

Chapter 1

Social Protest: *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) as Muckraking Film

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the American public had become aware of the social and economic consequences of industrialism and unrestrained capitalism. As the nation made the transition from an agricultural to industrial economy, it became clear that rapid industrial growth brought important changes in cultural and class relationships. The preceding generation had witnessed the dazzling advance of industrialization and urbanization, as well as the social upheaval that followed the collapse of the economy in the wake of the Panic of 1893. The Populist political rebellion of the 1890s, rooted in rural discontent but linked to the wider urban social crisis, focused popular attention on the increasing inequality in the distribution of wealth and power that resulted from rapid industrial growth. In this overheated social and economic atmosphere, social critics and intellectuals called attention to new problems that were to test the American commitment to democratic principles over the next generation. Memories of the labor disturbances of the 1890s, unemployment, and business failures encouraged reformers to explore new policies and institutions to defuse the social and economic conflicts and economic inequality that now threatened to shred the social fabric of industrial America.

The Historical Background

As a sweeping reconsideration of long-accepted principles such as laissez-faire economics and unbridled competition unfolded, Americans entered the age of Progressivism with a new openness to reform ideas. Progressive reformers worked tirelessly to humanize the workplace, democratize the political system, and reduce the human suffering that threatened social harmony. In order to accomplish the proposed reforms, it was necessary to build consensus behind policies and regulations that departed from nineteenth-century classical economics with its restrictive definition of governmental responsibilities. Crucial to this raised consciousness of social problems and proposed remedies was the work of journalists, novelists, and creative artists, who alerted mass audiences to the economic and social realities of the new era. Known as “muckrakers,” these publicists explored the nation’s most pressing social issues in literary works aimed especially at the new and broad middle-class audience of the Progressive era. Through such sensational works as Upton

Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), an exposé of the meatpacking industry, the muckrakers played a central role in developing public awareness of social abuses and popular support for new solutions to those problems. In the process, the print media of the Progressive era played a key role in the enactment of important reform legislation during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

As we have noted, the motion picture was one of the most dramatic media of communication to emerge in the early twentieth century as an influence on popular consciousness. Before the rise of the film industry, knowledge of the worst abuses of the general welfare had not always reached a wide public audience. Recent scholarship has shown that the film content of the silent era was much more political and socially conscious than that of later years. Among the topics addressed in Progressive era movies were the deadly Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911, the massacre of workers in the Colorado Fuel and Iron strike of 1914, and the sickening abuses in the meatpacking industry highlighted by Upton Sinclair in the film version of *The Jungle*. As noted by the National Board of Review in 1913, film was an influential outlet "for political, social, religious propaganda, for muckraking . . . [and] for revolutionary ideas."¹ As this statement suggests, the movies were employed as weapons in the class struggle in the early years of the motion picture industry's development. Film scholar Steven J. Ross correctly asserts that these early celluloid missiles struck with great force because they reached millions of viewers rather than the more limited audiences to whom the work of muckraking writers was addressed.² As you study the films of the Progressive era, think of their content within the context of that period's social reform movement as well as the contest for public sympathy and support.

Many Progressive era filmmakers chose to address controversial social issues in their work. One of the leading artists to employ such themes was the gifted director David Wark Griffith (D. W. Griffith) of Biograph Studios. Much of his early work dealt with worker culture and working-class problems in terms sympathetic to exploited farmers, workers, and their families. Griffith's films typically emphasized social and economic inequities, while characterizing the wealthy, privileged, and powerful as parasitic exploiters of defenseless workers. For example, he highlighted the problems of economic and sexual exploitation in such features as *The Lily of the Tenements* (1911) and *The Song of the Shirt* (1910). Always a gifted storyteller, Griffith filled his work with sharp social commentary. Consequently, you may compare him with equally effective muckrakers who communicated with a narrower audience through the print media.

Analysis of Griffith's classic morality tale, *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), must begin with its historical context and literary origins. The film's plot deals with one of the liveliest topics explored by the muckraking novelist Frank Norris in several of his works. Although Norris exposed the corruption and exploitative behavior of railroad and wheat monopolists in *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903), his short story "A Deal in Wheat" (1903), together with Channing Pollock's play, *The Pit* (1904), became the primary bases for the Griffith film.

Interest in the activities of monopolistic power brokers in the wheat industry and on the wheat exchanges actually dates from the concerns of the Populist Party, which in the 1890s had worked to expose the corrupt practices of wheat speculators, whom it attacked as enemies of both producers and consumers. After the return of higher grain prices in the late nineteenth century, the militancy of the farm rebellion declined. However, market manipulation by brokers, traders, and dealers continued to attract the attention of

Progressive reformers, who in 1910 introduced legislation to regulate grain speculators. While the intense heat of Populism had subsided, the interest of Progressive reformers in controlling financial manipulators made *A Corner in Wheat* a topical film after its release. It is within this context that you may best understand this film as a historical document of Progressive America.

Analyzing the Film

As you proceed with your examination of this film, it is important that you pay careful attention to the film structure, character development, and artistic techniques employed by the filmmaker in telling his story. Perhaps most significant are the editing and cross-cutting introduced by Griffith in *A Corner in Wheat*. Because the film blends three separate stories (the farmer, the wheat speculator, and the consumer), you should pay special attention to the ways in which the separate story lines are visually linked with one another through editing. Look for the central theme in the way in which the economic realities are perceived and experienced by the independent participants in a drama of greed and its consequences. Though the key figures do not confront each other directly, their lives and fortunes are closely interrelated. How does the film maker use sharp film cuts to establish a connection among farm, office, and marketplace? How does the tightly compressed plot work to show how the product of the fields is exploited by a ruthless commodities speculator to the disadvantage of the urban consumer unable to buy bread for her starving family? Consider the significance of the way in which the wheat king eventually meets his fate when, having cornered the world market, he accidentally slips into a bin of grain, buried in the object of his own greed.³

By examining the film's narrative structure and editing, it is possible to develop your critical skills while gaining a clearer understanding of the reform impulse so evident in early twentieth-century political life. Attention to cinematic technique may be combined with awareness of immediate historical context to strengthen your knowledge of American reform. *A Corner in Wheat* stands as a striking visual document of the social and economic consciousness of the Progressive era. Like the muckraking novels of this period, the picture demonstrates the impact of modern media on popular social and political awareness as Americans moved into the age of mass culture.

Thinking About Primary Sources

The best way to explore the muckraking themes evident in *A Corner in Wheat* is to begin with an examination of the primary sources contained in this chapter. A review of the excerpt from Frank Norris's "A Deal in Wheat" will familiarize you with one of the literary sources for Griffith's film. Be conscious of the relationship between the short story and the film based on it. In each case, try to assess the intentions of the work's creator and evaluate the respective outcomes. Next go beyond the work of Norris and Griffith to place their efforts in the larger historical context by considering the words of Senator Robert M. La Follette as a barometer of the Progressive era's political concerns. Determine how and where the film fits into the reform spirit of this historical period.

Finally, turn your attention to the marketing and reception of the film at the time of its release. Use the primary sources to detect the themes that were employed in advertising the picture. Since promotional materials often appeal to public taste, the advertising tear sheet will shed light on the producer's assessment of the potential market for the film. A comparison of the advertising copy and the film review could identify common themes that reflect the filmmakers' assumptions about viewers as well as elite group judgments about the target audience. The promotional campaign to "sell" *A Corner in Wheat* may be linked to the expanding advertising and public relations industries of the early twentieth century. Mass media and modern marketing, including alluring advertising appeals, were key features of the new age of mass culture. The film and the promotional activity surrounding its release were products of the modernization process well under way by the Progressive era. Critical analysis of this motion picture therefore sheds light on both the reform mentality and media culture shared by Americans in an age of transition.

Historical Perspective

Sincere as its moral statement may have been, *A Corner in Wheat* does not really offer clear solutions to the social and economic problems it discloses. Rather, the viewer of the Progressive era was able to cope with the emotional tensions created by this tale of exploitation through approval of the wheat king's unfortunate fate. As the viewer is left with the haunting image of the farmer sowing the seeds of future destruction, the film's deeper problem is left unresolved. Yet this film's biting social commentary had certainly shown the potential of the motion picture as a political weapon.

During the remainder of the Progressive era, the movie industry continued to project conflicting images of class harmony and social disruption. Not until the industry moved west to establish the Hollywood system would producers close ranks to deny class conflict, as their product was redesigned to fit the needs and worldview of an increasingly middle-class audience. By the 1920s, proponents of worker/labor films found that the resources necessary to the production process were often unavailable to those who boldly challenged the social assumptions that reinforced the business system.

As the moral outrage of Progressive consciousness weakened, most muckraking filmmakers of the prewar era turned to other pursuits. Creative artists like Griffith found that the national market was more open to epic films of sweeping scope and themes that increasingly stressed love, sex, violence, historical landmarks, and, during World War I, national glory and patriotic unity. As will be seen in Chapter 2, the brilliant D. W. Griffith was to continue his pioneering work in the movies by extending the sweep and dramatic structure of the feature film. His landmark production of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, while flawed by racism, would rewrite the rules of cinematic technique and address issues distinct from the social and economic questions raised by his earlier work. Yet the controversy surrounding *The Birth of a Nation* cannot obscure the Progressive commitment found in *A Corner in Wheat*, which stands as a visual reminder of that reform era's social consciousness. Griffith's muckraking achievement, when understood against the background of the literary product of its age, remains a revealing historical document of the humane vision that fired the first wave of twentieth-century reform.