farmer in “Warning” (see figure 4-2). By recalling visual materials and recycling narration from other episodes, these persistent themes link the present with the history of the plains and serve to more thoroughly contextualize and correct the crash-to-bone visual scenario. However, this tactic also risks recalling the inevitability of what we see and the presumed awareness that the farmers should have had. After all, the rains held off “once again.” The net result of both is to continue the overarching plan of distributing blame to everyone.

Musically, “Drought” also recycles material. “Grass” receives the longest treatment here while a shorter quotation from “Speculation” stands out because of its proximity, reinforcing connections with this episode. Additional fragments from the Prologue and elsewhere fill out the episode. For example, the tom-tom’s familiar pulsing from the Prologue and “Homesteader” re-appears near the end of the episode. Its presence is prefigured by the narration’s recycling of materials from these same sections. In this case, however, it is no longer foreboding, instead reinforcing the conclusory nature of “Drought” and also the inevitability of the moment.

In his analysis of this episode’s music, Lerner overlooks important elements that connect episodes. Concerning “Grass” quotations, he writes of “a tight connection between the pre- and postlapsarian Midwest” whose music “binds these two scenes together, establishing a causally linked dialectic wherein the major mode is associated
with lushness and fertility while the minor mode is associated with decay and death.” 207 Clearly there is a relationship between the two episodes, but a few factors undermine his reading. First, the minor mode and similar rhetorical devices were also used in “Grass,” suggesting there that the Great Plains are not simply lush and fertile. Though “Grass” does begin in a major mode, it wanders away in order to accommodate the text’s complex description. Lerner himself noted that at one point in “Grass,” “Thomson writes his most anguished harmonies at that point in the score.” 208 Thus, the major-minor “Grass”-“Drought” dichotomy is not so clearly articulated by Thomson’s music. Relatedly, the primordial grasslands are not presented as lush and fertile; their vegetation is not that of a romanticized Eden. They are more akin to the sublime rather than the idyll. Their vastness – 400,000,000 acres – is “treeless” and “windswept,” and the land is complicated by “high winds and sun… / without rivers, without streams, / with little rain.” Nothing about this description suggests lushness or fertility.

This is not, then, a story about the overuse of a formerly useful place, as the gradual poisoning of a limited water supply through industrial waste would be. Overuse is a second or third phase in a larger narrative; misuse may be a more correct starting point with overuse as a symptom or compounding factor. The Plow to this point, then, begins as a lesson on America’s quest to control and manipulate nature through the use of technology. In this scenario, while such endeavors may flourish briefly, their results are temporary and eventually have devastating consequences, not only because they act

207 Lerner 141, 143.

208 Lerner 104.
against the natural order but also because of a flaw in the American character. Previously the land was misused for noble and perhaps forgivable ends: to supply beef and grain to a growing nation and later to defeat a wartime foe. Once the greed that characterizes the 1920s combined with misuse, nature itself issued final judgment. As they have throughout this story, the small farmer fits awkwardly into this scenario; The Plow only becomes clear in its characterization with the final episode and Epilogue. As “Drought” closes, this “record of land” and “melodrama of nature” shifts focus to the original reason the film was made – to the humanitarian crisis of those displaced by the Dust Bowl.

“Dust Storm”

“Dust Storm” transitions the narrative’s remainder from land to people. Proceeding from “Drought’s” primary emphasis on land, this episode’s title obviously points also to a non-human subject, and shots without people outnumber shots with people. Rather than imitating “Drought’s” relegation of humans to disembodied legs, “Dust Storm” instead shows adults and children running in fear from impending dust storms, set both on farms and in towns (see figures 4-14 and 4-15). The purpose is not only to depict dust storms as a side effect of the land’s condition but also to emphasize human terror in the face of these storms. Given the treatment of the infant in “Warning,” it is no surprise that children are again highlighted (with three shown versus only one adult), reinforcing the appeal for compassion.
Figure 4-14: A farm child runs for shelter. From “Dust Storm.” *The Plow That Broke The Plains.* Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.

Whereas “Speculation” and “Drought” were clearly defined in terms of where the former ended and the latter began, “Dust Storm’s” beginning is ambiguous. Conceptually, it begins before “Drought” is finished and immediately after the disembodied legs, with a new focus on winds that stir up dust. Each new shot builds in intensity. Five seconds of unaccompanied pulsing separates this portion’s music with preceding content from “Drought,” and this is followed by melodic material unrelated to
that which immediately preceded the pulsing. We hear a short fugato that again resembles the opening to “Grass,” but it begins with an alarming tritone and the answer proceeds dissonantly. A windmill spins quickly as a farmer, seemingly attuned to the film’s shift in mood, scans the horizon while the dust and wind build. “Drought” seems to end after this with a dust devil, a normally harmless occurrence though in this case preceding a full-fledged dust storm.

Given the content of this final portion of “Drought,” from the tritone and shots of gathering dust to the farmer and the dust devil, a viewer might perceive the episode to have already been interrupted by “Dust Storm” with the cameramen having captured the initial lifting of soil of a storm in its infancy. However, Lerner, working from Thomson’s notes and drafts of the score, places these actions in “Drought.” The Study Guide is ambiguous, placing the ever-increasing and blowing dust with “Drought” but the farmer, windmill, and dust devil with “Dust Storm” – even though there are no obvious indications of such placement given by the film. Whatever the case, we clearly have arrived in “Dust Storm” immediately following the dust devil, as French horns belt out leaping fifths, effectively sounding the alarm.

In addition to watching the birth of a dust storm, watching terrified children run for shelter, and listening to tense, disjunct figures, this entire episode is without narration, leaving the visual and musical to advance the plot. A horse races into the distance, apparently disoriented by the dust. Given the animal bones from the previous episode, it is not difficult to image its fate. The music swirls through harmonic clashes and rapidly rising and falling melodies, and an energetic wind machine sounds throughout this sequence. Tight shots of blowing topsoil punctuate landscapes with dust clouds
resembling the title card image (see figure 4-16). Finally, the music comes to rest on an eerie reworking of the Protestant hymn “Old Hundredth” in E minor, played only by an organ. Visually, the film settles on the interior of an abandoned house (see figure 4-17), specifically the fireplace. The storm continues to blow dust through the house, although the wind machine has stopped so that the hymn is all the audience hears.

The human presence is now indicated by an absence. Rather than “Drought’s” fields of dead and dying machinery, suggestive of the mechanized devastation of the land by large-scale farming, the relic of civilization here is suggestive of a family. Regardless of status as land owner or sharecropper, the small-scale farmer is who this house belonged to before the storm, and the audience may imagine his family – or even their own – spending an evening beside this symbol of comfort and protection. The hymn, a form long associated with congregational singing, plays to an empty room. Since they were no longer able to make a living, these families were forced to leave. They labored patriotically whenever their country needed it, and they were victimized by forces beyond their control. The greedy businessman and Mother Nature conspired to remove them. Now fully refocused on the human element, this potential endpoint must have been too abstract. “Devastation,” the final episode, fills in the gap created by “Dust Storm,” between the running children and the abandoned house, and it shows where they have journeyed. Despite leaving, they may be in worse circumstances than in their former life; hence the need for the RA and the purpose of this film.
Figure 4-16: A dust storm engulfs the Great Plains. From “Dust Storm.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
Figure 4-17: Inside an abandoned house. From “Dust Storm.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
“Devastation”

“Devastation” is the longest episode in The Plow. Even without the Epilogue, audiences could not mistake the gravity and urgency of the human condition as portrayed in this episode. Visually, we follow a family as it leaves its farm on the Great Plains. We lose the family as it becomes part of the thousands heading west in the tragic parade. Finally, we watch vehicles pulling into a migrant camp and families unpacking for an indeterminate stay. Human-less images of destroyed land and farms punctuate these sequences. Musically, Thomson begins with materials only slightly reworked from the Prologue. These accompany most of the episode, with the previously mentioned tango beginning around the film’s twenty-fourth minute. The narrator explains the plight of such families as they come to the decision of leaving. He provides general information on the mass exodus and finally appeals to the audience on their behalf.

Children again are utilized to emphasize the humanity of those affected. The departing family’s two children initially watch their father futilely shovel sand from the front steps, their clothes and hair blown relentlessly by the wind (see figure 4-18). The youngest is even enlisted to haul objects to the trailer as the family packs to leave. Finally, the two ride in the trailer, watching their home recede as they drive away. Their faces are devoid of emotion and their bodies sit motionless except to balance themselves as the trailer moves across the rough land (see figure 4-19). This portion of “Devastation” finally overtly humanizes and personalizes the tragedy of the Dust Bowl, which is lacking in the two previous episodes.
As the situation becomes direr, gender roles become increasingly confused. Previously in “Warning,” the mother’s maternal instincts were called into question; she rested on her broom while the infant wandered away (see figure 4-3). With the onset of the Dust Bowl, the father can no longer perform his function as farmer; even a simple task like shoveling dirt is counterproductive. Finally, his daughter must assist in the labor of packing, his wife and son unseen.\(^{209}\) Male masculinity is non-existent by the time the tragic parade enters the migrant camp. The first man shown at the camp sits passively in front of his tent tending to his child while his wife emerges from the tent, actively standing guard while observing the incoming migrants (see figure 4-20). This setup is foreshadowed by the children just discussed and shown in figure 4-18: the older brother crouches while the younger sister stands. Once unpacking begins, it is the women who engage in labor while men sit idly conversing (see figure 4-21). As with the activism of the late nineteenth century, farmers did, in fact, take matters into their own hands during the late 1920s and 1930s, forming groups like the Farmers’ Holiday Association and even turning to violence to stop foreclosures.\(^{210}\) This time, however, economic and environmental conditions far exceeded their abilities. The film again omits farmer activism and instead emasculates them in these shots, thereby suggesting a crisis in gender among the Dust Bowl migrants. This reinforces the paternal role of the RA and its indispensability in solving their problems.

\(^{209}\) The Study Guide states that the “children” help but only the girl is shown.

\(^{210}\) See Americans View Their Dust Bowl Experience for additional information on farmer activism, including contemporary personal and media accounts and historical analysis.
Figure 4-18: Children watch their father. From “Devastation.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
Figure 4-19: The family leaves. From “Devastaion.” *The Plow That Broke the Plains.*

Figure 4-20: Greeting incoming migrants. From “Devastation.” The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. DVD. US National Archives and CreateSpace, 2007.
Related to the ignoring of the activist farmer, “Devastation” glosses over the reasons behind activism as well as other reasons that farmers left their land, assigning nearly all blame to the climate and geography. No tenant farmers are forced off their land by bankers or corporate farmers in this narrative, and the only mention of class-based problems occurs with two words, “broke” and “credit.” The narration explains:

Baked out--blown out--and broke!
Year in, year out, uncomplaining they fought
the worst drought in history…
their stock choked to death on the barren land…
their homes were nightmares of swirling dust
night and day.
Many went ahead of it--but many stayed
until stock, machinery, homes, credit, food, and even hope were gone.  

Even the bare mention of class is ambiguous at best. The audience does not hear about
the men from the bank delivering eviction notices, the failure of the tenant system, or the
practices of large-scale farm operations.  It is a story perhaps deserving of criticism for
being only partially told but done so in order to avoid audience alienation, to enter into
the political process for a positive response to the RA, and to find that delicate balance
between art and activism.  The Plow plays the game to the end; after the appeal to the
audience – “all they ask” – even the last two lines of narration assign calculated blame:
“The sun and winds wrote the most tragic chapter / in American agriculture.”

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212 For example, contrast The Plow’s language with that of Steinbeck. In
describing the tractors of large-scale operations, he focuses on their tractors – those
“snub-nosed monsters, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down the
country, across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in
straight lines” whose implements were “orgasms set by gears, raping methodically,
raping without passion” (Steinbeck 45, 46).

Epilogue

Because the narration from the Epilogue has been absent from the scholarly record and may only be accessible to those with access to interlibrary loan and a sixteen millimeter projector, it is transcribed here in its entirety:

400,000,000 acres. The Great Plains seemed inexhaustible. Yet in fifty years we turned a part of it into a dustbowl. We put too many cattle and sheep into it. We granted homesteads on rangeland that never should have been plowed. We tore up grass for war wheat. We invented new machinery making it possible for one man cheaply to plow thousands of acres. An unprecedented drought completed the havoc. There was no grass left to hold the light soil against the light winds. A fifty year record. 40,000,000 acres of land ruined perhaps forever. Two hundred million acres badly damaged.

The great part of this vast area of damaged land can be saved, and the federal government has worked strenuously during the past few years to restore these lands. The Soil Conservation Service, the Forest Service, the CCC and the Resettlement Administration are cooperating with the Department of Agriculture in working sixty-five land improvement projects in the plains. The Resettlement Administration will take title to 5,800,000 acres of this land and put it to its proper agricultural use.

On a second front, the federal government is working to rehabilitate the stricken farmers of the drought area. Various emergency
agencies have distributed millions of dollars of direct relief and thousands of farmers from dire poverty [sic]. The Resettlement Administration has loaned millions to farmers whose lands were not damaged beyond repair but who needed seed, farm equipment, and credit in order to carry on.

Most important, the Resettlement Administration is taking over 4,500 farms in the drought area, and it will move families from this land that cannot be farmed into natural agricultural districts. Model farm strips, such as this one being constructed in Nebraska, are being built to house these resettled farmers, and they not only will be paid for their old farms, but they will be given a chance to buy their new homes on long-term credit. Modern equipment, irrigation, good land, electricity, sanitation, schools: the Resettlement Administration is bringing these benefits to thousands who were left stranded and without hope.

[music begins]

But the winds still blow and the sun still bakes the land. We must practice control and conservation if we are to save the rest of the grass. The rains will come again. The plow will dig again. Another decade of reckless use and the grasslands will truly be the great American desert. \(214^\)

The Epilogue was introduced in Chapter Two of this study as a minor annoyance for some scholars and an object of mystery for others. It was also viewed as a target for political opposition, perhaps leading to its elimination, as well as a too specific signifier

\(214^\) Punctuation, paragraph divisions, unclear words in brackets, and the indication of the music’s entry are mine.
of time and place that needed to be removed in order to give The Plow a life beyond the RA. Additionally, its elimination was discussed in terms of the message being communicated alongside dramatic requirements as a work of art.

The Epilogue stands apart from the rest of The Plow because it begins without musical accompaniment and the narrator shifts to a more prosaic delivery. The absence of music signals this change in information delivery, underscoring the gravity of what is being communicated. Finally, the film becomes clearly concerned with educating its audience on specific details about its producing institution, and its propagandistic function is set forth unapologetically. After all, the free market failed to help Dust Bowl residents, so the RA was a humanitarian institution with an obligation to inform the public if it was to help the migrants.

The Epilogue begins in a manner similar to the bulk of the Prologue, with the “Great Plains Area” filled in on a map of the continental United States (see figure 4-22). The narration begins soon after, restating the causes of the Dust Bowl then summarizing RA accomplishments and current activities. The map zooms in on a portion of the Great Plains, and animated text summarizes the information delivered by the narrator (see figures 4-23 and 4-24). After approximately two minutes, we see shots of RA activities, including relocated farmers and new farm communities and farmsteads (see figures 4-25). The narration lauds the potential of the RA while we view these shots.
Figure 4-22. The beginning of the Epilogue. From Epilogue. *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. Author’s Photograph.
Figure 4-23: Restating the current problem. From Epilogue. *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. Author’s Photograph.
Figure 4-24: Summarizing the Resettlement Administration’s activities. From Epilogue.

The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936.

Author’s Photograph.
Figure 4-25: Working together to build a model farmstead. From Epilogue. The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. Author’s Photograph.

The hopeful tone shifts once the music begins after approximately two-and-a-half minutes, with an ominous recycling of the previous episode’s tango. The audience is reminded that the RA’s solutions are incomplete. A shot pans across a model farmstead, which is followed bluntly by recycled film from “Devastation” showing a landscape without vegetation. This is succeeded by a shot of a landscape clearly taken from a reel of film also used in “Dust Storm,” though it is not identical and instead appears to be filmed a few seconds before or after the footage used the earlier episode. Confusing the
potential prosperity suggested earlier in the Epilogue, the narrator concludes by presenting a warning of what will happen if RA recommendations on land use are not heeded. The final image is of healthy, blowing grass – an image of hope reminiscent of the opening to “Grass” (see figure 4-26). When paired with the shots of the model farmsteads, The Plow finally presents the idyllic Great Plains, as humans live in harmony with nature.

The subtext in the warnings immediately preceding this final shot involves more than land use recommendations and pastoral tranquility. Disaster will also result if the RA is killed by political opponents. The audience is not simply to feel compassion for the migrants shown in “Devastation” nor are they the ones who will heed the RA’s recommendations on saving the Great Plains. The Epilogue is instead a call to action for the audience to vote, to contact their congressmen, and to generally support the Roosevelt Administration’s agricultural reforms.

Although the historical record is imprecise, scholars agree that the Epilogue was removed from the film sometime during its first three years of existence, possibly as early as the first year, 1936. As mentioned earlier in this section and discussed in Chapter Two, some believe its content was too political, attempting to persuade the audience instead of informing it and resembling conservative assertions of communist tendencies in the Roosevelt administration. Interestingly, the Study Guide that sometimes accompanied the film beginning in 1938 moves beyond the Epilogue’s recommendations for appropriate land use and its description of and advocating for government intervention. Further, it becomes clear by numerous references to students and teachers
Figure 4-26: The Epilogue’s final message. From Epilogue. The Plow That Broke the Plains. Dir. Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration. 1936. Author’s Photograph.


The Study Guide’s thirteen-page section “After the Showing,” includes quotations from contemporary environmentalist authors writing passionately about the Dust Bowl
and from political leaders speaking about the problems. For example, President Roosevelt is quoted at a building dedication:

> A nation less bountifully endowed than ours would have ceased to exist a long time ago. The remarkable thing was that the people of the United States were complacent for so long in the face of exploitation and waste and mismanagement, yes, and even larceny, of the national wealth that belongs to all the people.

There are subsections titled “The Land: Its Use and Misuse,” “The Consequences,” and “The Cure,” which includes this advertisement: “There is, of course, no cure for much of the damage already done. Through the government’s widespread program of conservation, however, erosion can be checked and some of the encroaching desert can be reclaimed.” Another subsection, titled “Suggested Activities,” includes directions on mapmaking, a prompt to write to government agencies, suggested fieldtrips, and finally the most radical step: “Active Participation.” This category includes such recommendations as joining the Girl Scouts in order to promote “real conservation programs,” planting a nursery, and organizing a panel to present The Plow “at an Open Forum in the town.” The final activity, in the subsection titled “Attitudes of Mind” prompts the student to:

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216 Study Guide 33-45.

217 Study Guide 33.

218 Study Guide 36.

219 Study Guide 41.
record his reactions to the following attitudes before and after discussion of the Great Plains problems:

1. That man conquers nature;
2. That natural resources are inexhaustible;
3. That habitual practices are best;
4. That what is good for the individual is good for everybody;
5. That an owner may do with property as he likes;
6. That expanding markets will continue indefinitely;
7. That free competition coordinates industry and agriculture;
8. That values will increase indefinitely;
9. That tenancy is a stepping stone to ownership;
10. That ownership means security;
11. That the individual must make his own adjustment.\textsuperscript{220}

These prompts target private property, free markets, and individuality. If the Epilogue were eliminated due to political opposition, then the Study Guide’s content would surely have been opposed for encouraging schoolchildren to embrace such ideals.

Arch A. Mercey offers a different reason that supports the continued radical messages in the Study Guide. In an article he wrote for the Journal of Higher Education in 1939, the former Assistant Director of Information for the Resettlement Administration explained,

At the end of the dramatic section of the film we had a three-minute epilogue which showed in forthright and not very dramatic form
what the government is trying to do in the Great Plains. This epilogue might be called ‘educational,’ but for the general public it was a letdown after the drama of music, sound, and photography. We curtailed that epilogue when we reissued the film since the information therein was obsolete. We felt that more is accomplished in long-range education through presenting the problem simply and dramatically and letting the schools supplement the presentation with an account of what is being done.\textsuperscript{221}

In this version of events, the Epilogue was cut because of aesthetic concerns and because its information was outdated. Mercey conveniently ignores the political firestorm surrounding the film, perhaps because it was beyond the scope of his article or perhaps because addressing it would have complicated his agenda. Political concerns may have been among the reasons for removing the Epilogue, but proponents of this theory need to address the continued radical content of the Study Guide and statements like those by Mercey. Whichever is the case, it is nonetheless exciting that the Epilogue has “re-emerged,” creating as many new questions as it answers.

\textsuperscript{221} Arch A. Mercey, “Teaching Social Studies through Documentary Films,” The Journal of Higher Education 10.6 (June 1959): 305-306.
CONCLUSION: THOMSON, THE PLOW, AND FUNCTIONAL AMERICANISM

In many parts of the Western world, the documentary film by 1936 had been established as a medium for engaging with contemporaneous political and social concerns, for representing national identity, and for experimentation. The Plow continued this movement in the United States in the public arena. In English-speaking countries, William Rothman explains:

In the films made in England by the talented filmmakers gathered around John Grierson, and in the work of Pare Lorentz, Willard Van Dyke, and others in America, a dominant form of documentary emerged [. . .]. [They] composed their views of people lyrically or expressionistically, and used them rhetorically in advancing a social thesis, usually explicitly stated by a [. . .] narrator’s authoritative voice."222

In essence, this is Bill Nichols’ expository mode.223 Prolific Russian filmmakers prefigured these British and American movements, and the German state, albeit as a part of a horrific plan, was also exploiting the documentary’s propagandistic possibilities to solidify support for the Nazi agenda. While these latter examples similarly spring from state agendas, the political controls in which they participated far outreached any social concern, rendering the documentary film a more direct tool of power. Since the beginning of World War I, the Western world had been in a state of radical change and


turmoil, and the documentary film was there to speed it along, project it or versions of it for itself, and to offer solutions to its problems – sometimes all at once.

It is notable that Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, and Marc Blitzstein, all leading American composers, also composed for documentary films shortly after Thomson’s two pioneering collaborations with Lorentz, *The Plow* and *The River* (Farm Security Administration, 1938). However, only a handful of now canonical European composers, including Benjamin Britten and Sergei Prokofiev, had turned to the medium. Perhaps this is attributable to the medium’s newness and the practice of borrowing conventions from fiction film. American composers were leading the classical world in reconceptualizing the role of classical music in film.

During the global depression of the 1930s, films take on more explicit social and political roles as countries work to shape their populations’ behaviors. On the one hand, films were used for social awareness in the case of the US and Britain, and on the other as a means of assuaging and priming a population for social controls in fascist and communist countries. Interestingly, in English speaking countries the film score composers seemed to have more aesthetic liberty. Lorentz and Thomson’s generation had more autonomy in the development of this artifact’s aesthetic function. American composers take the lead in developing documentary film scores’ aesthetic functions.

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224 These include Copland’s score for *The City* (1939), Harris’s score for *One Tenth of a Nation* (1940), and Blitzstein’s *The Spanish Earth* (1937).

225 For example, Lerner explains that early viewings of Robert Flaherty’s pioneering documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922) utilized the common practice of the “compiled score” rather than an original. He writes, “Such compilations drew from the musical flotsam and jetsam of the day, ranging from popular songs to symphonic warhorses” (28).
because this opportunity dovetailed with an emerging American classical music equal with European counterparts. Further, this alignment of functions fits within Howard Zinn’s argument that American identity is discursive in its historical structure rather than as being “simply there”. Identity is crafted as an agent of social coherence rather than as a product of a long term history of tradition, invention, and social process. American identity is not inherent in Thomson’s compositional gestures but is generated as the film fulfills its social and political functions. These macro and micro conditions, operating as social and political forces, primed American filmmakers and composers’ interest in the potential of this medium.

Another explanation for Americans’ interest in composing for documentary film relates to the theme of American classical music as a pale copy of European music, as described in Chapter One. Wherever one might identify a flourishing documentary culture in Europe, such as in Russia, Britain, and especially Germany, there already existed a socio-national classical music identity; the newness and processes of such artistic maturation were largely irrelevant or second nature in Europe by the 1930s. In the United States however, a unique combination of circumstances created a compelling backdrop for the Thomson-Lorentz films and the musical engagement with identity: the Great Depression’s socio-cultural crisis, the propagandistic needs of the federal government, the burgeoning consciousness of musical Americanism among composers, and the socio-political extra-musical activism of these composers. American classical music’s engagement with American identity and subsequent equalization with European models occurred alongside the development of the socially conscious expository mode of documentary filmmaking. Certainly, this does not account for all kinds of musical
Americanisms or for the entire maturation of American classical music during this period, but the music for *The Plow* and other documentary scores play a crucial role in this history. In the United States, the milieu for the development of such a documentary film was highly organized and deliberate, fulfilling aesthetic and social needs.

**Pinning Down Thomson**

As noted throughout this study, Thomson’s music for *The Plow* grows out of a complex mix of individuality, governmental oversight, political ideology, and humanitarianism. Thomson’s political writings and activities add further layers of meaning. Thomson was prolific in New Deal arts programs. He rejoined Lorentz for *The River*, collaborated on works performed by the Federal Theater Project, and benefited from exposure if not income from premiers and performances by Federal Music Project ensembles. Thomson also associated with left leaning people, including Aaron Copland, Marc Blitzstein, and Orson Welles. Though arguably more of an avant-garde gambit in the spirit of primitivism and less a stand for racial equality, Thomson also used an all African-American cast in his opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* and helped with an Orson Welles production of *Voodoo Macbeth* that did likewise. These were at least unconventional moves in a segregated society with effects that transcended potential intent.

Oddly, by 1939 Thomson was recommending a more conservative path in the ideal world he constructs for musicians in his book *The State of Music*. He writes, “It is frequently proposed that artists and intellectuals should form a solid political front of
some kind. I have seen a number of these movements in action, and I do not think musicians make much sense in them.”

He unfortunately does not offer details to which movements he refers, but it is safe to assume, given his New Deal activities and the circles he travelled in, that he saw firsthand some of the more radical ones the United States. Thus his motives are not purely aesthetic but are aesthetic/politico-social hybrids.

He continues shortly thereafter:

What is impossible to conceive is that the members of the musical trades and professions should give up a real economic status based on a wide, non-political function (I mean the supplying of music to its habitual consumers) for a non-paying economic status based at present on a narrow and sectarian function.

Thomson was not in favor of an institutional revolution within the world of American classical music as he aligns himself here with the prevailing capitalist model. If musicians want change, he says they should do so within this institutional framework, with its trade unions and professional organizations, rather than through political activism. However, according to the American Federation of Musicians, seventy percent of musicians were unemployed by 1934. Thomson does not address or even recognize the failure of the American patronage system due to the rise of the music recording industry, prohibition, and the Great Depression, nor does he acknowledge his own

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227 Thomson 237.

aforementioned participation in new governmental systems of patronage – in at least four New Deal programs.

In this case true to his recommendation, Thomson played a role in the formation of the American Composers Alliance and the Arrow Music Press, both moves within the world of music aimed at securing the composer’s place in that world. However, Thomson biographer Anthony Tommasini interprets his actions differently, explaining, “This was an era where collective activity, organized resistance to exploitation, and radical leftwing politics were rampant in America. Copland [working closely with Thomson in the aforementioned actions] saw no reason why American composers should not also put their faith in collective action.”

Tommasini’s “collective action,” saturated with extra-musical political activism, matches Thomson’s activities but conflicts with his editorial opinion in framing such actions.

Thomson continues:

Nothing is more legitimate and proper than that any citizen should have private and political or religious affiliations which furnish him guidance in matters of private and even of professional conduct. Nothing is more suicidal, however, than to use one’s professional prestige to give weight to public statements of private opinion.

Or, the musician should stick to making music or at least to matters only concerning music, leaving politics for the politicians. This belies the evidence of Thomson’s record

\[^{229}\text{Tommasini 272.}\]

\[^{230}\text{Thomson 240.}\]
of collaboration with the RA. Thomson did not express regret in his collaborations with Lorentz despite The Plow’s RA propaganda and its politicization by Republicans, although perhaps his cautious shift was directly related to this politicization and the Epilogue’s removal.

There is a loophole that allows for music to function politically so long as the composer does not. Perhaps Thomson the pragmatist was covering his tracks, seeing in the tea leaves an impending conservative backlash to the decade he was implicitly reviewing. Perhaps Aaron Copland, who would later testify in front of Senator Joseph McCarthy, should have heeded this prophetic decree.

Most curious are Thomson’s comments on the function of art during the 1930s:

> Everybody nowadays wants to dictate the social usages of art. The authoritarian governments are on the warpath to make art serve their foreign policy or their social theories. The revolutionists are doing their best to subject the Beautiful Arts to summary judgment by persons unknown.²³¹

Despite a decade’s worth of supporting “the social usages of art” and benefiting from such, Thomson seems to be retreating into the mindset of an autonomous modernist, thereby closing his brief connection with American society. Thomson began the 1930s open to state sponsorship and the social utility of music. He ends the decade with a conservative caution that seeks to separate a professional self from private beliefs. The result of this separation preserves his place in the evolving American patronage system.

²³¹ Thomson 249.
When the political winds shift against art activism and socio-political utility, so too does Thomson.

Whatever motivated Thomson’s change, the meaning and success of his music during the 1930s hinged on quasi-socialist government programs and left leaning cultural networks. If not intended to be dirtied by contextual politics, his score to The Plow is certainly guilty by association of carrying additional meanings, which should have been an obvious possibility to Thomson before he agreed to compose. Thomson biographer Anthony Tommasini adds,

Copland and Thomson believed that American composers belonged out there in American society, not walled up in the concert hall, or sheltered in the university. […] One could always compose complex chamber pieces for select audiences. But writing a fanfare for the dedication of a new town hall was a perfectly proper and thoroughly professional activity, and the attendant visibility would help to demystify the composer, would make the concert music world not so elitist.”^{232}

So, even though Thomson shifted his alliances, he committed to music’s social function during the 1930s. Thus The Plow’s music may be characterized as functional Americanism because it was produced for and by American government agents intent on conveying particular socially beneficial messages. While not directly for their daily use or enjoyment, the music also functions for or on behalf of the Dust Bowl refugees, promoting their interests on a national stage.

^{232} Tommasini 273.
Musical Meaning and Functional Americanism

Barabara Zuck’s postulation that musical identity occurs through two processes, those of compositional gesture and conceptual idea, does not adequately address The Plow, and traditional musicology limits itself to matters of form and style while context remains a backdrop instead of a presence in music. Compositional Americanisms may lack usefulness, seldom moving beyond being clever figures in an autonomous work and are limited by an audience’s musical literacy. Conceptual Americanisms remain distinct from the music; they are ideas from and actions by composers instead of music. While they may be attributed to music, music does not contain them inherently. Beyond a functionality within the formal logic film and even in addition to its functionality as political propaganda, The Plow’s music poignantly served farmers driven off their land after a series of horrible events and who were subjected to blatant discrimination as they migrated westward.

For The Plow, these actions and attributes identify the music as American rather than through discussions of Thomson’s Parisian, modernist education, his Satie-like interest in satire and simplicity, or even in the cowboy songs he selected as source materials. The Plow is the realization of ideals unified with the humanitarian actions for social welfare by the government – all in an art object. Its musical meaning is partially the result of its composer becoming active and relevant in the meaning-making processes of national and cultural identity instead of remaining autonomously privileged – insomuch as this project does not challenge his privileged place in the capitalist patronage system.
Music alone can only carry limited meaning. More than simply notes on a page, it assumes meaning negotiated over time among its participants. Thus, at even this basic level, it cannot suffice to stop with the mechanics of construction. When combined with a program, suggested or enacted, music necessarily moves beyond its participants and also engages with the meaning of the program. When that program is historical, meaning necessarily moves beyond its program and into that history, and when that program is social, so too does meaning become social. Music moves within these historical and social arenas as an agent for crafting. The endeavor to understand these arenas is central to the endeavor to understand musical meaning. Thus, this endeavor is central to a full understanding of “what is American” in American classical music. The art object certainly has its own unique shapes and boundaries, tubes and wires, actions and gestures, or wavelengths and chord progressions that define its material existence when at rest. When active, however, it becomes an active process of culture.
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