

# A Corner in Wheat

By Daniel Eagan

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"A Corner in Wheat" was one of scores of films D.W. Griffith directed in 1909. While he showed little interest in day-to-day politics, Griffith was a kind of populist who reduced society's problems to heroes and villains. Judging from his films, Griffith distrusted reformers and the wealthy, but had little faith in the poor, who were just as liable to form vigilante posses and mobs as to help their peers. If anything, Griffith apparently believed in a sort of agrarian society that, if it ever existed at all, had disappeared long before the Civil War.

But he knew his audience, and knew that he couldn't go wrong attacking the rich. Moviegoers wanted to see the upper class defeated, or at least blamed for injustice — a formula still in use today. Griffith's liberal leanings took some courage at the time. They also echoed the feelings of some significant artists at the turn of the twentieth century, among them Frank Norris.

Born in Chicago in 1870, Norris began his career as a newspaper reporter in San Francisco before moving to New York in 1898. In the next five years he published seven novels and two collections of short stories before succumbing to a ruptured appendix in 1902. He was transfixed by the work of Emile Zola, and aimed for a similar realism in his own fiction. By the end of the century he had developed a distinctly American form of naturalism that was both brawny and pitiless. "McTeague" (1899) would be adapted into one of the towering films in the Registry, "Greed" (1925).

After the fatalism of "McTeague," Norris turned to social activism, to finding solutions rather than just documenting them. At the time of his death he was working on a trilogy about wheat — loosely, its production, distribution, and consumption — from the viewpoint that the American economy was both creating and destroying an underclass. "The Octopus"



Mourners gather around the body of the Wheat King. *Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.*

(1901) dealt with farmers in California whose fortunes were controlled by railroad interests back East. "The Pit" (1903) took place in Chicago's mercantile exchanges.

In "The Pit," Curtis Jadwin is so profit-driven that he attempts to corner an entire year's wheat market by speculating in wheat futures, an obsession that leads to a nervous breakdown and the possible rupture of his marriage. Norris died in October 1902 before "The Pit" was published. (He never began writing the third novel, "The Wolf.") Channing Pollock adapted "The Pit" into a play in 1904, which may have been how Griffith became acquainted with it.

Working with a screenwriter — possibly Frank Woods — Griffith tried to merge and condense the two novels, but it was a hopeless task. The best he could do was try to extract noteworthy moments that audience members might recognize. Griffith couldn't hope to explain the financial and psychological subtleties Norris built up over thousands of words. He couldn't even adequately explain who the characters were. The opening shot, for example, includes four people. Readers of "The Octopus" might recognize them as representing a farmer with his father, wife, and daughter, but would others understand their relationships and occupations when Griffith had to paint them with the broadest of brushes?

Griffith was also hampered by the fact that he had little experience with farmers. As a reviewer in the "New York Dramatic Mirror" noted about scenes in

which the farmer and his father sow seed, “No wheat would ever come up from the sort of sowing they do, but this slip is lost sight of in the artistic atmosphere of the scene and in the compelling pictures that follow.” (It didn’t help that a field near Fort Lee, New Jersey, had to stand in for California’s San Joaquin Valley.)

The film then cuts to the office of the Wheat King, played by Frank Powell as a dashing and energetic businessman. An intertitle explains that he is “engineering the great corner,” but viewers only see an executive ordering underlings around. Griffith later shows a ruined businessman confronting the Wheat King in his crowded office. You can spot him in the group not just from the hand thrust up to this brow, but because he is the only one wearing a hat — a sign that the director was becoming aware of the importance of set and costume design.

The ending retains its power even today. It’s stark image that was imitated directly by the Danish director Carl Dreyer in “Vampyr” (1932), and appropriated by directors for many other movies.

In a sense, the scenes function as illustrations from the novel. The entire film is shot from a stationary camera, but Griffith managed to keep most of the frames filled with motion. By this time his stock company was pretty firmly in place. The cast included many Biograph regulars: his wife Linda Arvidson, Henry B. Walthall, Mack Sennett, Blanche Sweet, Bobby Harron, and Owen Moore.

Griffith perhaps received more credit than he was due for addressing contemporary problems with this

work. As social criticism it’s pretty weak stuff, offering viewers only the hope that the millionaires who make fortunes from the poor will receive divine retribution, or at least ironic deaths. But at the time it was strong medicine, enough to help get filmmakers as a whole branded as radicals. Encouraged by the positive response, Griffith pursued his social agenda in a number of other films. But his politics were and are difficult to decipher. He became bolder in his attempts to affix blame, until in films like “The Birth of a Nation” and “Intolerance” he was condemning wholesale entire races and cultures.

As Richard Schickel points out in his biography of Griffith, the film marked another milestone in the turn toward quality and respectability. Films had only recently been covered as art instead of technology in the press. Griffith’s adaptation of the Robert Browning poem “Pippa Passes” had been released that October, and the “New York Times” pointed to it and to films based on Tolstoy and the Old Testament as proof of cinema’s maturity.

The film has been preserved by the Museum of Modern Art with funding from The Lillian Gish Trust for Film Preservation.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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