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Trading Places: Griffith, Patten and Agricultural Modernity

Jan Olsson

> 'Melodrama begins and wants to end, in a "space of innocence", as if the farm was all ours' home.'[1]

Only three cities in the United States have been awarded fictional attention enough to merit the designation, 'story cities', Frank Norris informs us in an early text: New York, New Orleans and Boston. 'Imagine,' scoffs the future author of *The Pit*, 'a novel of Chicago'.[2] In the case of Chicago, wheat and meat materialized as the stuff of which fictions were made.[3] Commodities shipped by rail formed part of a global network of operation, a complex, integrated, simultaneously magical and dispiriting mechanism at the heart of modernity, as evidenced by the most renowned Chicago novels: Norris' posthumous *The Pit* (1903) and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). Magical metaphors flourished when awestruck commentators, in language sometimes messianic, sometimes cataclysmic, sought to elucidate the momentous cultural upheaval wrought by new means of transportation and communication. 'Railroads are talismanic wands', opines an early Chicago historian: 'They have a charming power. They do wonders – they work miracles. They are better than laws; they are essentially, politically and religiously – the pioneer, and vanguard of civilization.'[4] In an adage tailored from the same discursive fabric, Ralph Waldo Emerson, before his initial enthusiasm cooled off, writes: 'Railroad iron is a magician's rod, in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water.'[5] Sixty years later, Henry Adams, in a text on acceleration, appraised the impact of the liberated energies and concluded: 'The railways alone approached the carnage of war.'[6]

The traffic moved in both directions, and so did the metaphors as farmers turned consumers and spent money on goods and luxuries shipped by rail from the cities and from the mail-order houses in, for instance, Chicago. The dramatic results of these changes greatly alarmed an oft-quoted observer from the 1870s who foresaw a cultural disaster in the wake of the cancerous metropolitan sprawl of values that threatened to derail Republican ideals in the absence of new mental scaffoldings. 'Our former rural civilization, with its simple manners, moderate desires, and autonomous life,' he claimed, 'has as good as disappeared; the country is now just the suburb of the city.'[7] Since no new ruling order had been ushered in to accommodate these changes, 'disorders increase, oppressions multiply; the nation is plundered in pocket, imperilled in morals'.[8] Gauging the relation between farm- and cityscape from the perspective of 1908, Herbert N. Casson found a fully integrated 'New Farmer': 'The Railway, the trolley, the automobile, and the top buggy have transformed him into a suburbanite. In fact, his business has become so complex and many-sided, that he touches civilisation at more points and lives a larger life than if he were one of the atoms of a crowded city.'[9]

For purposes of discursive convenience, abstraction and acceleration – framing not only the traffic in commodities, magical or not, but a vast span of economic and cultural processes – can

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serve as indicators of changes that transformed and informed society. Telegraphy signalled a new era by paving a virtual way for trading agricultural commodities in terms of futures. The speedy dissemination of data whisked out the differences between trading places and shifted spatial modes of agribusiness to temporal commerce, from factual to virtual crops. As James W. Carey puts it: the telegraph 'permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation'.[10] Arbitrage, Carey explains, presupposed 'buying cheap and selling dear by moving goods around in space' factoring in the cost for transportation as a price differential between places. By nationalizing or even internationalizing the flow of information, market speculation in, for instance, wheat moved from arbitrage to futures, that is to a form of trading based on differences in time in a global hermeneutics that defined the parameters for actionable strategies in the pits.

The exigencies of modernity's multifarious inflections of antebellum politics and (agri-) cultural practices called for negotiations, adaptations and responses across the board. Jeffersonian Republican ideals and tenets lingered as a repository for representations of life in agrarian communities featuring independent landowners tilling and cherishing the land in a generational relay. The continuity and permanence of this life style and mode of production, grounded in the freeholder's unfettered property rights, gave meaning and direction, a constitutional embodiment, as it were, for the young nation. Cyclical timelines defined by the rhythm of the seasons gradually gave way to ideas about progress taking the nation and its modes of production elsewhere – to an allegedly better 'place' – offering a historical trajectory for the epochal ongoing changes propelled by modernity and its fugitive frontiers. The brisk dissemination of technology transformed nature as well as the nature of both factory work and agriculture, and in the process recast working conditions for mechanics and producers. Small-scale businesses were losing out to giant corporations dominating their line of business in a trust-like fashion, not least the railways. In Lewis Mumford's succinct formulation: 'Unfortunately, finance did not lag behind technology'.[11]

The diverse mix of ideas and associations we conveniently bring together to characterise populism voiced critical responses to wage labour, industrialism and paper money as indicators of the corrosion of Jeffersonian ideals. As Christopher Lasch reminds us, the first wave of unions and guilds, exemplified by the Knights of Labor, organised artisans and small producers rather than industrial workers, and consequently represented responses more geared to middle-class concerns and anxieties than the vicissitudes of factory workers.[12] The fading Knights of Labor committed themselves wholeheartedly to the Populist Party's anti-industrial stance and supported the free-silver plank in the 1896 presidential election. Predictably, Samuel Gompers and the emerging American Federation of Labor (AFL) refrained from fully embracing William Jennings Bryan or any other candidate when Bryan topped both the Populist and Democratic tickets. Gompers supported free silver, but agrarian radicalism and party politics did not resonate with the AFL's acceptance of industrial wage labour.[13] The depression in the early 1890s and its effects on farmers and workers fuelled Bryan's political agenda. In the 1896 election, monetary reform, restoring silver as a legitimate metal for coinage besides gold and fixing their respective value as 16 to 1, was launched as a panacea. Free silver was to boost the circulation of money, turn the tide of downward prices, and restore prosperity to farmers and producers hard pressed by the depression.[14]

Bryan introduced an expansive definition of the businessman in his legendary speech, 'Cross of Gold', during the Democratic national convention in 1896; the enlisting of miners makes sense for a platform unequivocally focused on free silver as a cure-all for a struggling economy:

> We say to you that you have made the definition of a business man too limited in its application. The man who is employed for wages is as much a business man as his employer; the attorney in a country town is as much a business man as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis; the merchant at the cross-roads store is as much a business man as the merchant of New York; the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, who begins in spring and toils all summer, and who by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of the country creates wealth, is as much a business man as the man who goes upon the Board of Trade and bets upon the price of grain; the miners who go down a thousand feet into the earth, or climb two thousand feet upon the cliffs, and bring forth

Fig. 1 (left). New York *World*, 16 April 1909, 3.

Fig. 2 (right). New York *Evening Journal*, 17 April 1909, 2.

> from their hiding places the precious metals to be poured into the channels of trade are as much businessmen as the few financial magnates who, in a back room, corner the money of the world. We come to speak of this broader class of business men.[15]

Bryan delivered his speech in Chicago, 'that raw citadel of American strength, where every European state was represented by a colony, where wheat, corn, and cattle of the Western prairie were gathered up, processed, and speeded to markets in the East and across the sea,' writes one of Bryan's biographers.[16] After a pugnacious campaign, Bryan lost in an election that repositioned the political landscape and caused rifts and wedges within both the major national parties and tensions inside the minor ones, the Populist Party as well as the National Silver Party. One political observer attributed Bryan's defeat to the 'sensational rise in wheat prices' leading up to the election. In fact, a new era of prosperity dawned in the final months of 1896 and lasted throughout McKinley's presidency. According to Casson, '[w]hat was called "McKinley Prosperity" was really created by the agricultural boom of 1897'.[17]

In *Pastoral Inventions*, Sarah Burns outlines a series of intertwined representational traditions of agrarian life: on the one hand, pastoral idealisation which resisted taking account of and addressing changes affecting the yeomen lifestyle; on the other hand, satirical depictions of country bumpkins and their sometimes shrewd, clueless manners and mannerisms. Parallel to these strands and their shifting emphasis over time, a matter-of-fact discourse in agricultural magazines celebrated the influx and impetus of agricultural machines and other changes gradually turning husbandry into prosperous agribusiness.[18] D.W. Griffith's film, *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) meshes with these cultural and representational traditions in complex, albeit unsettled ways. Griffith's film forms part of a larger discourse on wheat corners which spawned a plethora of cartoons in American editorials in 1909 (Figs. 1 and 2). A wider contextual situating of this film in relation to agricultural representations and discourses, modernity's abstractions of the agricultural economy and the trading in wheat futures during 1909 might add a few useful footnotes to the stellar body of research already awarded this landmark film.

Speculative intertextuality

Silent cinema is often studied as the epitome of modernity skirting the sensory apparatus of the volatile social body, predominantly in its metropolitan

guise. Within this analytical framework, scholars have teased out representational priorities and cultural interfaces of the emerging film industry. By highlighting processes of differentiation and abstraction in how cinema came to terms with temporal and spatial parameters, and how it adopted its own analytical and synthetic grids of representation when attractions were narrativised and turned into the handmaidens of storytelling, an intricate visual machinery emerges. In the process, filmmakers gradually dismantled models holding cinema accountable to other art forms and representational practices, but continued to enlist the sister arts for intertextual revenue. One particular body of filmmaking, D.W. Griffith's work at Biograph, and especially one film, *A Corner in Wheat*, have served as a linchpin for pre-classical cinema by its testing of devices, sophisticated intertextual play and editing protocols.

Griffith's universally acclaimed masterpiece has been rightfully praised for its innovative style and for taking on controversial subject matter. The film was marketed and read as an editorial, to pick the oft-quoted phrasing from *New York Dramatic Mirror*, when the film opened in December 1909.[19] Over the years, the film has been productively discussed by George C. Pratt, Russell Merritt, Vlada Petrić, Eileen Bowser, Tom Gunning, Scott Simmon, Helmut Färber and many others.[20] These analyses predominantly involve three intertextual registers: in relation to passages from Frank Norris' texts; as visually inspired by the oeuvre of the French artist Jean-François Millet (1814–1875), which was openly advertised in the *Biograph Bulletin*; and as an emulation of populist convictions and William Jennings Bryan's platform in 1896. Bryan's defeat more or less killed the silver issue for good. Between Bryan's first two presidential campaigns in 1896 and 1900, Joseph Leiter unsuccessfully tried to corner wheat and before him, such notorious speculators as Old Hutch (Benjamin P. Hutchinson) and Edward Pardridge had orchestrated corner attempts in the pit of the Chicago Board of Trade which Bryan alluded to in his convention speech.

Given this tripartite referential frame for *A Corner in Wheat*, the film primarily seems to address issues of the past. Tom Gunning elegantly sums up the thrust of the analytical discourse by concluding that the film 'was taking up a social battle cry more than a decade old and in some ways a dead issue'.[21] The wording is more or less identical when Gunning revisited the film for *The Griffith Project*: 'no longer a burning issue, although the economic organization of society was still hotly debated'.[22] Gunning reads the figure of the Wheat King in the film as inspired by Joseph Leiter and his corner failure in 1898, which most Norris scholars point to as the model for Curtis Jadwin's corner fiasco in *The Pit*.[23]

Gunning's contention goes against the grain of the marketing of the film, however, which moves beyond the timeframe of the 1890s. The *Biograph Bulletin* explicitly situated the film in the context of 1909 by claiming that 'no subject has ever been more timely than this powerful story of the wheat gambler, coming as it does when agitation is rife against that terrible practice of cornering commodities that are the necessities of daily life'.[24] Such a claim cannot be dismissed as standard marketing hype in the tumultuous year of 1909. As the anonymous critic in *Moving Picture World* reflected about the film, 'it should serve as a warning to those who undertake to corner and control the food supply and an encouragement to those who see the menace in such illegal and altogether inhuman operations'.[25] Given the studio's assertion regarding conditions beyond Leiter's corner of old and the critical application of the term 'editorial' (which even more distinctly stresses the film's urgency), it might be productive to situate and address the film's representational priorities in relation to the discourse on wheat, flour and bread in 1909.

The term 'the wheat mechanism', picked up from a text by Herbert N. Casson published in 1909, offers an architectural blueprint for the intricate connections alluded to by Wasson's observation that the sprawl of metropolitan values turned the countryside into a suburb.[26] The traffic, of course, operated both ways along the metropolitan corridors opened by the railways and lined by telegraph poles. John R. Stilgoe neatly sums up the spatial implications: 'Every intersection of railroad and way represented a crossing of two kinds of space, one metropolitan and futurist in character, one essentially rural and traditional'.[27] Griffith's film, in an oblique manner, addresses the repercussions of this traffic by way of an intricate abstract architecture outlining a form of imaginary three-way crossing. Griffith's farmer is unable to reap revenue from his grain due to the manner in which trading in wheat shifted the generative power and forcefulness from the land to the pit, from arbitrage to futures. Instead of operating within the self-sustaining mode of production of old, the farmer is positioned as just one chain in a wheat mechanism

grounded in the pit's speculative dealings. If the iron of the railway was a magician's rod, wheat shipped along the lines was in the process transformed by a series of abstractions. Actual grain was turned into a liquid of sorts by a complex series of hands-off processes; the most visual aspect of this transformation was the theatricalized trading in futures in the pit.

Allegorical abstraction

Griffith's film, in a highly abstract fashion, brings together spatially and temporally dispersed farmers, bakers and consumers in a *danse macabre* orchestrated by a cynical speculator in the pit who, in the end, falls victim to his own greed, perhaps by intervention from higher powers or forces. If metaphysical influence operates in surreptitious allegiance with the film's narrative voice, the allegorical abstraction set in motion by the unprecedented deployment of parallel editing unleashes a balancing force of its own, an invisible grim reaper bringing down he who has tampered with what the earth yields. For added emphasis, the literal downfall takes place at the crowning moment of the Wheat King's triumphant success in cornering. He loses his bearing in the very space where some of his yellow gold is stored in abundance, ready to be converted to real currency when the price is right, and the shorts short enough to buy cash wheat no matter what the price. Telegram in hand, he slips and falls into the bin's abyss and chokes to death on his own wheat which, the film seems to imply, was not his to amass in the first place. Due to the film's abstract nature and its explicit unwillingness to ground the narrative in the pell-mell of recent events – more about these later – the film, in the end, collapses its populist-inflected economic analysis by grafting it onto a melodramatic logic underpinned by metaphysics as a purveyor of natural justice. Consequently, and by way of the film's multiple narrative threads and a corresponding set of contrasts and alliances forged by the editing, the Wheat King personally, rather than the system he embodies, is singled out as the evil force in the capitalist system. His juggernaut mentality is further emphasised by a total lack of compassion even in the face of the misery of his fellow speculators. Everyone stands empty-handed except the speculator.

The film's most blatant contrast, effected through editing, shows the Wheat King throwing a lavish party celebrating the corner in the making (Fig. 3) while the famished are lined up in a tableau-like

Fig. 3. *A Corner in Wheat*: the banquet. [Richard Koszarski Collection.]

shot inside a bread-less bakery. This pungent polarization between exquisite dining and acute famine is one of two key scenes in the film appropriated from Frank Norris' *The Octopus* (1901), the first part of his projected epic on wheat. The author's premature death at the age of thirty-two in 1902 cut short his trilogy to only two finished novels, *The Octopus* and *The Pit*. In the scene, Norris' railroad magnate is hosting an exorbitant gourmet dinner featuring a lavish display of courses. The serving of haute cuisine and small-talk about produce is interwoven, course by course, with the final starving moments in the life of the widow of one of the magnate's dispossessed victims. Griffith displaces the scene by turning it into the exploiting Wheat King's celebratory dinner party set off against the frozen tableau from

Fig. 4. *A Corner in Wheat*: the breadline. [Richard Koszarski Collection.]

the bakery. The Wheat King's subsequent downfall, Griffith's open-ended narrative resolution, mirrors the fatal accident in *The Octopus* which befalls a railroad agent turned big-time farmer/elevator owner/wheat exporter, featuring desperate hand and all.

Thus, at the end of the day, there is no future in trading futures for Griffith's Wheat King. Metaphysics and melodrama, working in tandem, bury him under 'the torrent of his own Niagara of grain'. By blocking the chain of natural transformation from grain via flour to bread, he diverts the daily bread from the market and puts basic food out of reach of those in need, while the grain in his elevator bins lies idle awaiting future gains in the wake of the corner. In his dying moments, the speculator finally touches grain. His previously gloved hand, now naked for full dramatic saturation, conveys his desperate, vain movements in the elevator bin. In the grander order of things, however, this changes little if anything. In the final shot, Griffith's antediluvian farmer embarks on yet another seemingly futile round of sowing, and for the poor people, the coveted bread is still too costly. If evil, as defined by the narration, is eventually vanquished, the film's victims, the metonymic small-time farmers and the poor people in the city (simultaneously disengaged and united by the machinery of the market by way of Griffith's editing), are doomed to stand as eternal victims given the middlemen's machinations and proliferation.

In Norris' novels, the bread famine primarily affects people in Europe in a trajectory moving from the vast wheat fields in California via the commodity market in Chicago to the poor and hungry in Europe. In Norris's short story, 'A Deal in Wheat', a Kansas farmer is forced to give up farming when bears in the pit slash prices in their struggle for profit. The ex-farmer re-locates to Chicago and we find him in a breadline run dry before he eventually manages to find a job and a career of sorts. The impact of the short story for the film's representation seems far from ironclad.[28] Even if the film shows farmers and breadlines, there is no transference between the two narratives converting an ex-farmer into a hungry supplicant. Griffith's farmer might be on the verge of leaving his farm for the city, but the film refrains from offering precise clues as to what went wrong for him. If bread prices advance in the cities, the speculator, in all likelihood, and in contrast to Norris' short story, would have driven up grain prices to the benefit of the farmers, which was how the events played out in 1909. The farmers' empty hands represent a powerful symbol for a depression set in the past in a story inspired by recent events defined by a different set of coordinates and alliances. Norris' short-story farmer is a victim of bears leading the market after the crash in 1893 and the following depression, while Griffith's speculator is a bull and, therefore, potentially a godsend to those who have grain to sell.

The narrative voice seems, primarily, to bemoan the vicissitudes of modernity and the abstract relations set in motion by establishing a market which de-localized and commodified farming by turning the tilling of the soil into only a chain in the wheat mechanism. Paradoxically, the film executes its critical operation through fashioning its own process of abstraction by means of cinematically interlocking spatially and temporarily dispersed aspects of the wheat mechanism: farmer, speculator and consumers. The abstract relation of the three-pronged editing pattern is applauded in the critical discourse as a major achievement in spite of its engagement with an allegedly 'dead issue'. However, 'dead issue' can, rather, be read as a misrepresentation by non-representation of the politics of wheat and bread in 1909, which offers the opportunity of reassessing the politics of abstract representation in the film and its ideological bedrock. In relation to modern, scientific farming as one chain in the wheat mechanism, Griffith's allegorical stripping away of the mechanical fabric of farming functions much like Edward W. Byrn's inverted catalogue of technological progress, but in Griffith's case, substitutes dismay with nostalgia. By peeling off one invention after the other from the alleged glory of contemporary, modern life, Byrn returns his readers to the disenchanted nightmare of pre-modernity deleting everything from suspension bridges and self-binding harvesters to false teeth and moving pictures.[29] In Griffith's film, the pre-modern farmer without harvesters, reapers and other agricultural boons, emerges as a revered but bloodless figure, without the forcefulness of the peasants on Millet's canvases, the model posited for the film's opening. Legions of techno-enthusiastic accounts of agricultural realities from the early twentieth century painted a different panorama. Hugo Münsterberg, for example, ventured this account of agricultural efficiency in 1904: 'every farmer rides on his machines; and the steam-plough, which sows and harrows at the same time, has reduced the amount of time spent on these processes to one-fifteenth of what it formerly was, and the cost of every sheaf of

wheat to one-quarter. The machines of to-day sow and fertilize at the same time, and place the seeds at just the desired depth beneath the surface.'[30]

Tayloristic modelling and monitoring of bodies for all kinds of profitable purposes fleshed out modernity's overriding abstractions. Griffith's depiction of the farmer as weak and bloodless is the obverse of the speculator's vampyric might which holds everyone in check. 'Vampyric' metaphors for trading hark back at least to William Cobbett (1763–1835) who, as Lasch mentions, recurrently referred to 'monopolists, speculators, and middelmen – [as] "plunderers" and "bloodsuckers"'.[31] In his meticulous shot description of the film, Färber notes the immobility of the servants in the dinner scene and the janitor standing in attention in the office scenes. The speculator's lieutenants are likewise lined up and frozen before being set in motion when the speculator has made up his mind on how to act as he pulls the strings. It's a staple of the discussion of the film to relate the frozen tableau in the bakery to the tradition of living pictures. This is no doubt a productive observation, but it serves as only the most salient moment in an overall slowing down and controlling of body movements in the film which in the bakery hits entropic standstill. Before embarking on sowing, the farmer performs an occult ritual running the seeds through his hands three times – perhaps once for each family member. Exiting the frame, he moves very gingerly, and the older farmer, probably his father, treads almost as catatonically as a marionette. Once on the field, they move more briskly. After harvesting, months later, the farmers return empty-handed after having sold the wheat seemingly without profit. The wife mirrors her husband's empty-hand gesture before the family is lined up in an immobile tableau tapped of all energy, not unlike the body language displayed in Millet's painting, *The Angelus* (1854–59). The film ends on this note picking up on the lack of force when the farmer, now alone, teeters over the field broadcasting the seed. In contrast, the speculator's demise is as violent as the relentless system that finally drowns him.

Speculative control permeates society and spins invisible threads holding down the once free yeomen, the archetypical symbol of Republican freedom and values. Entropy slows down all 'real' and systemically peripheral processes, immobilizes farmers and consumers, but accelerates the abstract realm at the heart of the system. This dialectic offers a paradoxical version of how the wheat mechanism speeds up processes, symbolically liquefying modern wheat and simultaneously slowing down the withering vestiges of pre-modern modes of farming. If modernity severs old links by forging new invisible means of positioning everyone framed by the wheat mechanism, it is an interesting aspect of the farm family that a daughter rather than a son represents the next generation. Certainly, Griffith's predilection for girlish vulnerability and innocence plays into this casting choice. For a yeoman cut down to peasant and expecting only the bleakest of futures, a son was more or less superfluous in an era in which the speculator has cut the bond between the farmer and the land leaving only peasants behind.

In its famous defining moment of victimization in the absence of bread, Griffith's narrative comes to a tableau-like standstill in the bakery. If God eventually redresses the balance sheet in the elevator, as the *Biograph Bulletin* implies, the victims are still awaiting their restoration outside the narrative. Only a pre-modern if not prelapsarian fantasy scenario, as it were, would restore order and put grain and money in the farmer's hand and affordable bread on the people's table. The circularity of Griffith's narrative trajectory is vicious in the absence of a redeeming logic able to capitalise on the elimination of the third party – the evil absolute – in this *laissez-faire* equation. If the system cannot be redeemed by reforms, the next speculator in line stands ready to step into the circle of the pit; hence the farmer's bleak prospects. As the story is constructed, the farmer is, of course, unaware of the speculator's fate, which seems of little consequence given the narrative's premises. Melodrama fashioned as populist politics offers no resolution. In that sense, the film toys with a dead issue; only nostalgia remains.

Wheat hermeneutics

On the cover of the issue of *Harper's Weekly*, 1 May 1909 (Fig. 5), a caption in block letters below a photograph of James A. Patten (1852–1928) reads: 'The Man Who Raised the Price of Bread.' The centre of the image is dramatically dark. Patten stands in semi-profile framed against the black opaque background of an automobile. His right hand occupies the centre of the image, the cigar, part of the oral myth of the man together with the ubiquitous chewing gum, is only semi-visible. An avalanche of cartoons played with visible and invisible hands plundering the poor and reaping revenues from the

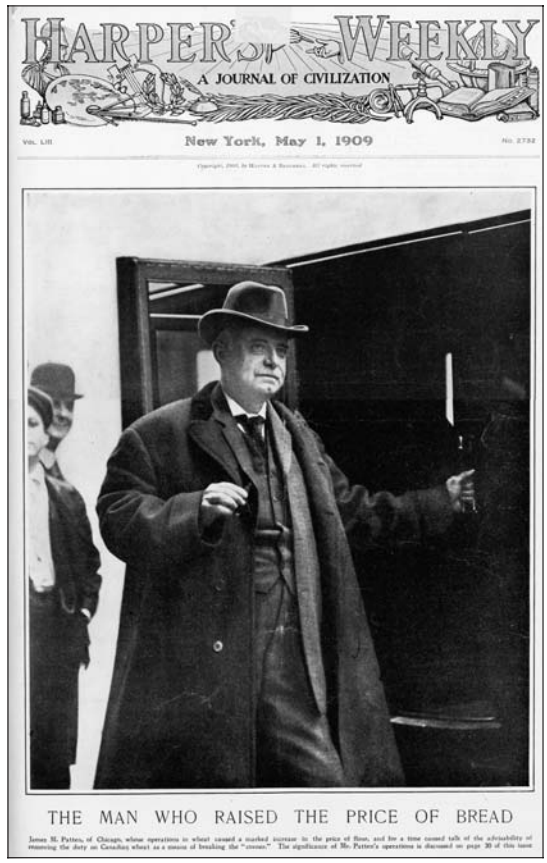


Fig. 5. *Harper's Weekly*, 1 May 1909.

fields. The front page of Hearst's Los Angeles *Examiner* of 15 April 1909 displays a photograph of a loaf of bread from both top and side subjected to graphic cropping in order to illustrate the upcoming shaving of three ounces from the bread due to rising flour prices. The reduced weight of the five-cent loaf in Los Angeles was to be 11 ounces. The headline, not mincing words, reads: 'Patten deal Robs Bread Eaters of Millions'. Below the loaf, a photograph in close-up shows a stern Patten hat and all. The following day, the Los Angeles *Herald* captioned a cartoon featuring Patten 'The Thief'. Butcher-knife in hand and sporting a top hat, the representative of the Wheat Trust slices off a sizable part of the bread marked profit, and leaves the public, embodied by a little girl, crying over the crumbs (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Los Angeles *Herald*, 16 April 1909, 1.

The editorial page from the same day headlined its intervention, 'Lawless Greed'. The *Herald* resumed editorial fire the following day under a new, acerbic rubric, 'the bread raid'. In numerous cities, the loaf size had already been cut down from twenty and one-half to sixteen ounces for the 10 cent bread, and it was feared that the price for the smaller size eventually could reach a dime. Some cities, such as Chicago, had adopted ordinances regulating the weight of loaves which obviated downsizing if not higher prices. In New York City, the price was now six cents for the so-called five-cent loaf, and customers braced themselves for further increases. In a cartoon of 18 April, the New York *Herald* elected to depict the food speculator as a wolf on the doorstep of the poor (Fig. 7).

The tone was merrier in a *Herald* cartoon from 9 April sporting a mixed assortment of lambs (i.e. the public) taking off from Wall Street bound for Chicago in an airship 'to buy wheat' (Fig. 8). The socialist *Daily People* assured its readers that bread prices would stay put, an assessment based on interviews with executives from the large 'baking establishments' in New York City. The president of the Hennessy National Baking Company 'said that bread was about the last commodity to be affected by raising prices in raw material'.[32] Most bakers had ample flour supplies or contracts for delivery reflecting earlier price levels. For the many smaller bakeries of which there were thousands scattered over the city, the brunt of them on the East Side, the situation was more alarming.

James A. Patten, singled out as the bad guy by *Harper's Weekly* and some of the newspapers in Los Angeles, traded in all crops in the commodity pits in Chicago. Patten was born on a farm in Illinois in the vicinity of Sandwich and Somonauk. His uncle, John L. Beveridge, Governor of Illinois in the mid-

1870s, helped young James find his first job in the trading business in Chicago. In 1902 Patten had more or less cornered the market in oats. Unruly market conditions in futures during the Russo-Japanese War prompted him to begin to trade heavily in wheat. In August 1904, he was prominent enough in the wheat pit for the *Wall Street Journal* to dub him the leader of the bulls.[33] Patten scored successfully in the financially chaotic days of 1907 when the American banking system all but collapsed, and the spawning nickelodeon market encountered its first temporary setback. In May 1909 the *Evening Post* concluded that motion pictures at this time had bounced back and even surpassed baseball as the nation's favourite pastime.[34]

Patten's most sensational coup, meriting the *Harper* cover and its harsh bread caption, was, however, orchestrated in April and May 1909 around No. 2 Red Winter Wheat, and spilled over to contracts for July, September and December. Like most of the legendary traders in the pit, Patten operated in futures (that is, contracts that might or might not have to be redeemed in actual grain) as well as in real crop, so-called cash wheat. Pace popular belief, few big-time speculators dealt only in abstract paper and virtual wheat.

An article in *Worker's Magazine*, simultaneously published as a featured story in the Chicago *Sunday Tribune*, succinctly described the Patten game in a fictive quotation: '"I began buying wheat last fall at less than the wheat was worth. I've been selling some of it at the market price. Millers have needed it in their business. And much of this wheat, of course, is still for sale. It's real wheat, though, that will make good bread."'[35] From 7 April and throughout May, American front pages brimmed with reports chronicling Patten's wheat corner in the Chicago pit. In the fall of 1908, when he had started to buy for around 90 cents, Patten predicted a wheat shortage, and spring prices around US$1.25 per bushel. The first flurry of reports concerning his extensive trading reached the newspapers in February 1909. His gamble focused on futures contracts for winter wheat to be delivered by the end of May. Prices advanced and fell, and Patten had to cover the corner certain days by extensive buying to fend off bearish tendencies. Patten's predictions were confirmed on 7 April when prices in the pit reached US$1.25, the highest level since Leiter's corner attempt in the war year of 1898. The Chicago *Tribune* estimated Patten's profit over the last few days at around US$1,500,000 and he

Fig. 7. New York *Herald*, 18 April 1909, II:3.

was still reported to control at the very least 10,000,000 bushels of May wheat. Ten days later, Patten and associates were said to have cleared US$4–5,000,000 on their deals; 80 per cent of the sum was credited to Patten personally. The public outcry, further exacerbated by Thomas W. Lawson's high-pitched proposal of mass meetings in New York City and Chicago, prompted the Wheat King to add a second bodyguard to his staff. Lawson was a self-made man and had made a fortune as a broker and speculator mainly dealing in oil, copper and railroad stocks. Of late he had decided to go after speculators and 'money kings'. His sensationalist series of articles, 'Frenzied Finances', published in *Everybody's Magazine*, was widely read and republished in book form.[36] Lawson attacked Patten by circulating an alarmist telegram predicting riots and

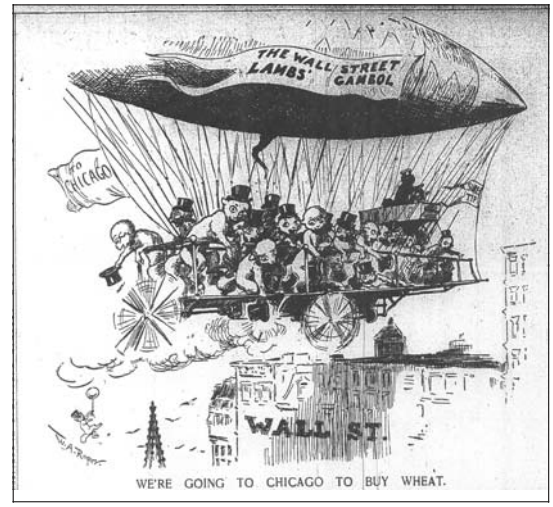


Fig. 8. New York *Herald*, 9 April 1909, 6.

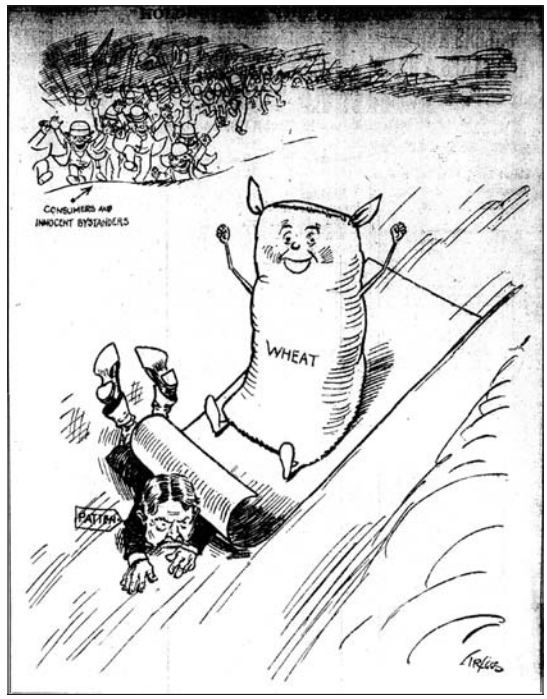


Fig. 9. New York *Press*, 22 April 1909, 4.

bloodshed in American cities as a result of the 'conspiracy' perpetrated by 'the terrorizing of the ravenous gamblers who are bent on securing their great winnings, regardless of the result to humanity'.[37] Predictably, Patten in his reply dismissed Lawson's analysis of what had caused the soaring prices. In reporting on the matter, the Los Angeles *Times* repudiated Lawson's intervention as 'a telegraphic tirade', but conceded that Patten had created one of 'the most spectacular corners that has ever been run at the Chicago Board of Trade and there are possibilities for serious consequences'.[38]

When the media frenzy turned even uglier, Patten removed himself from the Chicago scene for a couple of weeks only to re-emerge victorious when the May contracts had to be settled. Via agents in the pit, he had by then sold off the lion's share of his holdings to jittery shorts. Prior to his departure, the palatial Patten home on 1426 Ridge Avenue in Evanston was broken into, so-called infernal machines were sent to his office on three consecutive days and in addition a multitude of threatening letters arrived. From around the country unsettling flour and bread news poured in. Flour prices had increased by 40 cents in a couple of days in Kansas City, and a ship was on its way from the New York elevators to Galveston in wheat-depleted Texas. One early victim outside the pit was George Wagner, an unemployed baker, who committed suicide in St. Louis after being laid off both in Litchfield, Illinois and then Perry, Missouri, and who had hunted in vain for 'employment at nearly every bakery' in St. Louis.[39] In New York City, scores of small bakeries on the East Side had shut down their businesses, but primarily for entirely different reasons, to which I'll return.

Patten was believed to have abandoned the corner as he left the scene for his partner Bartlett's ranch in New Mexico, and prices instantly fell. A premature cartoon in the GOP paper, the New York *Press*, depicted Patten flattened by a personified sack of wheat steamrollering the speculator to the accompaniment of cheering 'consumers and innocent bystanders' (Fig. 9).[40] On 19 April, an editorial in the *Press* phased out the corner – it was not a question of if but when 'it will smash'.[41] On 25 May, the *Press* on its front page, contrary to its earlier prediction, proclaimed the 'May Corner Complete'. Patten returned to Chicago from New Mexico, far from crushed, and prices again advanced since almost all May wheat had been sold during the Wheat King's absence when everyone believed the corner attempt was about to topple. During the decisive trading day, 29 May, Patten set the price at US$1.34 per bushel, a level far below what had been possible to squeeze out of those bound by delivery contracts, and only one cent higher than the closing price the day before.

In auditing the corner late May, the Chicago *Tribune* exacted much less severity in its assessment of Patten's deal than some of the Los Angeles papers when the news broke in April. The *Tribune* observed:

> Had the bulls been so disposed there was nothing in the situation to prevent prices from being boosted to as high a level as when [Joseph] Leiter had a near corner in the market. The moderation of the bulls in this respect is noteworthy and shorts are fortunate that wheat has been for sale all through the month. The greater part of May has been sold on the basis of the cash value of the property in this and other markets, and the current future has kept in line with other exchanges and with cash prices throughout the deal.[42]

The following day's trading bore out the prediction, and the *Tribune*'s headline consequently read: 'Patten lenient in his triumph. Holds Prices of May Wheat firmly at US$1.34, Refraining from

Squeezing Shorts'.[43] Unlike Leiter in 1898, Patten refrained from exporting wheat to Europe in order to deplete the domestic market and, thereby, create higher prices. Regardless of the *Tribune*'s neutral accounting, Patten's overall handling of the corner far from endeared him to the public, but the readings of the wheat narrative and the embroiled issues of agency, causality and character offered little transparency and were, hence, much more difficult to decode in late May than mid-April. The New York *Evening World* interpreted Patten's lenient strategy as precautionary; he wanted to avoid stirring up support for legislation targeting futures trading.

Looking back on 1909, David Greising and Laurie Morse, historians of the Chicago market in futures, consider Patten's May deal as 'perhaps the only successful major corner in the Board of Trade's history'.[44] In a somewhat fuller account of this particular corner attempt, William G. Ferris reaches a similar conclusion in his historical overview.[45] The ramifications of the wheat crisis in 1909 – whether caused by the corner, or the result of an actual wheat shortage, which Patten alleged at the time and over the years – initially provoked sharp reactions from people of all walks of life. Patten was pitted against the public as well as the federal administration. He had a dispute with the Secretary of Agriculture, James Wilson, when contesting the official account and predictions of the wheat market, and the newly-appointed Attorney General, George W. Wickersham, unsuccessfully tried to hold him accountable in terms of trading policies. Had it not been for his amassing of wheat, Patten claimed in his two-front defence, the bulk of the wheat would instead have found its way to Europe, which would have caused even higher prices in the US. This is an assessment with at least some grain of truth.

It is virtually impossible to ascertain how many bushels Patten controlled and sold, or at what price during the duration of the long campaign. Prior to having cornered the market, it was reported that he had sold off substantial amounts of wheat on secondary markets to get rid of his holdings of cash wheat; the tactic was to sell in such a fashion so that the wheat did not return to the primary markets. The buzz in the pit trickled down via small millers to bakers, and consumers hoarded flour which spawned even higher prices. To no avail, insiders tried to dissuade excited small-time speculators, lambs, eager to take advantage of soaring prices from entering the mercurial market via brokers. Money was both gained and lost by those following Patten's speculative lead. Farmers, however, and some small-time speculators, and, in Patten's judgment, even the consumers, benefited from the corner. Patten himself, of course, reaped more revenues than anyone else. Later on, government reports, in addition to analytical pieces in magazines and periodicals, bore out the underlying assumptions of Patten's market intervention. The bone of contention seems to have been whether his intervention had blocked export to Europe, Patten's mantra, and, therefore, offset a prospective wheat shortage domestically, or if the shortage was purely imaginary and rigged by Patten. Even if scores of inconclusive figures were flying around, the foe of April 1909 was partly vindicated in late May by his lean handling of his adversaries in the pit.

To fathom the full implication of Patten's manoeuvring was far from easy during the turmoil of 1909. Government officials initially disputed Patten's analysis of the market and his questioning of their estimations. Gradually, his reading gained currency in the face of lingering high wheat prices even after the May corner. Some commentators sided with Patten's line of reasoning that the corner was no corner, rather a symptom of a real shortage. Cash wheat in New York City and Kansas City, in fact, was sold above future prices in Chicago during the decisive days of the campaign, which evidenced a real shortage according to some. Irrespective of this, a commentator in *The Nation* concluded, a propos Patten's deal, that 'operations to force up the price are certainly not no more respectable because there are sign of genuine scarcity'.[46] Wheat prices did roll back after the May corner, but not dramatically, and opinion progressively leaned towards Patten's reading that there indeed was a wheat shortage when looking at the world market. Journals targeting Patten in May, like *Harper's Weekly* and *Outlook*, returned to the topic some months later, more in-depth and with less of an edge. Scores of editorials in the business-friendly press championed Patten's reading more or less throughout the campaign.[47] Some circumstances seemed indisputable: a cultural shift in eating habits had occurred in many countries which raised the demand for wheat; the global wheat yield had decreased in the last few years; the increase in population worldwide was not matched by an increase in wheat acreage. According to agricultural experts, wheat was a pioneer crop attractive for emerging farmers who gradually moved on to other crops unless high wheat prices prompted a sustain-

ing focus on that crop. The top price paid for wheat in June 1909 was not surpassed until 1916 during the First World War, but prices had remained high in the meantime.[48] One burning issue in the political debate running parallel to Patten's corner was the 25 cent tariff per bushel levelled, for instance, against wheat imported from a country such as Canada. Tariff issues were on the top of the political agenda in 1909, and in a much broader context than just in relation to agricultural matters. Tariff costs inflicted in order to protect and safeguard American business from competition were no doubt a burden to consumers.

The activities in the pit and the volatile grain, flour and bread prices prompted Representative Charles F. Scott of Kansas, chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, to introduce a bill in Congress to prohibit dealing in futures in wheat, corn and other agricultural products. Trade officials in Chicago were reported to fear 'that unless the Patten forces are called off and the market quieted down this bill will get behind it so much popular pressure that Congress may be forced to pass it'.[49] The Board most of all wanted to avoid the 'bread famine' cry. Patten took notice and gave shorts leeway. Scott did indeed introduce a bill, but he could not marshal support for a sweeping indictment regarding commodity futures, so the bill in the end only targeted cotton. 'On the momentum of Southern rhetoric, and with farm voters seemingly in the balance,' writes Cedric B. Cowing, 'the bill passed 160–41, but never reached the floor of the Senate'.[50] The passing date was 24 June 1910. Subsequent attempts to curb trading in futures were as little successful as 'the Scott bill fiasco'.[51] In fact, anti-futures bills had been a political staple since Patten's oat corner in 1902; 164 such bills were unsuccessfully introduced up until 1920.[52]

In the spring of 1910, in the wake of the flourishing wheat corner, Patten and his business associates stepped down into semi-retirement, and he and his family embarked on a long European voyage. Patten, however, continued to operate on the commodity market more or less until his death in 1928. He was even indicted as a member of a ring of speculators accused of cornering cotton, a case prosecuted within the legal framework of the Sherman Act. Patten eventually pleaded guilty in February 1913 and paid his US$4,000 fine, but in a statement, considered the case to be a misapplication of the anti-trust laws. His alleged 'co-conspirators' refused to plead guilty and were eventually acquitted.[53]

In 1927, James A. Patten ventured his own version of the 1909 events in a series of autobiographical instalments co-authored with Boyden Sparkes in *Saturday Evening Post*:

> Heavy exports in the fall of 1908, lean yields over a period of several years, increasing domestic consumption in the United States, and finally, to cap all this, killing frosts in the Argentine and Canada, had persuaded me the time was ripe for a bull campaign.
>
> So I started to buy wheat and kept buying until I had 10,000,000 bushels pledged to be delivered to me in May, 1909. Other bulls who believed as I did, that there was going to be a shortage that would last the crop year through, bought until they held contracts for 30,000,000 bushels. With the end of May, wheat that I had bought at 89 3/4 cents a bushel was priced at US$1.34, and would have been higher if I or my associates had been the sort of men to desire the ruination of those who were unable to fulfil their contracts.
>
> America was still in the throes of the trust-busting madness. It was fashionable then to decry almost any business that was too large for the understanding of the average mind. Thomas W. Lawson was writing that he was going to put me in jail; bakers were protesting against the high price of flour. They blamed me and the Board of Trade for the advance. But if it had not been for me and that bull campaign which I led there would have been much smaller stocks of wheat in the United States, and, as a consequence, much higher prices.
>
> That deal was a satisfactory climax to my career in the grain trade – I was pretty well evened up in all my trades by the end of June; [William H.] Bartlett was arranging to retire to a 400,000 acre ranch in New Mexico; [Frank. P.] Frazier wanted to go to New York; Brother George and I talked of an extended trip we hoped to take abroad in the fall. The four of us just walked out of Bartlett-Frazier Company, giving the business to the younger fellows.[54]

Patten continued to reap wheat revenues. In July 1909, he had allegedly made a million dollars

when wheat prices advanced from US$1.20 to 1.27.[55] Wheat issues hit the front pages again early October when the price was up '14 cents on a quiet corner'.[56] This time an Albany miller, Theodore H. Waterman, was singled out as the leader of the bulls. In early November 1909, Federal agents from the Justice Department started to investigate if the alleged wheat corner in May was the result of a conspiracy involving several trading centres and, thus, in violation of the interstate commerce laws. Nothing came of the investigation. The same day as the investigation was reported in the Chicago *Tribune*, 3 November, D.W. Griffith began to shoot a new film, *A Corner in Wheat*.

New York City was then still in the grips of bakery conflicts which had generated strikes, lockouts, riots and soaring prices for months. On 1 November, the New York *Times* reported that the East Side Boss Bakers' Association was on the verge of locking out the kosher bakers who were fighting for recognition of their union and had gone on strike on this issue in August.[57] This was a spin-off from conflicts that had erupted on May Day. The striking bakers demanded higher wages, reasonable work conditions, hygienic handling of bread and cheaper bread; employers were accused of trying to lower wages, using the Patten corner as a pretext.[58] The strikers demanded a 10-hour working day, instead of allegedly working between 12 and 18 hours per day. Employers responded with lockouts and by hiring non-union bakers. In the following weeks, riots proliferated when strikers and their allies stormed bakeries where, according to the headlines, 'Police Club Rioters in Bakers Strike'.[59] The master bakers were said to have enlisted prize-fighters to attack the union headquarters inciting the riots. The bakers' wives were particularly active judging by scores of headlines such as 'Mothers' Brigade in Bakers Riot',[60] 'Police Compelled to Exercise Force to Drive Wives of Strikers Away',[61] 'Mob of 100 Forces Way into [Bakery] Shop',[62] and 'Baker's Wife Dies of Shock from Raid'.[63] After the lockout, a loaf was priced at 15 cents, and the New York *Times* voiced concerns regarding 'famine on East Side'.[64] The conflicts were not confined to the East Side, but spilled over to Harlem and several other parts of Manhattan. In an unusual initiative to seek support, the strikers staged a play, *The Bread Strike*, at the Thalia Theatre on Broome Street. It showed 'police clubbing meetings of the strikers and other incidents of the strike'; professional actors apparently joined the strikers on stage.[65] Moving from stage to screen, strikers, in an attempt to lobby their cause, 'put on some films at a moving picture show on Broome street which depicts their conditions, their long hours of employment and alleged slavery. Another scene shows the police busy with their clubs.'[66] Griffith offered his own version of police interventions in a bakery scene in *A Corner of Wheat* without alluding to open-shop issues, strikes and lockouts.

Griffith could hardly have a found a season more rife with the issue of bread, particularly in New York City. But why did he and the Biograph Company elect to address a burning contemporary issue, branching out in several directions, by resorting to an antiquated conceptualization of the wheat question and an allegorical model of representation totally out of touch with the agricultural practices of 1909? This disavowal, including the background for higher bread prices and police violence in New York City, cannot be understood without some real grounding.

Certainly, the analyses of advancing bread prices in 1909 did not line up the poor and the farmers in a symmetrical pattern of victimization vis-à-vis the speculating middleman. To all intents and purposes, farmers were sitting pretty as a virtually invisible factor in the discursive equation. Furthermore, the ramifications of the corner in terms of politics and economics were far from clear-cut; rather, they represent a contested realm of market semiotics argued over by government officials, speculators and scribes of all stripes. In his film, Griffith sides with the caption from *Harper's Weekly* by dislocating an individual (albeit, in his case, anonymous) speculator from a more fine-grained review of what drives prices, and by shying away from day-to-day politics.

This increasingly murky discourse turned Patten into an unlikely fall guy in November, particularly since his corner was successful, and, more importantly, perhaps even reflected a real wheat shortage. Lingering high bread and flour prices, and the growing complexity of the wheat narrative, did not encourage creation of an identifiable Patten effigy to be denounced on screen. Allegorical abstractions offered a much safer game to work into Griffith's preferred stylistic figure: parallel editing. In this context, the abstraction indeed offered a remarkable novelty (which Griffith never returned to, besides perhaps in *Intolerance*), but there was a price to pay. Thus the film, by way of a regressive intertextual play, disenfranchised itself from voicing dissent vis-à-vis a read-

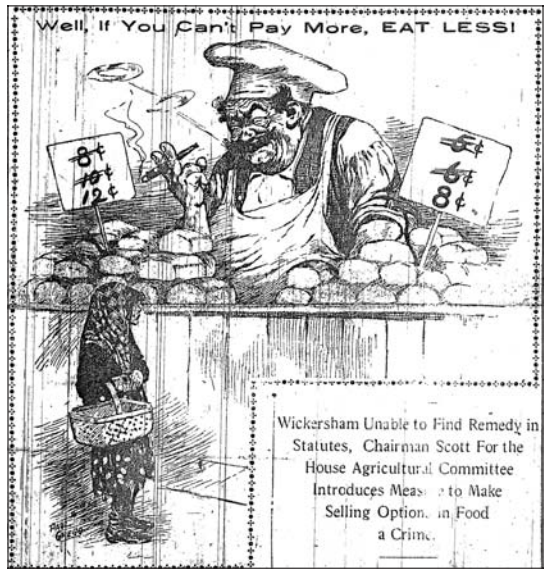


Fig. 10. New York *American*, 16 April 1909, 1.

ily identifiable corner and its complexities by featuring a speculator less guilty in November than in April. Moreover, by substituting a modern farmer for an allegorical peasant, a sinister middleman readily emerges in a wheat mechanism simplified in absurdum which otherwise would have offered a less symmetrical group of pawns to bookend the middleman's speculative game.

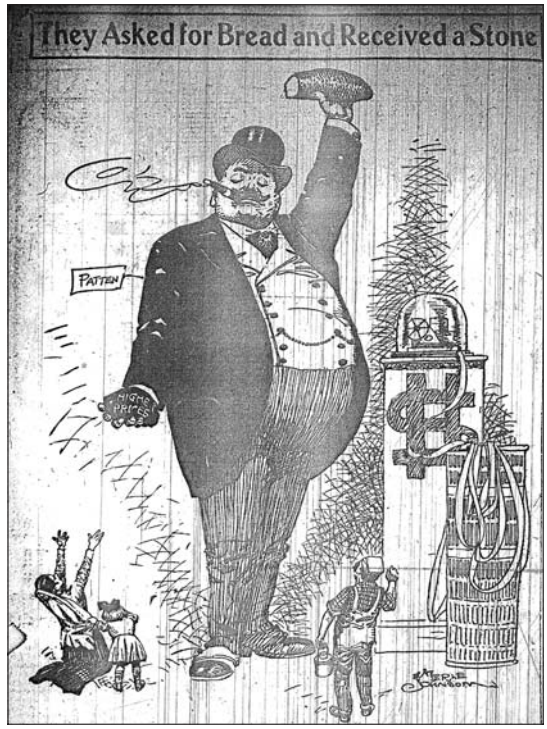


Fig. 11. New York *Evening Journal*, 16 April 1909, 2.

The high point for speculative cornering schemes was, no doubt, 1890s. But this decade far from eclipsed the impact of activities in the pit which, contrary to all discussion in Griffith's film, increased in the spring of 1909 and continued to have an impact in November when high prices still ran rampant, primarily for other reasons. The historical matrix for the film's intertextual web – Millet, the Populist movement and Frank Norris' texts – have blocked access to the contemporaneous dimensions of the film and the obvious inspiration gleaned from headlines about wheat, flour and bread prices in 1909 (Fig. 10). Griffith and his associates read the front pages in April when Board of Trade news moved there from the business section. In addition to the headlines, the Biograph people were aware of the clamour from clerics and reformers, and could not have escaped the pointed analyses in editorials and in legions of cartoons targeting the Wheat King, James A. Patten, in April and May (Fig. 11). In their own backyard in Manhattan, strikes, lockouts and riots afforded an even more sinister inflection of the bread famine. By November, the issues seemed hopelessly tangled. Patten was thus substituted in the film for a featureless speculator embodying the stock qualities of a cynical 'money king' deserving to be taken down by the brute force accumulated in his own elevator.

Irrespective of the currency of the subject, captioned on the front page of *Harper's Weekly* and later recast in a different register by the riots in New York City, the filmmakers preferred to dress the narrative in a fashion that downplayed the topicality of cornering and bread issues by allegorizing them in terms of the past. By openly invoking or hiding behind Millet and, hence, the agrarian discourse which had taken him to heart, and by taking cues from Norris' texts, an intertextual play took precedence over the advertised editorial urgency regarding the bread agonies on the East Side and elsewhere. Millet had been reactualized in the US in May when an American, Edwin Scott, bought Millet's cottage at Gruchy in order to preserve the homestead as a museum, an action which merited a feature article in the New York *Press*.[67] Millet and the Barbizon painters had attracted a marked following of American artists and art investors, particularly in Boston, who had acquired a sizeable collection of work from the French school. As Van Wyck Brooks put it: 'The drawing-rooms of the elect were adorned with French academic and Barbizon artists, along with

the "great cow painters."'[68] During Patten's deal, a Millet canvas, 'Going to Work – Dawn of Day', was purchased from the late John T. Martin's estate by a collector in Philadelphia for US$50,000.[69]

The success of Griffith's approach has been effective insofar as scholars have consistently ignored bread issues crucial to the film's historical audiences. Even if the film obliquely acknowledges ongoing campaigns against trusts, speculators and big business, the narrative aborts the connections to its otherwise most obvious historical contexts, the Patten corner and the bread riots in New York City, impossible to escape for the film's audiences in 1909.

Agricultural modernity and industrial spectatorship

The market for commodities regulated demand and supply when its abstract pricing mechanism trickled down to the consumers in, for instance, the bakeries. As we know from so many films, a set of integrated technologies – here the wheat mechanism – emerged as the very cornerstone for this type of commerce. The transactions at the heart of the mechanism were predicated upon obtaining timely data for speculators to act speedily on pertinent information collected globally. Reliable knowledge made speculation as little speculative as possible. The activities in the pit gravitated around collecting and interpreting data and turned them into actionable strategies. Conflicting readings were at the core of the 1909 corner. The wheat figures presented by the Secretary of Agriculture were based on observation by a small army of local scouts. Patten dismissed the accuracy of their findings. Privileged foreknowledge and betting on a set of circumstantial assumptions drove the trading in the pit. Gambling based on these volatile parameters was re-evaluated and negotiated every trading minute. In the end, nature's unpredictability and other more or less variable factors in the wheat mechanism reinforced forecasts or wrecked calculations. For a crop like wheat, speculation had to take into account a global market and yield conditions in scores of key countries scattered over several continents in, for instance, Italy, Hungary, Russia, Argentina and India.

In his discussion of 'the world mechanism of the wheat', Herbert N. Casson situates agricultural matters within a recognisable framework of modernity. The harvester, he claims, 'has become an indispensable part of the music of our industrial orchestra, harmonious with the click of the telegraph-key, the ring of the telephone-bell, the hum of the sewing-machine, the roar of the Bessemer converter, the gong of the trolley, the whistle of the steamboat, and the puff of the locomotive'.[70] Casson situates agricultural modernity within the fluid network of grain transportation, the elevator system for storing and cleaning the crop, with futures trading at the apex of this intertwined mechanism of agricultural practices, communications and transportation. Casson's framework for the wheat mechanism opens up a chasm between Griffith's representational priorities – allegorical abstractions – and the film's contemporary agricultural realm with its socio-economic implications. Norris' *The Octopus* focuses on big California farms that operated according to such scientific frameworks with farmers hooked-up to the pits in Chicago and Liverpool via tickertape, in touch with the community via telephones, and with telegraphy as an option for long-distance communication. In the novel, one farm office is aptly labelled 'nerve-center', appropriating a longstanding organic metaphor which had offered succinct descriptions of the telegraph lines since the mid-1850s.[71]

Griffith's agrarian predilections sought to undercut the implications of modernity which bolster Norris' epic tale of the wheat. Railway construction in the US linked the farmland to the cities by facilitating the shipping of crops and cattle from the former frontier and the plains and prairies to the major metropolises and trade centres of the country, and telegraph lines followed suit. The panoramic spectacle analysed by Wolfgang Schivelbusch, John R. Stilgoe and others, and the opportunity to scan the fields from inside the train compartments were, at times, further theatricalized by scheduled stops during the harvesting season to admire the wheat spectacle more closely. Trains traversing the landscape afforded a spectacle described by one early observer as 'sublime and terrific', and magical metaphors multiplied.[72] In a playful undoing of the magic of transportation, Caroline Kirkland arrives at a civilisational void that prefigures Byrn's chilling catalogue from the turn of the century: 'Fancy the rail gone, and we have neither the telegraph, nor schoolhouse, nor anything at all but the sunset, – and even that we could not be there to see in spring-time.'[73] As Stilgoe has shown, the panoramic spectacle from inside a run-away engine could be described as 'cinematic' at the turn of the century due to its abnormal speed

on icy downhill tracks. Stilgoe also reminds us of Henry James' elaborate discussion of the inertia of the 'normal' compartment experience, perceptually outlined in dramatic terms in *The American Scene*, published in 1907.[74]

Norris' description of activities in the pit brims with liquid metaphors – whirlpool, Niagara, vortex, torrent, ocean, hurricane – which mirrors the transformation of abstract wheat as it becomes a new sort of liquid. This liquidity bolsters the death scene in *The Octopus*, which Griffith appropriated, where the victims are drowned by streaming wheat. In an insightful analysis, William Cronon discusses the wheat mechanism in liquid terms as a liberation of grain from the enclosing sack. Receipts for a given quantity of crop equivalents severed ownership from specific bushels. Instead, grain came to function as a liquid, 'floating' from the fields to the city along rails, or in the abstract as futures.[75] Since the sack of old represents a more solid and concrete wheat reality consonant with pre-modern farming, it is quite fitting that Griffith's Wheat King stumbles on such a sack only to be drowned by his own liquefied flow of unstoppable wheat.

At the end of the railroad lines, Chicago emerged as a clearinghouse for a series of key transformations in dealing with commodities in the pits, as well as in processing animals into dressed meat in the jungle of the slaughterhouses. The sickening industrial processes, unsanitary gore, and inhuman exploitation targeted by Upton Sinclair's muck-raking novel displayed a form of theatricality affiliated with the horror of *grand guignol*. The narrator mounts virtual walkthroughs and a mode of spectatorship integral to workplaces tailored to efficiency in the manner of Taylor. Sinclair provides a gallery view over the entrance points for the animals, and later on enlists an invisible, unnamed escort who guides us through some of the chambers of unspeakable horrors. Chicago was also a centre for film production and, on a very different spin, for jungles when the Chicago *Tribune* carried a featured article that playfully exposed 'Theodore Roosevelt's' fictionalized adventures in the big-game jungle of Selig's Chicago studio at a time when the former President had embarked on his African hunting expedition.[76] In an economy fuelled by abstract transactions, virtual space linkages and de-localization, the film studio offered the most fully-fledged launch pad for connecting real places and representations and, in the process, collapsed clear-cut distinctions between them. The indiscreet undoing of cinematic illusion and the fictional President Roosevelt's not-so-brave bravery effectively pulled the rug from under the would-be 'documentary' by documenting the fiction by way of visual evidence from the safe haven of the Selig studio. *Hunting Big Game in Africa* was shot more or less when Patten's corner moved to the front pages; *Roosevelt in Africa*, a 'documentary' directed by Cherry Kearton chronicling the ex-President's adventures on location in Africa, was a big hit on trust screens in 1910.

The gallery audiences in the pit were treated to a very different form of spectacle when watching the dealings. If there was blood on display it was as abstract as the trading. In *The Pit*, Norris almost shifted the drama from the floor to the gallery during the fatal day when Jadwin's corner broke. Patten's final victory was less dramatic, to the apparent disappointment of the audience: 'Few were in the pit, and Mr. Patten was not one of them. In the gallery, lured by the history of spectacular finishes to such bull campaigns as those of "Old Hutch", John Cudahy, Joe Leiter, Coster-Martin and others, a dense crowd gathered, many of them women. They had come to see Patten take his pound of flesh along with what blood might ensue, but what they really saw was an arena more than half deserted.'[77] Meanwhile, Patten stayed at his desk chewing gum. The same day, the New York *Press* carried an article about the greatest mill in the world, recently opened on the East River opposite the Brooklyn Navy Yard, a ten-story structure occupying a full block. At a time when purity of food was still a hotly debated issue, the sanitary aspects of the milling process were heralded as an attraction to behold alongside the plant's overall efficiency, a true spectacle of industrial modernity and yet another instalment in the 'wheat mechanism'. Consumers were, hence, invited to become audiences and witness the miraculous fluidity of the processes in the mill, performed more or less without intervention of human hands. Keywords like 'modern', 'scientific' and 'perfection' were marshalled to conquer the momentous threats of uncleanliness, a discourse that proliferated in numerous campaigns waged against flies, germs and the like. By eliminating dirt and dust, the new mill would attain 'the acme of cleanliness in every operation'.[78] Parallel to this hands-off procedure, health authorities in many cities cracked down on bakeries in order to enforce higher sanitary standards, efforts that tied in with intense campaigns against the fly

launched during 1909 and aimed at educating consumers at the very end of the wheat mechanism. Among other demands, striking bakers in New York City fought for a higher level of cleanliness in the bakeries. In a seminal study of 'the fly pest', Marina Dahlquist has analysed hygienic efforts in fascinating detail. Her spectacular material evidences the pivotal role that the film medium played in campaigns against unclean food.[79] Another grand-scale project replete with automated processing was announced by the Ward Bread Company in Pittsburgh, which planned to build five plants in New York City at a cost of US$3,000,000 in order to grind out 'a million loaves daily'. This was another hands-off project that 'practically takes the raw flour and turns it into the oven'.[80]

Partners and painters

Farmers were much better off in 1909 than in the crisis of the 1890s and, therefore, prone to be partners in corners rather than victims of them. This possible allegiance was not necessarily conspiratorial; rather, it was a speculative waiting game in a market read as bullish. The Secretary of Agriculture, in his annual report for 1909 to the President, had little reason to complain on behalf of the nation's farmers: 'Most prosperous of all years is the place of which 1909 is entitled in agriculture. The yield has been bountiful with most crops, and prices have been high. Advantageously situated as he is in most respects, the farmer is less and less generally compelled to dump his crops on the market at time of harvest. He does not need to work for his board and clothes, as he often did in the former time when prices were so low as to be unprofitable.'[81] The *Evening Post* ventured an even more upbeat assessment of the effect of Patten's dealings on farmers:

> James A. Patten is the man of the hour in this market and all over the agricultural regions. He is talked about at the corner groceries. The women talk about him over the telephone to their neighbors, they tell of him at the country blacksmith shops, or wherever there is a gathering of farmers. 'He has given us high prices for wheat, corn, and oats, and we are with him,' they say. The coming generation of farmers' boys will be named James Patten Jones, or James Patten Olsen.[82]

Overall, farmers had recovered from the lean years of the early 1890s due to excellent yields from 1897 and the following years; according to Münsterberg, farmers 'became very prosperous' due to excellent harvests.[83] Likewise, the fictitious farmers in Norris' *The Pit* were described as being on the receiving end of Jadwin's corner attempt:

> all through the Middle West, all through the wheat belts, a great wave of prosperity was rolling because of Jadwin's corner. Mortgages were being paid off, new and improved farming implements were being bought, new areas seeded, new live stock acquired. The men were buying buggies again, the women parlor melodeons, houses and homes; in short the entire farming population of the Middle West was being daily enriched.[84]

A similar conclusion was formulated a propos Patten's corner: 'the farmer as a class is more prosperous than ever before. Farm buildings have improved and farming equipment and facilities have been brought up to high state of efficiency, and generally speaking, he [the farmer] finds himself in an independent situation.'[85] Several commentators expressed faith in the market's self-regulatory capacity for handling corner attempts:

> Every farmer with wheat in his bin, every miller, every factor or dealer controlling a supply of the grain is in the corner with [Patten]. They are all holding their wheat back because the price has gone up and they think it is going higher…Their part of the corner is so big that it usually swamps the little end of the corner in the Chicago wheat pit. For its moral effect we hope that will happen this time.[86]

In praising the benefits of the wheat mechanism, another editorial described the pit as a court of speculation with its own judicial machinery holding speculators instantly accountable if the market was misjudged. The public, however, 'sees only the arch fiend who by some sort of Satanic hugger-mugger, called "cornering the market," takes bread out of the mouths of widows and orphans and becomes the author of famines'.[87]

When grain and bread prices advanced, farmers prospered, Patten and his partners and followers gained, bears and some lambs lost, the poor suffered. In a historical analysis of price fluctuations and lingering high prices, a New York editorial made the distinction Griffith obfuscates, namely that consumers and farmers entertained 'fear and hope, *respec-*

tively, that the situation is of pronounced personal significance'.[88] A scathing editorial in the *Evening Sun* made a similar distinction by allying farmers with Patten:

> So it seems that Plunger Patten is doing us for our own good with his bull speculation in wheat. If not us, then some of us. Out West he is being called in agricultural circles 'the farmers' friend,' and they do seem to look on him in that light, for they have not been rushing to market any of the wheat which would make the position of himself and his fellow philanthropists uncomfortable or even unpleasant.[89]

William Jennings Bryan did not comment upon Patten's corner; the focus in his journal, *The Commoner*, was riveted on the tariff question. The journal did, however, republish a speech Bryan delivered during his time in the House of Representatives. In June 1894, Bryan was defending an 'Anti-Option Bill', that is one of the numerous unsuccessful attempts at legislation against futures trading. The reprint sported an updated, dramatic headline, 'Crime in the Gambling in Food Products', no doubt alluding to recent wheat issues.[90]

On the brink of the 1910s, numerous farmers owned elevators, and combinations of farmers controlled elevator complexes in key storage nexuses like Minneapolis, the nation's leading flour city. Such cooperative ventures hark back to the ideology behind the repealed Granger Laws.[91] Agricultural practices were, if not already, at least on the verge of being grounded in science. Refined seeds and new, high-grade varieties improved the quality of the crop yields, as too crop rotation within a highly mechanised culture of farming. Victimization in Norris' *The Octopus* is solely due to the exploitation, unfairness and brutality of the railroad magnates and their underlings in a monopoly market. The expansion of the railway redefined the nation's agricultural landscape making it possible to farm in places previously outside the local market, beyond reasonable means of transportation. Unfair shipping rates could, however, undo and upset the agricultural market opened up by the railways. In combination with the elevator system, which made it possible to deposit grain for future reclaiming, and the grading system that abstracted actual wheat and other crops and made it possible to deal in crop equivalents, farmers could hedge by selling contracts well ahead of harvesting. In combination, this provided the backbone for the trading in both futures and cash commodities, and overall for agricultural modernity. A similar system of classificatory abstraction, dependent on transportation, had redefined the market for meat, traded by hoofs, processed in the stockyard and shipped out at the other end as dressed meat in wagons cooled by ice.

If farmers thrived on higher grain prices, bakery workers and poor people with no margins for meeting escalating prices for their daily bread had little to celebrate in the face of advancing prices. Outcries were thus not only voiced in the US: the repercussions of reports from the wheat pits in Liverpool and elsewhere sent shock waves to consumers in the U.K. and on the European continent. The asymmetrical constellation of victims in 1909 was, thus, radically different from the analysis and representational priorities put forward in Griffith's film. This adumbration has made it difficult for generations of scholars to unveil the historically cloaked tailoring of the story. If the inspiration from Millet represents pre-modern methods of wheat farming, it effectively feeds the parallel editing of the film with one set of recognisable victims suffering concretely from the abstract dealing in futures by the speculators in the middle. In the wake of Patten's deal, the enthusiasm for the politics of cornering inspired farmers in Kansas to hoard wheat hoping for a replay.[92]

The dramaturgical priorities of the story and its desire to set in motion a fantasy resolution unleashed a liquefied deluge scripted by the gospel of modernity. The edge of the bin is one of many crossing points for the two spatial regimes described by Stilgoe. Such intersections regulate the wheat mechanism by linking the fields via the metropolitan corridor to the pit, elevators, mills, bakeries and all the way to the bread sliced in some kitchen. When appropriating the death scene from Norris, it was probably wise not to bury a replica of Patten under his own wheat. Hence, none of his signature traits: no chewing of gum, no bushy moustache, and the film's ubiquitous cigar was too commonplace a reference for a capitalist to single out Patten as the model for the Wheat King. Patten's biographical legend further militated against mimetic casting. The former mayor of Evanston was not the type of man to host celebratory parties, and was reported to be unwilling even to dress up.[93] Thus, his biography, in most respects, set Patten apart from the stock conception of a business tycoon. Hearst's New York *Evening Journal* offers a slightly different take on the dress code,

which the cover from *Harper's Weekly* also evidences, and reports that Patten never drank: 'He doesn't know what the fun of the average man means. He sleeps in his tent outside of his marble mansion, dresses stylishly (even nifty), and keeps hammering at the other gamblers in the Chicago wheat pit.'[94] One of the many articles published in April and May outlining Patten's career ventured a 'chemical analysis' of his personality: 'Determination, four parts, intelligence, four parts, decision, two parts, mercy, a trace'.[95] A more eccentric aspect of the Patten story was his habit of sleeping in a tent on the lawn outside his US$250,000 marble mansion.[96] To further complicate matters, Patten was an active Presbyterian who carried the contribution basket for offerings during Sunday services, a pillar of society, and a benefactor to both the Art Institute and his alma mater, Northwestern University – the Patten Gymnasium still stands on campus as evidence of his generosity. The gift to the Methodist institution did not, however, stop the leadership of the Methodist

Fig. 12 (top right). Jean-François Millet, *The Angelus*, oil on canvas, 1854-59, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

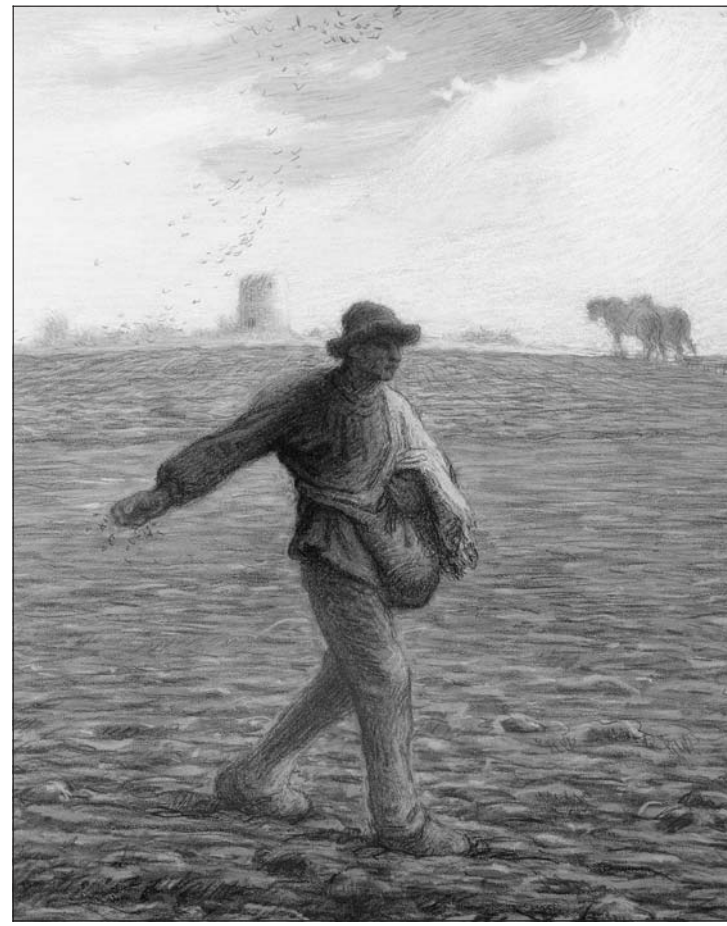
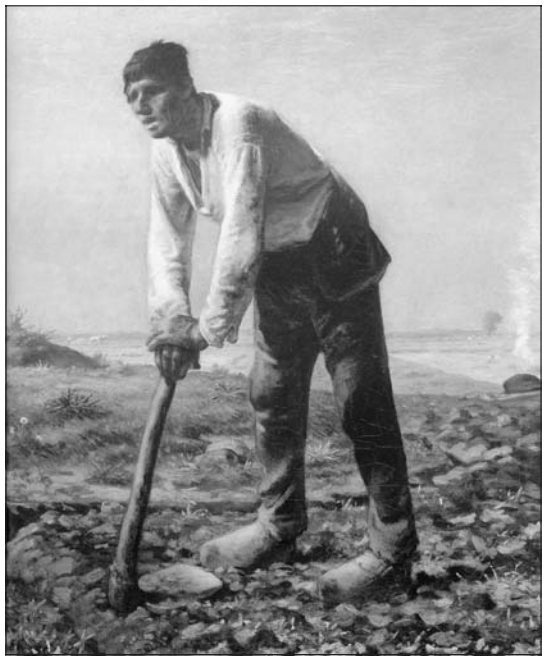


Fig. 13 (left). Jean-François Millet, *The Man with a Hoe*, oil on canvas, detail, 1863, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Fig. 14 (right). Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, black conté crayon and pastel on paper, detail, 1865-66, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown.



Church in Cincinnati from taking a stand against speculation in food stuff.[97] Charity and contributions did not seriously drain James A. Patten's financial might. When he died in his home in 1928, his estate eventually mounted to almost 20 million dollars, the largest in the history of the Illinois Inheritance Law.[98]

Millet and Norris portrayed hard-nosed protagonists, exploited French peasants and western farmers harassed by the railroad companies. Griffith avoids tapping into the antebellum tradition of tilling, which depicted forceful yeomen who embodied Republican virtues. Instead, we encounter a bleak agriscape and a peasant on the verge of turning into a figure in a tableau as entropic as the scene from the bakery. Millet's canonical paintings date from the late 1840s to the early 1860s. Boston art collectors had acquired a substantial number of Millet paintings and sketches from the 1860s onwards, and other emerging American collectors had joined the bandwagon and bought both Millet paintings and work by less political Barbizon painters. French museums subsequently started to buy works by Millet, but an auction bid for a famous painting like *The Angelus* (Fig. 12) was not ratified by the Chamber of Deputies and detoured to the US before finding a home at the Louvre.[99]

Millet and the Barbizon painters were prominently featured at the Chicago Exposition of 1893. Interestingly, 'California's railroad king William Crocker lent his famous Millet painting *The Man with a Hoe*' to be displayed in the section, 'Foreign Masterpieces Owned by Americans' (Fig. 13).[100] Crocker was the model for the railroad king in Norris' *The Octopus*, only visible during the lavish dinner feast. The painting inspired Edwin Markham's famous socialist poem which is intertextually worked into Norris' novel. The painting presents a quintessential Millet landscape gloriously beautiful, but the barren and unforgiving earth is brutally hard for the man with the hoe at work. The face of the anonymous peasant catching his breath as he leans on the handle of the hoe is more visible than in most of Millet's social pictures. He is as forceful in this moment as he pauses in his work as the dynamic figure in *The Sower*, which was the advertised model for Griffith's farmer (Fig. 14). For Millet, forcefulness was connected to pain and fatigue in an endless struggle. French critics, in the main, abhorred Millet's peasants. Gautier describes them as rugged, bristly, savage and uncouth, and other critics associated the peasants with asylum inmates. Millet wanted to convey nobility and dignity in the face of the hardship imposed on the peasants, but the clash between his heroic stance and the 'low subject' exacerbated hostile reactions from academically inclined critics. Millet put his mastery of the academic tradition, predicated on the rendering of mythological and biblical figures or historical characters, in the service of realist subject matter, which is evidenced by a catalogue description of *The Sower*:

> The active yet heroic image shows a peasant striding across a furrowed hillside at twilight: he presents a figure as mysterious as it is powerful. Masterfully drawn, the painting's carefully counterbalanced twists of torso and thighs recall great works of Western Art, from the Apollo of Belvedere to Michelangelo's sculpture and Florentine painting. Indeed, with the sower's muscularity and purposeful forward stride, so clearly the attributes of the idealized hero, Millet presented his unindividuated peasant as an extended emblem of heroism in Western culture.[101]

John Berger partly challenges such readings in his discussion of Millet's peasants and describes *The Sower* (Fig. 15) as 'reminiscent of the figure of death'. Thus interpreted and transplanted to Griffith's film, the sower plants the seed foreshadowing the Wheat King's demise. Berger argues that Millet's

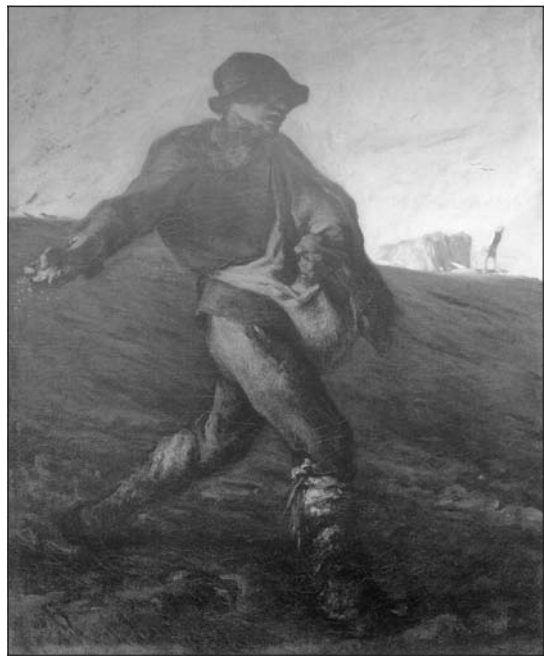


Fig. 15. Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, oil on canvas, 1850, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

paintings fail when the figures are removed from the shadowy corner to take centre stage in the foreground and presented as 'central and monumental'. This monumentality 'refuses the painting', and the 'cut-out figures' thus 'look rigid and theatrical'. Berger explains the 'failure' as a conflict between the limitation of the expressive repertoire of oil painting at the time, which was unable to contain and fully articulate Millet's subject matter:

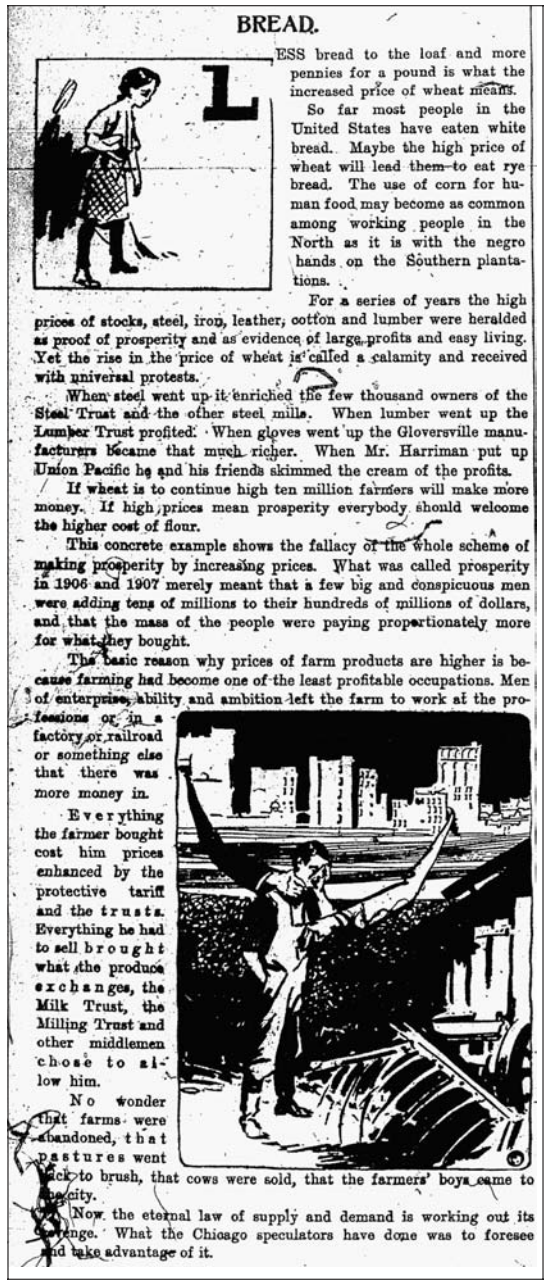
> One can explain this ideologically. The peasant's interest in the *land* expressed through his action, is incommensurate with scenic landscapes. Most … landscape painting was addressed to a visitor from the city, later called tourist; the landscape is *his* view, the splendour of it is *his* reward … There was no [iconographic] formula for representing the close, harsh, patient physicality of a peasant's labour *on*, instead of *in front of* the land. And to invent one would mean destroying the traditional language of depicting scenic landscape.[102]

In contrast, Millet's drawings, pastels and etchings are, for Berger, on the verge of achieving a compatible balance between the peasant figures and their surroundings.

Sarah Burns provides a broader framework for Berger's misgivings vis-à-vis Millet's heroic stance in a comparative discussion of the Barbizon painters and the American rural school, since several in the latter group were living in France, but more or less exclusively working for the American market. One of the transplanted painters she focuses on, Daniel Ridgway Knight, won a medal at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 for his *Hailing the Ferry* (1888). His idyllic scene, depicted in 'heroic scale', features two archaic peasant girls in a treatment which Burns relates to Corot's 'silvery palette' as well as to 'the tonalities of the photograph'. The girls incarnate 'the perfection of French artistic peasanthood – full-figured, healthy, clear-skinned, and picturesquely uniformed in tight bodices, much-mended skirts, and ungainly clogs' as they are stand on a river bank gesturing to a ferryman 'across the shining river'. For Burns, this is a 'primitive idyll created with empty virtuosity by a sophisticated cosmopolitan', and it is produced for a market of wealthy American collectors. To compete with French masters – Millet, Breton and others – the Americans had to sacrifice the domestic farm scene, lacking picturesque qualities in an era of progress, and emulate the French style and its archaic subject matter. In Burns' formulation, 'Innocence and distance from the mad pace of progress had once been admired in the life of the ideal American farm; now, the basic complaint was that the American farmer was no longer picturesque. Mass manufacturing, transportation, marketing and communication had made him mentally and physically indistinguishable from any other ordinary, dull American.' For Burns, 'the American farmer was not "peasant" enough for art'. The 'peasant craze' was fuelled by nostalgia for the simple and alleged rural virtues at a 'point where cosmopolitan fashion and the art market coalesced'.[103]

Millet's political stance concerning the exploitation of peasants was exacerbated by his personal experience as a farm boy in Normandy. A series of his paintings came to embody French genre painting and were the most sought after objects for the first generation of American art collectors. Through the mass market, reproductions of his most famous works achieved new meanings in the US when industrialisation turned some farmers to agribusiness entrepreneurs, and others to peasants or industrial workers. The wide dissemination of Millet's work resonated with populist sentiments which provided the premise for Griffith's nostalgic but far from idyllic appropriation. Griffith's farmer literally leaves the frame for a few seconds when walking along the furrows as he sows before he re-emerges in front of the camera. The frame is radicalised the second time around, late in the film: the older farmer is gone, so is the farmhand, and the young peasant has lost all vitality. One can only imagine a deserted field next season.

As Gunning notes, the film's shots from the field are more attuned to Millet's later pastels on the sower motif from the 1860s than the painting from the 1850s. The figures in the pastels are still forceful, but less so than in the painting. If the peasant positioned in front of the field came across as a victim of exploitation, which Millet took for granted, the pictorial stance, 'the heroism', magnifies the pain to sublime dimensions. Edmund Burke's discussion of the sublime provides useful clues as to the paradoxical attractiveness that Millet's art possessed for urban collectors. According to Burke, the sublime was the pleasure excited by an 'idea of pain and danger without being in such circumstances'.[104] By divesting pain of danger, and thus containing the political implications in Millet's art, Millet's images took on



BREAD.

LESS bread to the loaf and more pennies for a pound is what the increased price of wheat means.

So far most people in the United States have eaten white bread. Maybe the high price of wheat will lead them to eat rye bread. The use of corn for human food may become as common among working people in the North as it is with the negro hands on the Southern plantations.

For a series of years the high prices of stocks, steel, iron, leather, cotton and lumber were heralded as proof of prosperity and as evidence of large profits and easy living. Yet the rise in the price of wheat is called a calamity and received with universal protests.

When steel went up it enriched the few thousand owners of the Steel Trust and the other steel mills. When lumber went up the Lumber Trust profited. When gloves went up the Gloversville manufacturers became that much richer. When Mr. Harriman put up Union Pacific he and his friends skimmed the cream of the profits.

If wheat is to continue high ten million farmers will make more money. If high prices mean prosperity everybody should welcome the higher cost of flour.

This concrete example shows the fallacy of the whole scheme of making prosperity by increasing prices. What was called prosperity in 1906 and 1907 merely meant that a few big and conspicuous men were adding tens of millions to their hundreds of millions of dollars, and that the mass of the people were paying proportionately more for what they bought.

The basic reason why prices of farm products are higher is because farming had become one of the least profitable occupations. Men of enterprise, ability and ambition left the farm to work at the professions or in a factory or railroad or something else that there was more money in.

Everything the farmer bought cost him prices enhanced by the protective tariff and the trusts. Everything he had to sell brought what the produce exchanges, the Milk Trust, the Milling Trust and other middlemen chose to allow him.

No wonder that farms were abandoned, that pastures went back to brush, that cows were sold, that the farmers' boys came to the city.

Now the eternal law of supply and demand is working out its revenge. What the Chicago speculators have done was to foresee and take advantage of it.

Fig. 16. New York *Evening World*, 24 April 1909, 8.

safe meanings outside the realm of the sublime for American art collectors. The sublime was progressively transferred to the experience of technologies and machines. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the machine halls of expositions, from the Crystal Palace in London to Chicago in 1893, generated an avalanche of accounts steeped in the vernacular of the 'aesthetics of the technological sublime', as shown by John F. Kasson's account.[105] Visits to factories and industries, like the new flour mill in New York City, tapped into this theatricalisation inspiring an awe bordering on the sublime.

Values

Why is it important, then, to dwell on the historical contexts deferred by *A Corner in Wheat*? The conspicuous absence in the film of contemporary farm realities and agribusiness – the askew analysis of the bread riots in New York City and their links with contested unionism, the weakening of Millet's forcefulness, the vanquished backdrop for the recent corner – all bear directly on the film's most admired quality: the abstract mode of parallel editing. Is the film's abstraction an achievement or a shortcoming in the face of a recent corner, ongoing conflicts, the social unrest related to bread prices, and heated political debates in newspapers and governments? Is it not the very paucity of engagment with a burning issue, and the unwillingness to address the dire aspects of everyday life in 1909, that pushes Griffith into abstractions in search of allegory and melodramatic victimization? His abstract mode of representation seems to be an involuntary by-product of his oblique take on the wheat mechanism and his detachment from politics.

Griffith offers no economic analysis but, rather, a sentimental, a-historical moral geography with little use value and explanatory force vis-à-vis the vicissitudes of 1909. From the vantage point of New York City, the film, in a sense, indirectly sides with the Boss Bakers and their fellow employers by blaming bread conflicts and soaring prices on a speculating villain. For locked-out, unionised bakery workers and their families, and those facing soaring bread prices, the analysis in the film offered no new insights.

Pulitzer's *Evening World* was one of Patten's fiercest detractors, and its analyses interestingly overlap with some aspects of Griffith's film. A cartoon from 14 April 1909 depicts Patten on his knees on a sagging loaf of bread in the pit where he collects a windfall of profit notes from what looks like a coalition of consumers and peasants. The headlines award 'the Plunger' fourteen millions instead of the four estimated by most commentators, and he is unflatteringly described as having 'eyes like a pig and an under jaw like that of a bulldog'.[106] A couple of subsequent editorials returned to bread and wheat issues. Farmers make more money when wheat prices advance, but according to the *Evening World*,

farming had developed into 'one of the least profitable occupations'. Enterprising men had, therefore, left the farms for the factories or railways. In addition, the tariff and the trusts overtax everything the farmer buys: 'Everything he had to sell brought what the produce exchanges, the Milk Trust, the Milling Trust, and other middleman chose to allow him.' In an accompanying cartoon, two hands attached to the city strangle him and take money out of his pocket (Fig. 16).[107]

A week later, the *Evening World* hurled another volley at the middlemen, now portraying consumers and farmers as partners in victimization. The consumers place money in the middleman's gigantic hand both coming and going, and the farmer's wheat wagons pass over the middleman's fat belly and vest pockets. This line of reasoning and its accompanying cartoon foreshadow Griffith's analysis.[108] Even more interestingly, the coverage in the *Evening World* offers a rare reference to Norris, or rather an interviewed baker provides the link:

> Once there was a man named Frank Norris who wrote a book called 'The Pit.' He is dead, they say. His novel is dead, too, no one ever speaks of it. But when that novel was new they said that Norris was either crazy or an Anarchist or both, because he said that the gamblers' fun in the Chicago market was fed by the flesh and blood of the poor of the world. The newspaper reports to-day, cold and matter-of-fact, are a worse picture than Mr. Norris's wildest dream.[109]

A week later the bakery strike took over the columns in the wake of strikes, lockouts and riots.

A propos anachronistic farm images and their longstanding popularity, Patricia Hills reminds us that 'the pictures are about values, not about farming'. The pictures 'made us forget the increasing conflicts between labor and the industrialists'.[110] From inside the world of melodrama, the farm comes across as 'all ours' home', writes Peter Brooks concerning a genre predicated on dualistic worldviews and polarized values. Yi-Fu Tuan's felicitous term 'topophilia', which is defined as the 'human being's affective ties with the material environment', broadens the scope for earthy cultural reverberations readily available for processes of dissemination by value-driven discourses.[111] Frederick Jackson Turner's influential, albeit controversial, discussion of the closing of the frontier read at a symposium at the Columbian Exposition in 1893 was founded on an agrarian conceptualization of progress and democracy. In summing up the criticism of Turner's text in 1950, Henry Nash Smith described this historiographical intervention as a discourse founded on values: 'The [agrarian] philosophy and the myth affirmed an admirable set of values, but they ceased very early to be useful in interpreting American society as a whole because they offered no intellectual apparatus for taking account of the industrial revolution.'[112] Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* subscribes to a similar set of values with no tools for taking account of agricultural modernity.

Griffith's interweaving of parallel tracks without markers for connecting them in time and space was a cinematic feat in 1909, and, if one is so inclined, the editing can be read as a launch pad for the later abstracting practice of montage. *A Corner in Wheat* merits scant praise for analytical insights into contemporary agricultural economics and trust practices, precisely because Griffith's film was about values, not farming. The film is, no doubt, remarkable, not least for its manner of deferring its historical context and getting away with it.

A year after the corner when the smoke had cleared, the New York *Press* took stock of the farmers' situation in contemporary American society, painting a rosy trajectory that confers on the farmer a status beyond monetary concerns and financial worries. The account once and for all removes the farmer from peasantry by affording him an aristocratic position. If the farmer was once the natural aristocrat (from the perspective of Republican ideals of old), now agribusiness entrepreneurship within a framework of modernity merited such a title. After the unprecedented agricultural profits of the last few years, farmers collectively seemed to enjoy even more might and financial clout than the Money Kings:

> The latest and most important addition to the peerage of the United States is His Lordship the American Farmer. Twenty years ago, he was a debt-ridden peasant. To-day he is so rich that he is buying most of the automobiles that are sold in the country. Financially as well as economically he is the king of America. He has cancelled the mortgages on his land, and if he chose he could pay off the mortgage on the United States – the national debt – in a year or so and not feel much pinched pecuniarily. The panic of 1907 and the subsequent indus-

trial depression had no effect on him. The price at which he sold his products then and since have been higher than he ever has known before. So far as he in concerned there are no such things as panics. The farmer has come into his own at last.[113]

Notes

1. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995 [1976]), 29.
2. Frank Norris, 'An Opening for Novelists: Great Opportunities for Fiction Writers in San Francisco', in Donald Pizer (ed.), *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964 [1897]), 28.
3. In a catalogue of monikers, Chicago is unflatteringly listed as Hogopolis, Pigopolis as well as Cornopolis. J.N. Kane and G.L. Alexander, *Nicknames of Cities and States of the United States* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1965), 65.
4. I.D. Guyer, *History of Chicago: Its Commercial and Manufacturing Interests and Industry* (1862), 153. Quoted in William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 72.
5. 'The Young Boy', reprinted in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Selection with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes*, (ed.) Frederick I. Carpenter (New York: American Book Company, 1934 [1844]), 152–53.
6. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), 495. Newspapers and magazines were replete with cartoons and articles on the carnage wrought by rail traffic, not least in the cities. See Ben Singer's essay, 'Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism', in Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (eds.), *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 72–99, for a discussion of the mental implications of the perils of modernity.
7. D.A. Wasson, 'The Modern Type of Oppression', *North American Review* 119 (July-December 1874), 262.
8. Ibid., 284.
9. Herbert N. Casson, *The Romance of the Reaper* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1908), 164.
10. James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 203. Paul Starr reinforces this point in his *The Creation of Media: Political Origins of Modern Communication* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 153. Telegraphic traffic, Starr reminds us, was, however, just one more step in reducing the time span for news flow, see Chapter 5, 153–189.
11. Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day: A Study in American Literature and Culture* (Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1983 [1926]), 118.
12. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991). For an excellent account of populism, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
13. Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 246–247.
14. Van Wyck Brooks outlines his discussion of what he perceives as an unfortunate chasm between lowbrow and highbrow sensibilities in American culture and politics from Bryan's 'cynical contempt of theory in relation to practical matters' in the free-silver question and reads it as 'a principal element in the popularity of a popular hero'. Economic theory is, however, 'at least equally cynical. It revolves round and round in its tree-top dream of the economic man; and no matter how much the wind blows, political economy never comes down'. *America's Coming-of-Age* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1915), 1–2.
15. A. Craig Baird, *American Public Address* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), 195–196.
16. Koenig, *Bryan*, 179.
17. Casson, *The Romance of the Reaper*, 165. For an excellent analysis of the implication of the repeal of the silver purchase clause in the Sherman Silver Act during the financial panic of 1893, which paved the way for full-blown capitalism and big business and was confirmed by Bryan's defeat in the free-silver election in 1896, see Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, 334–345.
18. Sarah Burns, *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).
19. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 25 December 1909, 15.
20. George C. Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness: Readings in History and Criticism of the Silent Film* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973); Russell Merritt, 'The Impact of D.W. Griffith's Motion Pictures from 1908–1915 on Contemorary American Culture', doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1970; Vlada Petrić, *D.W. Griffith's 'A Corner in Wheat': A Critical*

Analysis (Cambridge, MA: University Film Study Center, 1976); Eileen Bowser, 'The Reconstruction of "A Corner in Wheat"', *Cinema Journal* 15, 2 (Spring 1976): 42–52 and 'Addendum to the Reconstruction of "A Corner in Wheat"', *Cinema Journal* 19, 1 (Fall 1979): 101–102; Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 240–252; Scott Simmon, *The Films of D.W. Griffith* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Helmut Färber, '*A Corner in Wheat* by D.W. Griffith, 1909: A Critique', *Griffithiana* 59 (May 1997): 70–87.

21. Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, 252.
22. Paolo Cherchi Usai (ed.), *The Griffith Project*, III, *Films Produced July-December 1909* (London: British Film Institute,1999), 132.
23. Joseph R. McElrath Jr. and Douglas K. Burgess, 'Joseph Leiter: Frank Norris's Model for Curtis Jadwin in *The Pit*', *Frank Norris Studies* 2 (2002): 20–24. The novel was dramatized in 1904 by William Brady and opened in New York City at the Lyric in February; in 1914 the dramatization provided the basis for Maurice Tourneur's lost film version.
24. Eileen Bowser (ed.), *The Biograph Bulletins 1908–1912* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1973).
25. *Moving Picture World*, 25 December 1909, 921.
26. Herbert N. Casson, 'The World's Mechanism of the Wheat', *Harper's Weekly* (31 July 1909): 12–13. Casson published a series of popular accounts, 'romances', of technological progress; apart from the previously-quoted book on the reaper, also a volume on steel, Herbert N. Casson, *The Romance of Steel: The Story of a Thousand Millionaires* (New York: Barnes, 1907).
27. John R. Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 167.
28. This short story was first mentioned in Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness*, 66–68.
29. Quoted in John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America 1776–1900* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976), 185 from Edward W. Byrn, *The Progress of Invention in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, Munn & Co., 1900), 5–6.
30. Hugo Münsterberg, *The Americans* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co, 1904), 265. A view from a bonanza field in Dakota from 1880, aligned with railroad vision ('The railroad train rolls through an ocean of grain.') and penned as a conquering of the fields by 'chariots of peace, doing the work of human hands for the sustenance of men', provides an even more upbeat assessment of the impact of agricultural mechanization. 'Dakota Wheat Fields', *Harpers's New Monthly Magazine*, LX (March 1880): 529–536; quotations from 534. An in-depth and well-documented account of the agricultural realm from the end of Civil War to the turn of the century is offered by Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860–1897,* V: *The Economic History of the United States* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1945).
31. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, 182.
32. *Daily People*, 12 April 1909, 1.
33. *Wall Street Journal*, 12 August 1904, 5.
34. *Evening Post*, 13 May 1909, 14.
35. Chicago *Tribune*, April 18, 1909, V: 1. A cartoon shows a field during harvest and two gigantic hands grabbing the wheat. A cuff link with a 'P' for Patten is visible in the upper right corner of the frame.
36. Thomas W. Lawson, 'Frenzied Finances', *Everybody's Magazine*, published from July 1904 through most of 1905.
37. Chicago *Tribune*, 16 April 1909, 2.
38. Los Angeles *Times*, 16 April 1909, 1.
39. Los Angeles *Times*, 19 April 1909, 4.
40. New York *Press*, 22 April 1909, 4. Several other editorials ventured gleeful accounts when prices temporarily fell, for instance, New York *Tribune*, 23 April 1909, 6: 'Perhaps Mr. Patten may even have cause to be glad that "he did not have a corner in wheat," that his name will not be linked with those of Hutchinson and Leiter to point a moral and adorn a tale.'
41. New York *Press*, 19 April 1909, 4.
42. Chicago *Tribune*, 29 May 1909, 14.
43. Ibid., 30 May 1909, I: 5.
44. David Greising and Laurie Morse, *Brokers, Bagmen, and Moles: Fraud and Corruption in the Chicago Futures Markets* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1991), 53. See Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier* for a discussion of the stabilizing effect of futures trading on agricultural products, 181–182.
45. William G. Ferris, *The Grain Traders: The Story of the Chicago Board of Trade* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1988), 140–144.
46. *The Nation*, 13 May 1909, 497.
47. For instance, two pieces in the New York *Evening Post*, 17 April 1909, Financial Section, 1.
48. Wheat Prices – Highs by month in cents: 1907 November: 97; December: 101; 1908 January: 102; February: 100; March: 101; April: 100; May: 111; June 100; July: 92; August: 96; September: 102; October: 102; November: 106; December: 107; 1909 January: 108; February: 124; March: 126; April: 145;

May: 154; June: 160; July: 124; August: 106; September: 115; October: 121; November: 121; December: 128; 1910 January: 127; February: 127; March: 125; April: 121; May: 118; June: 104; July: 112. Source: James E. Boyle, *Chicago Wheat Prices for Eighty-One Years: Daily, Monthly and Yearly Fluctuations and Their Causes* (Ithaca, 1922), 71.

49. Los Angeles *Times*, 16 April 1909, 1.
50. Cedric B. Cowing, *Populists, Plungers, and Progressives: A Social History of Stock and Commodity Speculation, 1890–1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 44.
51. Ibid.
52. Ferris, *The Grain Traders*, 135.
53. *Wall Street Journal*, 12 February 1913, 3.
54. 'In the Wheat Pit', installment four, *Saturday Evening Post*, 5 November 1927, 28.
55. New York *Times*, 15 July 1909, 5.
56. Ibid., 1 October 1909, 1.
57. Ibid., 1 November 1909, 22.
58. Ibid., 3 May 1909, 2.
59. Ibid., 6 May 1909, 18.
60. New York *Herald*, 6 May 1909, 7.
61. *Evening World*, 6 May 1909, 15.
62. New York *Globe*, 14 May 1909, 7.
63. New York *Tribune*, 3 May 1909, 4.
64. New York *Times*, 20 May 1909, 9.
65. Ibid. The proceeds for a second show amounted to US$840 according to New York *Herald*, 23 May 1909, 5.
66. *The World*, 20 May 1909, 18.
67. New York *Press*, 6 June 1909, III: 6.
68. Wan Wyck Brooks, *John Sloan: A Painter's Life* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1955), 1.
69. New York *Tribune*, 17 April 1909, 1. The painting is described in the following manner: 'The principal figures in the composition are a young man and woman, peasants, and the poorer of the kind, who are on their way to their daily toil. The scene shows a low lying meadow. The canvas is 211/2 inches high and 18 inches wide.' Three weeks later, the New York *American* reported that Millet's *The Goose Girl* had fetched US$26,250 at an auction in London. 'Several of the bidders seemed determined to secure the masterpiece at any price.' (14 May 1909, 2).
70. Casson, in *Harper's Weekly* (31 July 1909): 12.
71. For instance, in Reverend Thompson's travel description: 'It seemed like the nervous system of a nation, conveying, quick as thought, the least sensation from extremity to head, the least volition from head to extremity. […] by these wire stretched across the Mississippi I could hear the sharp, quick beating of the great heart of New York.' Max Maria von Weber further extolled the correlation between lines: 'as the muscle of a human body without the nerve flashing through it would be a mere lifeless hunk of flesh, so would the flying muscles that Watt's and Stephenson's inventions have lent to humanity be only half as capable of wining their way, if they were not animated by the guiding thought imperiously flashing through the nerves of the telegraph wires.' Quoted in Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (New York: Urizen Books,1979), 38. See also Anne M. Lyden's recent discussion of railroad perception in *Railroad Vision: Photography, Travel, and Perception* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003). Carey, *Communication as Culture* offers a valuable account of organic metaphors for telegraphy.
72. 'The American Woodburning Locomotive', *Scientific American* 6 (3 April 1851): 227.
73. Caroline Kirkland, 'Illinois in Spring-Time: With a Look at Chicago', *Atlantic Monthly* 2 (1858): 485.
74. Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor*, 249.
75. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 145.
76. Chicago *Tribune*, 23 May 1909, VII: 4–5. *Moving Picture World* also published an account which was reprinted in *Daily People*, 7 May 1909, 2, 4.
77. New York *Press*, 30 May 1909, I: 3.
78. Ibid., 30 May 1909, II: 8.
79. Marina Dahlquist, 'Everyday Life as Spectacle: The Reception of Scientific and Education Films 1910–1911', paper delivered at the Commonwealth Fund Conference on 'American Cinema and Everyday Life', London, June 2003.
80. New York *Tribune*, 7 April 1909, 1.
81. *Yearbook of the US Department of Agriculture* (1909), 9.
82. New York *Evening Post*, 10 April 1909, Financial Section, 1.
83. Münsterberg, *The Americans*, 269.
84. Frank Norris, *The Pit* (Cambridge, MA: Robert Bentley Inc. 1971 [1903]), 334.
85. *The Journal of Commerce and Commercial Bulletin*, 24 May 1909, 9.
86. New York *Tribune*, 17 April 1909, 6.
87. New York *Globe*, 21 April 1909, 8.
88. *The Globe and Commercial Advertiser*, 10 April 1909, 10. Emphasis added.
89. *Evening Sun*, 19 April 1909, 8.
90. *The Commoner*, 30 April 1909, 3–5.
91. In 1908, the Farmers' Business Congress owned over

800 elevators for storage of grain according to Casson, *The Romance of the Reaper*, 119.

92. 'Farmers Are Speculating', Los Angeles *Times*, 28 November 1909, I: 4.

93. New York *Herald*, 18 April 1909, III: 3.

94. New York *Evening Journal*, 17 April 1909, 2.

95. *Globe and Commercial Advertiser*, 19 April 1909, 10. The article, 'Wheat King Patten, Winner of Millions, Tells Why He Forced up Price of Staple Necessity', Los Angeles *Record*, 15 April 1909, 1, 3, is also replete with background biographical information.

96. An article in New York *American* shows a photograph of Patten asleep in the tent. 10 May 1909, 8.

97. 'The Methodist Episcopal Church in regard to gambling, from gambling at bridge whist to speculations on the Board of Trade: that we especially condemn the action which cornered wheat in Chicago and view with alarm the far-reaching effect of such action in raising the price of breadstuff.' New York *Tribune*, 20 April 1909, 2.

98. *Wall Street Journal*, 1 January 1930, 25.

99. See, for example, the account in New York *Times*, 1 November 1890.

100. Alexandra R. Murphy, *Jean-François Millet* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), xvi. In the aftermath of the earthquake in San Francisco in 1906, the Los Angeles *Times*, 30 April 1906: 30 April 1906, 1: 2 reported that Millet's painting had been destroyed. This rumour proved to be unfounded. The painting is now at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

101. Alexandra R. Murphy et al, *Jean-François Millet: Drawn into the Light* (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1999), 13–14.

102. John Berger, 'Millet and the Peasant', *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 69–79, emphases in original.

103. Burns, *Pastoral Inventions*, 220–226 passim.

104. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry in to the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, (ed.) James T Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968 [1757]), 51.

105. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine*, particularly the chapter, 'The Aesthetics of Machinery', 139–180.

106. *Evening World*, 14 April 1909, 4.

107. Ibid., 17 April 1909, 8.

108. Ibid., 24 April 1909, 8.

109. Ibid., 13 April 1909, 2.

110. Patricia Hills, 'Images of Rural America', in Hollister Sturges (ed.), *The Rural Vision: France and America in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1987), 78.

111. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 93.

112. Frederick Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' [1893], reprinted in Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986), 1–38; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957 [1950]), 303.

113. New York *Press*, 10 April 1910, III: 1.