

FILM 240 D.W. Griffith: *Corner in Wheat* and *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*

*Corner in Wheat*

Made in 1909, *Corner in Wheat* is the first great film of social commentary. In just fourteen minutes, the film manages to expose how both producers and consumers are squeezed and exploited by a ruthless grain speculator, who, nonetheless, suffers cruel and ironic justice in the end. The movie begins with a pastoral scene of poor farmers planting their grain crop. The scene then shifts to the offices of an investor who speculates in grain futures. The investor devises a plan to buy up all the grain in advance of its harvest by creating a panic in the trading pit that drives the prices down. Other investors, and the farmers, are ruined in the process, but in the end he gains control of the entire wheat market. He can then hoard the grain in silos, making it artificially scarce, driving the price back up again. The retail price of bread goes up, and poor consumers suffer as well.

Griffith drives the point by **parallel editing**. Instead of juxtaposing scenes of action and suspense to increase tension, as he does in action movies, here he juxtaposes the arrogance and high living of the speculator with scenes of the suffering and hunger that his greed has left in its wake. The investor is served with an ironic fate, though. He takes his family and associates on a triumphant tour of his grain silos, and just as everyone else is leaving, he receives a telegram informing him that he has cornered the entire market and has increased his fortune by millions. Ecstatic with his success, he stumbles into the pouring wheat of the silo and drowns in his own ill-gotten goods. The movie ends with the poor farmer, more poverty-stricken than ever, mournfully trying to raise another crop. Despite his poverty, he has the dignity of his work and he carrying the eternal human effort of growing and harvesting.

*The Musketeers of Pig Alley*

*Musketeers of Pig Alley*, from 1912, is the first urban gangster film. In its 18 minutes, it traces a fairly complicated plot involving a poor musician and his wife, an attempted seduction, gang warfare, and a morally complex conclusion. The action gradually builds in intensity, featuring vivid characterization enhanced by **close-ups**, unexpected plot twists, and **rapid cutting**. Viewers of the time must have been breathless with excitement, and even today the movie challenges our powers of observation.

At the beginning, a struggling young musician leaves his wife and her mother behind to seek his fortune. While he is gone, the mother dies, leaving his “Little Lady” despondent. To cheer her up, a friend takes her where she has no business going, a gangsters’ ball. The “Musketeer,” the local gangleader, has already noticed her and sees her at the ball, but his deadly rival gets to her first. The Musketeer sees his rival trying to drug the Little Lady in a private room and challenges him. This conflict spreads into open warfare. In the meantime, the young husband returns with a wad of money and the gangster steals it from him. In the ensuing confusion caused by a gun battle between the rival gangs, though, the musician manages to recover his money, and the Musketeer ends up seeking shelter in the couple’s apartment. The police are closing in, and the gangster looks done for, but he reminds the girl of how he had saved her from his rival’s attempted seduction. In return, she agrees to give him an alibi, getting the Musketeer out of trouble, at least for the moment.

By the time he made *Musketeers*, Griffith had assembled a group of young players who would appear in many of his films. Their gestures are for the most part entirely realistic, especially the acting of **Dorothy Gish**, who, along with her even more famous sister, **Lillian**, would become an important silent film star.. **Harry Carey**, who plays the Musketeer, also had a successful film acting career, as did his son Harry Carey, Jr., who had important parts in several John Ford films of the 1940s and 1950s. The setting, or **mise en scene**, is quite believable: crowded streets, assorted curious urban characters, a variety of interiors and exteriors that are connected with a clear visual logic. The moral ambiguity of the ending is realistic, too. The bad guy's capacity for one act of goodness, even though he did it entirely from self-interest, saves him from arrest in the end. Griffith thus implies that street justice and legal justice don't always coincide, a notion that we're still all too familiar with.