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STS.036 Technology and Nature in American History  
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## STS.036

### Reading questions for Worster, *Dust Bowl*

- What is Worster's attitude toward the Southern Plains and their history? (1-8 and Preface)
  - What lessons does Worster find in the history of the Dust Bowl? (4)
  - According to Worster, who and what are to blame for the Dust Bowl? (4-7, 13)
  - Worster talks about the Dust Bowl as an "inevitable outcome" of a particular kind of culture? What kind of culture is he talking about? Do you agree that this ecological disaster was indeed inevitable? What, if anything, do you think might have prevented it?
  - How does Worster conceptualize the 1930s, historically speaking? In other words, what kinds of connections does he make between the Dust Bowl and the Depression? (5)
  - What is Worster's definition of capitalism? (5-6)
  - What are the ecological values of capitalism? (6) Can you think of any more to add to Worster's list based on your readings this semester?
  - Generally speaking, what was Plains agriculture like in the 1920s? (6-7)
  - What is Worster's assessment of the New Deal? (7)
  - How does Worster characterize people who lived on the Plains? (23-25)
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- Here is what Worster has to say in *Dust Bowl* about Pare Lorentz's 1936 film *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. Do you agree with Worster's assessment?

Perhaps no other documentary work of the time had more impact, in its style, above all, but in its argument, too, on thinking about the Dust Bowl. Dorothea Lange, Archibald MacLeish, and John Steinbeck all picked up its images and cadences, and the film was shown in theaters across the nation, including those in the southern plains. It was Lorentz who first focused people's attention on technology as the instrument of destruction. Through newsreel-like camera footage and a rousing musical score by Virgil Thomson, he suggested that it was the machine—the unbridled, reckless force of modernity—that had made the dust storms. Great phalanxes of tractors were filmed, advancing on the land just as World War I tanks had moved across the smoke-shrouded battlefields. But given a new liberal government, Lorentz reassuringly concluded, the same machines could be turned to man's benefit; the conquest of the grassland would be more successful under the enlightened leadership of Franklin Roosevelt. When his cameramen, Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz, refused to go along with this New Deal puffery, Lorentz stubbornly persisted: "They wanted it to be all about human greed," he said, "and how lousy our social system was. And I couldn't see what this had to do with dust storms." It was the machine that got the blame, and yet, paradoxically, Lorentz argued that the New Dealers would make modern technology man's savior—so long as they could help drive the tractors. Despite its widespread influence, however, Lorentz's film did not begin to deal with the cultural sources of autonomy and aggression that lay behind the dust storms. As cinematic art, it was a triumph; as social analysis, it was wholly inadequate. (96)