



OXFORD JOURNALS  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

---

New Deal Jeremiads

Author(s): Finis Dunaway

Source: *Environmental History*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Apr., 2007), pp. 308-312

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of [Forest History Society](#) and [American Society for Environmental History](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25473076>

Accessed: 02-03-2016 17:38 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Forest History Society, American Society for Environmental History and Oxford University Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Environmental History*.

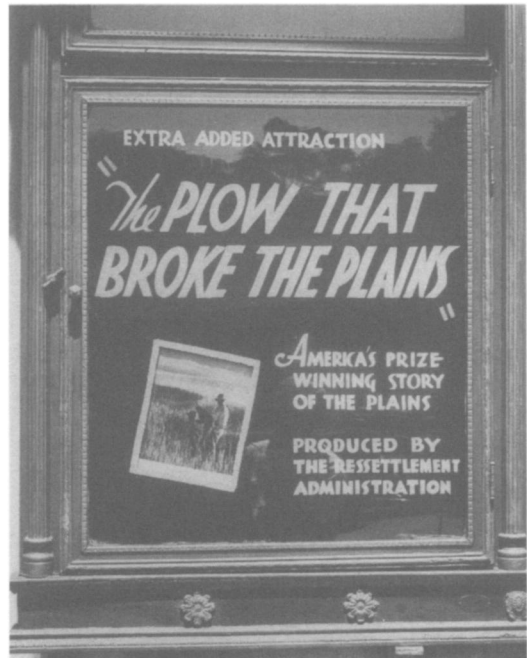
<http://www.jstor.org>

FINIS DUNAWAY

## new deal jeremiads

IMAGINE, JUST FOR a moment, that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the federal government sponsored someone, say, a noted film critic, to make a documentary film about the catastrophe. Imagine, too, that this director, drawing on the insights of leading ecologists and other scientists, chose to blame the disaster not on the capricious behavior of nature but rather on human actions. With their lack of foresight and careless disregard for the region's ecology, the American people, the filmmaker argued, altered the landscape and ultimately created the conditions that led to so much destruction and human misery in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. Finally, as this film circulated around the United States, imagine that it was shown in thousands of movie theaters and seen by several million people, generating considerable controversy in some places but also garnering tremendous praise from a wide range of critics and audiences.

This series of events, which probably seems unimaginable in today's political culture, reminds us yet again of what made the New Deal such an extraordinary moment in American history: During the 1930s, a time marked not only by economic depression but also by a number of ecological disasters, the federal government hired Pare Lorentz, a prominent movie critic, to make films about the Dust Bowl and Mississippi River flooding. These documentaries—*The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937)—combined ecological aesthetics and religious rhetoric to condemn American land use practices. Like the documentary photographs sponsored by the Farm Security Administration and the post office murals commissioned by other New Deal agencies, these films grappled with the relationship between the American people



Pare Lorentz Collection, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University.

Dorothea Lange, photograph of poster for *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, outside the Belasco Theater in Washington, DC, June 1936.

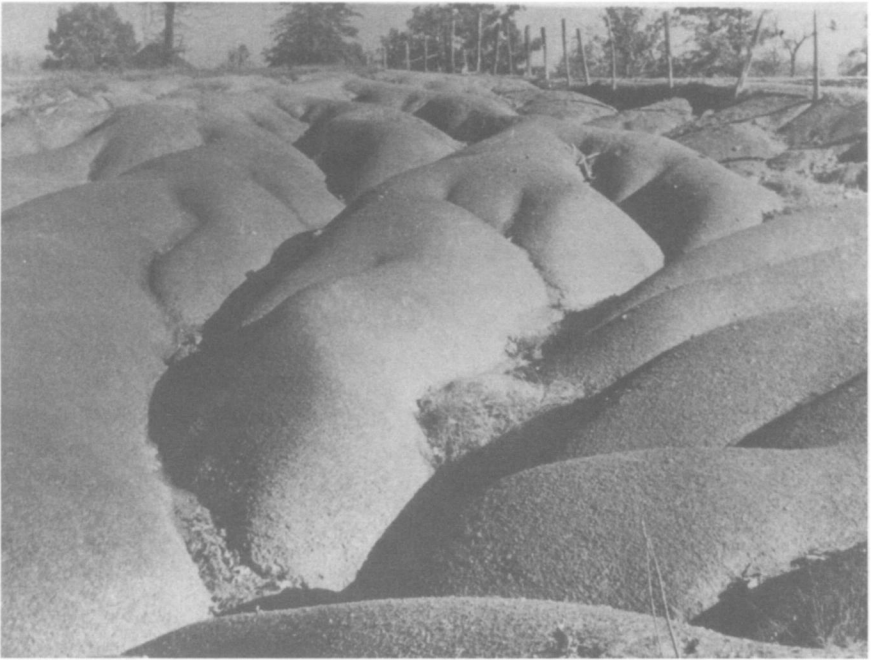
Finis Dunaway, "New Deal Jeremiads," *Environmental History* 12 (April 2007): 308-12.



Pare Lorentz Collection, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University.  
 Baby with plow, still photograph from *The Plow That Broke the Plains*.

and their land. But while photographers tended to portray the people as blameless victims of calamity and mural artists emphasized the glorious past of the pioneer, Lorentz presented the nation's environmental history as a tale of decline. Refusing to see dust storms and floods as natural disasters, he instead depicted these events as human-created tragedies. Blending words and images, *The Plow* and *The River* adapted the Puritan jeremiad tradition to explain the decade's ecological catastrophes. For environmental historians, these films provide not only a portal into the visual politics of conservation but also the opportunity to challenge traditional interpretations of the New Deal.

As he worked on *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, Lorentz became embroiled in a cultural debate over the origins and meanings of the Dust Bowl. This debate hinged on one key question: who was responsible for the disaster? Newsreels, along with many journalists and Great Plains politicians, blamed the weather: The long drought of the 1930s, they suggested, turned large parts of the Plains into desiccated fields and swirling piles of dust. Yet Lorentz rejected this explanation and instead emphasized human culpability. His ecological history relied upon a major tenet of 1930s science—the concept of a climax community. According to the ecologist Frederic Clements, the grasslands represented a natural equilibrium, a community of plants adapted to its regional conditions. Armed with their steel plows, pioneers and farmers destroyed this delicate balance on the Great Plains. Their reckless actions, their inability to adapt to the environment, eventually led to the Dust Bowl. Lorentz visualized Clements's concept by instructing his film crew to use a wide-angle lens to portray the



Pare Lorentz Collection, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University.

Panoramic view of soil erosion, still photograph from *The River*.

vastness of the grasslands that once dominated the Plains. This panoramic perspective established the film's ecological aesthetic. Through this visual strategy, Lorentz depicted the land as an interdependent system and portrayed people as biological agents responsible for overturning nature's design.

Lorentz combined panoramic vision with the spoken words of a narrator to castigate American farmers. *The Plow* draws on the jeremiad sermon—a form of address that warns of God's vengeance and admonishes Americans for their corrupt and sinful ways—to generate a sense of collective guilt. Rejecting the popular myth of frontier progress, Lorentz condemned the pioneers and their descendants for failing to adjust to the ecological realities of the Plains, for ruining the soil and creating a wasteland. Throughout the film, the narrator sounds like an angry preacher delivering a sermon: first warning a character on screen, "Settler, plow at your peril." But the man fails to heed the narrator's advice. Foolishly ignoring the region's periodic drought, he breaks the soil and plants more wheat. Later, the settler, along with other farmers on the Plains, must face the fury of nature. Once again, the narrator judges and condemns, reminding the settler of his sins against nature. His words, together with the images of blowing dust and barren fields, help turn *The Plow* into a political sermon, one that makes the fabled errand into the wilderness appear as a downward spiral into the abyss.

*The River* follows a similar pattern. It employs panoramic shots to encompass forests and other landscapes that surround the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The film also borrows from the jeremiad sermon to blame the American people for wasting natural resources and thereby contributing to the

massive floods in the Mississippi Valley. “We built a hundred cities and a thousand towns,” the narrator says, as flood imagery flickers across the screen, “but at what a cost!” As he did in *The Plow*, Lorentz again ignored questions of class interest. Rather than grappling with the power dynamics that shaped the American landscape, he chose to blame all Americans for their collective sins. Overlooking the racial divisions of the time, he urged viewers to feel sympathy for poor whites, toiling as sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the Deep South but neglected to portray the poverty and displacement of African Americans.

While *The Plow* ends with scenes of despair, *The River* closes with a celebration of the technological sublime. The film features dramatic footage of the Tennessee Valley Authority building large dams to tame rivers, conserve resources, and restore the region’s ecology. The New Deal jeremiad thus moves from rebuke to rejuvenation: *The River* concludes with an aesthetic vision of government planning and with the promise that human society can create harmony between technology and the environment.

When placed within the larger visual context of the time, within the myriad appeals to “the folk” and the numerous portrayals of Dust Bowl migrants, Lorentz’s work stands out as unique. His focus on ecological history and his condemnation of traditional values departed from the era’s more typical expressions of cultural nationalism. Rather than glorifying the frontier virtues of the past and emphasizing the strength and perseverance of the American people, he found redemption in the managerial vision of the New Deal. Connecting his films to the broader cultural politics of the 1930s also points toward a different way of thinking about the New Deal, which historians have long regarded as devoid of the morality and spirituality that inspired other reform movements. While New Dealers, unlike their Progressive predecessors, rarely focused on issues of personal morality, agricultural reformers and other conservationists framed the decade’s ecological catastrophes as a moral crisis. Lorentz’s use of religious rhetoric and sublime aesthetics reveals the fervor and passion that enlivened New Deal environmental reform.

The Bush administration did not make a documentary about Hurricane Katrina, but Al Gore, in his recent book and film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), suggests that global warming contributed to the storm’s destructive power. Gore’s project both draws on and departs from the legacy of New Deal documentary film. Like Lorentz, Gore uses the jeremiad form to argue that human beings—particularly Americans, with their ravenous consumption of resources and profligate emission of greenhouse-gases—bear full responsibility for the climate crisis. Like Lorentz, he relies on contemporary science to explain how people have altered the environment. While Gore occasionally gestures toward a critique of corporate power, he, too, like Lorentz, tends to focus on collective guilt and charges all Americans with ecological sin. The distance between the New Deal and today can be measured by the solutions that Gore offers at the end of the film. While Lorentz imagined a collective rebirth and pictured the environment being restored by the federal government, Gore looks instead to the individual. His jeremiad closes with people using energy efficient light bulbs, carrying reusable bags to the grocery store, and, if they can afford to, buying hybrid vehicles. Without minimizing the importance of such action, we may wonder whether more will be required to save the planet.

For all of their flaws, Lorentz's films still deserve our attention today. They bring us back to a time, so different from our own, when the government acknowledged and publicized the human role in ecological catastrophe. They also demonstrate that 1930s conservation cannot be reduced to a story of hardheaded realists motivated solely by economic and utilitarian concerns. The New Deal contained a spiritual dimension, expressed vividly in Lorentz's cinematic jeremiads. Animated by emotion and infused with aesthetics, his films offered secular prayers to the possibilities of New Deal reform.

*Finis Dunaway* is assistant professor of history at Trent University. His book, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago, 2005), includes an extensive analysis of New Deal documentary film, as well as discussions of landscape photography in the Progressive era and Sierra Club coffee table books in the postwar period. His current research project is tentatively entitled "This Is the Way the World Ends: A Visual History of the Environmental Crisis."