

Introduction

The Alchemy of Capital and Nature

Though he was already dead, Frank Norris had a good year in 1909. His epic novel *The Octopus* (1901) was brought to the screen by visionary film artist D. W. Griffith—no other filmmaker has touched it since. Titled “A Corner in Wheat,” the film is a confident, bare-bones distillation of the novel’s hundreds of pages into fewer than fifteen minutes of viewing time. It is of course no substitute for the original, a point compounded by the fact that Griffith drew on a second Norris novel, *The Pit* (1903), also a rather long book. Griffith’s work is such a treat for Norris’s readers because it superbly confirms that Norris was an expert craftsman of signature tableaux, devices that regularly punctuated his narratives and that allowed him to tie together the worlds of meaning he had been summoning up. Of several exemplary scenes that structure the two novels, one from *The Octopus* was perhaps guaranteed to be filmed. This was an especially macabre sequence involving a conniving grain speculator, who is destined for live burial under the tons of wheat he has amassed. Thrashing about in a pelting rain of wheat, choking on grain dust, and trying desperately to stay alive, he inevitably succumbs. The wheat continues to pile up around him, until only one hand is able to poke through in a final, gruesome salute. In Norris’s hands, the speculator, also an urban sophisticate, has tumbled into the hull of a ship while the wheat was being loaded. In the film, he happened to have plummeted to the bottom of a grain silo. But no matter the difference in detail, the scene is a brilliant summation of the novel’s back and forth movements between San Francisco and its startlingly productive hinterland, the San Joaquin Valley. As such, it establishes a host of disquieting themes and questions.