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Silent Cinema as Social Criticism
Front Page Movies

Kay Sloan

Today, silent films are largely unwatched, with the notable exception of comedies starring Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Many contemporary viewers regard silent films with condescension: as over-acted, slow-paced, and excessively melodramatic. Today's audiences tend to dislike the lack of dialogue and color and are particularly put off by the subtitles that interrupt the films' flow. But silent movies were not simply a more primitive version of modern films. They embodied a different aesthetic and sensibility. Makers of silent films produced powerful visual images whose haunting beauty and lyricism exceed those found in most current Hollywood films. Equally important, many silent films were explicitly "political" in a way most contemporary films are not.

Although many people conceive of silent films as pictures of innocence – filled with gentlemanly tramps and virginal beauties – many early directors ripped their plots directly from the headlines of newspapers. As film historian Kay Sloan shows in the following essay, early cinema directly addressed many of the social problems raised by Progressive era reformers.

Sheiks, flappers, comic tramps, and vamps: silent film has left a legacy of bizarrely colorful images preserved in the popular mind by nostalgia. Yet in the early days of the primitive film industry, the cinema treated social problems in a way that was, ironically, as fantastic as the glamorous stars and tinsel world of Hollywood's later silver screen. The earliest audiences pushed their coins across box office windows to watch melodramas and comedies that often celebrated characters who literally animated the social and political dilemmas of the Progressive Era. The cinema turned these dilemmas into fairy tales of the day. Greedy corporate tycoons, villainous landlords, corrupt politicians, flamboyant suffragettes, and striking workers flickered across the bed sheets that sometimes sufficed for screens in hastily created movie houses just after the turn of the century.
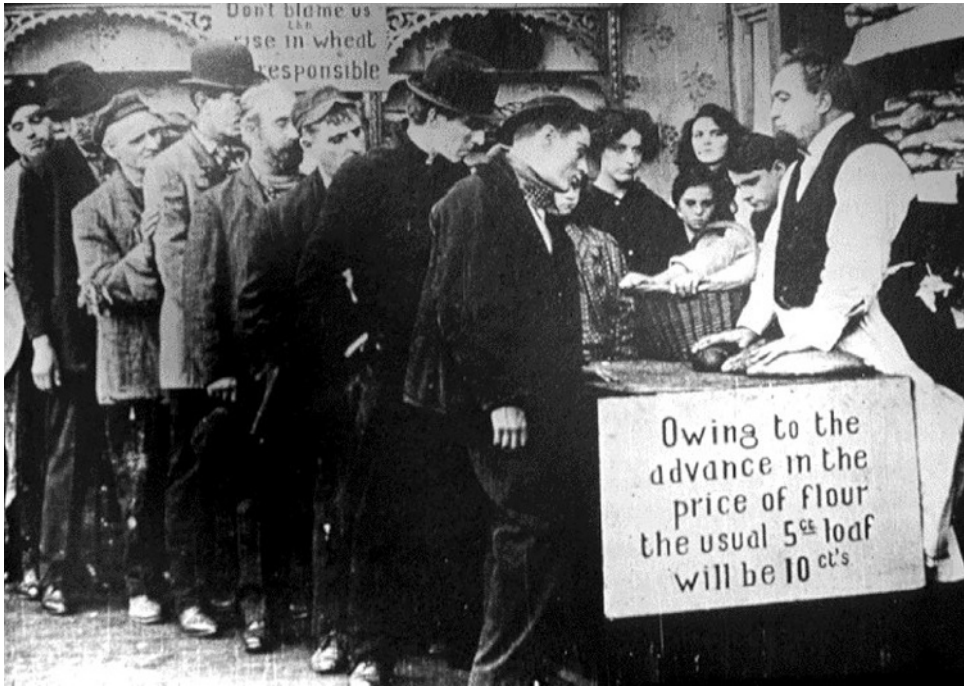
Figure 3   *A Corner in Wheat* (1909). American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. Directed by D.W. Griffith. Author's screenshot.

   This is the story of that early silent cinema, a largely pre-corporate, inconsistently censored film industry that had its roots not in Hollywood but in the nation's inner cities. It is an important story both for the vision it provides of how entertainment can deliver social problems to the public, and for the historical portrait it paints of America just after the turn of the century. In the era before World War I, moviegoing often involved paying a nickel or a dime to watch a series of short one or two reelers in the cramped quarters of storefront theaters that populated the urban ghettoes. The elaborate movie "palace" was, for the most part, an anomaly; so was the feature film. Film companies were small business operations that might shoot several one-reel films every week in a makeshift studio. This was a time when the traditions of the cinema were in the process of formation, when both the subject matter and the form of film were in flux. Inventions rapidly became conventions that helped shore up a sense of social order, as a new art form began to link human desire with the needs of society.

   In New York, Chicago, Boston, and in an obscure community called Hollywood out in California, small film companies often turned to the literary and political milieu of the muckrakers and the Progressives for storylines. The "muckraking" cinema cranked out stories that entertained primarily working class audiences who could afford the five or ten cent price of admission to the nickelodeons. There, seated on wooden folding chairs, moviegoers watched graphic portrayals of America's social problems, some of which were part of their everyday lives.

   In 1910, Walter Fitch, a film critic for the *Moving Picture World*, one of the film industry's first trade journals, stepped back from the immediacy of the new medium – it

was, indeed, a cinema in search of itself – to take a long look at its potential and its possibilities. Filmmakers, mused Fitch, "may play on every pipe in the great organ of humanity." The early cinema did indeed attempt to compose euphonious sounds from the cacophony of the era. With titles such as *Capital Versus Labor*, *The Suffragettes' Revenge*, *A Corner in Wheat*, *The Usurer's Grip*, *The Girl Strike Leader*, or *The Reform Candidate*, all released in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, the cinema championed the cause of labor, lobbied against political "bosses," and often gave dignity to the struggles of the urban poor. Conversely, other films satirized suffragists, ridiculed labor organizers, and celebrated America's corporate leaders in anti-labor melodramas that the American Federation of Labor denounced and boycotted.

The period itself encompassed vast contradictions. While socialists such as Eugene Debs and Mother Jones fought for drastic changes in the nation's economic system, the new industrial leaders attempted paternalistic, philanthropic solutions to labor activism. At the same time that radicals pushed for fundamental changes in American life, middle class reformers lobbied for legislation on labor and women's rights that would offer moderate change within the existing structure. Progressive thinkers such as the economist Richard T. Ely and the sociologists Edward A. Ross and Thorstein Veblen condemned what they saw as the dynamics of inequality in America; their voices became part of the milieu of protest in which the movies were born. Others, like Louis D. Brandeis, later a Supreme Court justice, indicted the banking system he analyzed in *Other People's Money*, and successfully challenged corporate America in the courts. Muckraking journalists exposed the horrors of child labor and the corruption of political machinery in the nation's magazines and newspapers. Articles by such investigative journalists decried "the shame of the cities" and their failure to adequately meet the needs of their citizens. Upton Sinclair created a national furor by exposing unsanitary meat-packing conditions in his novel *The Jungle*; Frank Norris took on railroad tycoons in *The Octopus*. Lincoln Steffens's articles for *Everybody's Magazine*, with their prostitutes, gamblers, policemen "on the take," corporate tycoons, and greedy landlords, provided an array of stories that pointed to the need for social change.

It was a volatile, exciting world for the new lively entertainment form of the motion picture to enter. Conflicts that challenged the foundations of society found their way into the cinema as film companies seized on the news in the headlines for rich melodramatic and comic material. They also documented contemporary events in early newsreels. In an era long before the advent of television, motion pictures served as news reportage and propaganda at the same time that they revolutionized entertainment. Savvy political figures quickly learned to use the new medium to advertise themselves. In 1906, William Randolph Hearst made talking films of his campaign speeches to circulate in areas in which his personal travel was difficult. Performing a function similar to that of a modern television reporter, the filmmaker Siegmund Lubin released films in 1908 reporting the campaigns of the political rivals William Jennings Bryan and John W. Kern. But, though the films showing news events or national political campaigns served as important justifications for the existence of the often criticized new medium of the motion picture, the fictions of those actual conflicts told a richer story about the climate of the period. The fictionalization of conflicts allowed an injection of fantasy and ideology into the stories. Films interpreted the nation's headlines in dramatic visual images that at once persuaded and entertained.

The comedies, melodramas, and occasional westerns about labor conflict, tenement poverty, or political corruption reveal through fantasy an America torn with ideological conflict.

Often, special interest groups made their own motion pictures in collaboration with film industrialists. An important part of the process of translating the news involved opening the channels of filmmaking to groups advocating change. The earliest film audiences watched motion pictures made or sponsored by groups like the National Child Labor Committee, the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and even by individuals such as Upton Sinclair and the Progressive New York Governor, William Sulzer, who produced and starred in his own melodrama in 1914. Other Progressive activists joined them. For instance, the birth control activist Margaret Sanger made a melodrama to promote the basic civil liberties that she was repeatedly denied during the Progressive Era.

Conservatives as well as Progressives seized on the new medium as a way to dramatize their ideas. Organizations such as the National Association of Manufacturers and the Russell Sage Foundation made film melodramas to promote corporate paternalism. Such films circulated through the nation's movie houses as if they were no different from slapstick comedies, westerns, and historical dramas. Distributors offered such politically oriented films to exhibitors along with material produced solely for entertainment. Often, a film reviewer would suggest to exhibitors that a motion picture with a pro-labor message, for instance, or a plea for women's rights would be popular in areas where such ideas were already accepted. Essentially, the early audiences paid their nickels and dimes to see the political tracts of special interest groups on the same program as less controversial material.

Regardless of the ideological message, however, the vision that commercial film could serve as a vehicle for overt political causes seems startling – even revolutionary – today. For instance, Progressive woman suffragists made melodramas in collaboration with Hollywood film companies. Certainly it is difficult to imagine a modern day equivalent: the National Organization of Women collaborating with Twentieth Century Fox in the early 1980s to make a melodrama starring Meryl Streep or Jane Fonda promoting the Equal Rights Amendment might be such an event. By contemporary standards, such a film would be an utter aberration from Hollywood practices. Yet in the early twentieth century, such was the notion of what film might – and even should – be. Film became a vehicle for overtly presenting social problems to the public.

The rise of the feature length film during the World War I years contributed to the decline of the numerous early social problem films. Since demand for motion pictures dictated that the companies turn out films rapidly, it was crucial that story ideas be readily found. It was easier for filmmakers to take risks about controversial issues in an era when the companies were releasing, as one Hollywood veteran remembers, at least "one reel a week." When film companies turned out several short films a month, the production of a potentially controversial film was far less of an economic risk than it would be in the later age of the blockbuster. Even without the encouragement and participation of special interest groups, the young film companies made melodramas and comedies that exploited the issues splashed across the nation's headlines.

One of the most notorious of these films bore the innocent title of *Why?* Released in 1913, *Why?* shocked critics with its tale of corrupt elites and its vision of workers

revolting against capitalism in America. The film's hero, a fiery-eyed immigrant with wild hair, dreamed of revenge against the wealthy classes who feasted while enslaved workers starved. The three parts of *Why?* contained episodes of capitalists and workers shooting it out with revolvers over child labor, corporate greed, and class inequality. In a scene that could have been scripted by Marx himself, the capitalists turn into sacks of gold when shot. Released by the American arm of the independent French company Eclair Films, *Why?* culminated with workers burning down Manhattan. The blazes, ironically, had been handpainted red by workers for the capitalist film company. The film ended with the Woolworth building still burning, violating one of the ideological tenets of the bourgeois narrative closure that flames, like western bad guys or melodramatic villains, have to die in the end. Instead of restoring responsibility and order, the film simply left its audience in a liminal world that granted power and legitimacy to unleashed desire. "Socialist doctrine!" cried one outraged reviewer.

Why?'s virtual celebration of anarchy frightened censors as well as critics. Early censors feared the political content of films as much as their occasional sexual content. The potential of the cinema to champion such organized violence disturbed Frederic C. Howe, the chairman of the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures. That organization had been formed by the filmmakers themselves in 1909 to discourage "immoral" or "lurid" material that had roused criticism from more traditional sectors of society. Howe feared the mounting success of radical, politically oriented moving pictures. He was a liberal reformer, but hardly a radical. Despite local outcries over the supposed "immorality" of the movies, Howe suggested that the political role of film was potentially as threatening to society as were its challenges to a Victorian moral code.

Particularly since the early films touched the sentiments of masses of people, including the millions of newly arrived immigrants to whom the English printed word was still a mystery, they elicited condemnation from those, like Howe, who feared the power of the motion picture over those in the ghetto. Motion pictures, noted one journalist in 1908, had become "both a clubhouse and an academy for the workingman." The class of people attending motion pictures, stated another observer delicately, "are not of the rich." At their outset, motion pictures found audiences primarily among the many Americans whose lives were dominated by the uncertainties of poverty and the cultural ruptures of immigration.

Thus Frederic Howe worried about the content of films in 1914. The films that "tended to excite class feeling or … tend to bring discredit upon the agencies of the government," wrote Howe, could lead to a time "when the movie … becomes the daily press of industrial groups, of classes, of Socialism, syndicalism, and radical opinion."

Howe's fears, of course, remained unfounded. The revolutionary content of *Why?* was an anomaly among the early social problem films. The young film companies themselves attempted to make their business more "respectable," and broaden the appeal of motion pictures to the middle classes. They made the social problem films as part of that process, with the notion that such films might be seen as "educational" and "uplifting."

It was a cinematic role encouraged by critics. In 1913, one film journalist suggested that the cinema might be a weapon "in the battle against child labor, white-slavery, labor-conflicts, and vice development." He suggested that film should take up the subjects headlined on the front pages of the nation's newspapers and "expose injustice,

cruelty, and suffering in all their naked ugliness." This critic suggested that both the film industry's need for stories and America's pressing social problems might be settled if only the filmmakers would turn their attention to social issues. But the solution to such issues, he emphasized, must be calm, reasoned change, not the revolutionary message of a film like *Why?*

Such liberal film critics played an important role in channeling film into a vehicle for middle class reforms. They pointed out causes that might be taken up in melodrama. *The Moving Picture World*'s Louis Reeves Harrison promoted the role that film could play in pointing out the need for social reform, and he denounced what he called "the desire for power on the part of the ruling classes." Filmmakers, he urged, should pay attention to such inequities in corporate society. The cinema might act as a cultural watchdog, appealing for responsibility from all levels of society. One issue demanding treatment by the moving pictures suggested Harrison, was child labor – another was what he applauded as women's "broadening knowledge and experience." The expression of those issues could not only strengthen the nation, but the role of film in it.

In 1912, Harrison reminded filmmakers that the often denigrated cinema might serve as a tool for "uplifting" the masses. He offered a virtual litany of themes for the melodrama that expressed the interests of both the era's reformers and some early filmmakers:

> the social battle for justice to those who do the world's work, the adjustment of compensation to labor, the right of common people to liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the betterment of humanity through the prevention of crime rather than its cure, the prevention of infant mortality, and the prevention of hoggishness wherever theatrical trusts will permit, the self-conflict between material tendency and spiritual clarification, all these furnish subjects of widespread interest which the dramatist may handle with or without gloves.

The film industry increasingly addressed the issues suggested by Harrison. In 1914, one film director boasted that he got the "best points for [his] work from the newspapers," turning the turmoil of the era into comedy and melodrama.

Concerned that the cinema raised subversive questions, Howe neglected the important role it played in laying them to rest. *Why?*'s radical solution to class conflict was, not surprisingly, rare cinema. It represented the starkest challenge to the nation's economic powers – the wheat speculators, tenement owners, loan sharks, or captains of industry. More typically, the films dealt with social problems in a way that muted their critiques of economic or social injustice. They called for careful reforms or fatalistic surrenders to uncontrollable "natural" forces that doled out troubles and misfortunes. Such films proved that the radically new entertainment form of the cinema could act as a conservative force in the emerging industrial society.

For instance, the Thomas Edison Company's *The Usurer's Grip* was a modern-day fairy tale set in the tenements. Funded by the Russell Sage Foundation in 1912, the film warned audiences about unscrupulous moneylenders who thrived on the poverty stricken, hounding them further and further into financial desperation. The film's hero and heroine found themselves in mounting debt to a usurer, but they were saved at last by an understanding businessman who directed them to the loan division of the

Russell Sage Foundation. There they were rescued by the paternalism promoted by Sage's vision of benevolent capitalism. *The Usurer's Grip* was a self-serving advertisement for the Sage Foundation. Such early films precursed modern television advertising by blending entertainment with commercial messages. Through melodrama, the Edison Company and the Russell Sage Foundation advertised direct social reform and suggested that philanthropic measures might remedy urban poverty.

Increasingly, the early films moved from primitive one or two reelers exploiting class conflict to more sophisticated films with complicated plots. At times, they advocated specific reforms. Film began to shift from the sensationalism of muckraking issues into serious calls for reform through "enlightenment" – whether it be better management to assuage striking workers, calls for woman suffrage, the abolition of child labor, poor tenement conditions, and the illegality of birth control. Film industrialists tried to establish the middle-class nature of the cinema by allowing reform groups or special interest groups access to the medium. In 1912, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) collaborated with Thomas Edison's Company to make a propagandistic melodrama on factory safety called *The Crime of Carelessness*. It was written by the Progressive writer James Oppenheim, who was quickly earning a reputation as a writer of what the *New York Times* called "social films." His first film for the Edison Company, titled *Hope*, had dealt with the problem of tuberculosis. With *The Crime of Carelessness*, he turned to the more controversial issue of problems in the workplace. The film laid equal blame for hazardous working conditions on workers and negligent owners – but insidiously punished a careless worker for a factory fire. The problems of the workplace, then, might be resolved merely by responsibility on the part of individual employees. It was, wrote the *New York Times* critic, a "long and stirring drama," one of a line of Oppenheim's "social films." NAM's film, of course, did more than link industrial problems with careless workers. It also linked the interests of the film industry with those of the larger corporate interests represented by NAM.

A similar theme emerged in the Vitagraph Company's *Capital Versus Labor*, an expose of labor problems made in 1910. Punctuated by bloody scenes of rioting workers battling company- hired thugs, the film suggested that the strikers had legitimate grievances to air. But the workers alone were powerless to change their situation. The eventual "happy ending" came not through the organized protests or negotiations of labor unions, but through the intervention of the church. The violence in *Capital Versus Labor* continued until a minister finally calmed the mobs and convinced the greedy capitalist to compromise with his workers. The film thus revealed the futility of rioting in the streets while it still acknowledged the validity of the strikers' complaints. From such plots came a dual statement about workers in America: while the films granted them dignity and self-worth as individuals, it also rendered them and their organizations powerless. *The Crime of Carelessness* and *Capital Versus Labor* serve as examples of how workers might be portrayed as irresponsible individuals who are ultimately dependent on the good graces of their generous bosses.

Such films relied on the "happy ending," which provided audiences with continuity and faith in "the system." Even actual historical events were rewritten to accommodate that expectation. A 1915 melodrama on political corruption in New York City provides a telling example of how important the happy ending had become. *The Governor's Boss* took a political tragedy and transformed it into victory for the

democratic process. The film was one of the most unusual melodramas made about political corruption for another reason: it actually starred an impeached governor of New York, William Sulzer.

Sulzer publicized his case against the Tammany Hall machine in 1915 with a melodrama written by James S. Barcus, a friend and political crony. He first took it to Broadway, where the play had a brief run of sixteen performances at the Garrick Theatre. Following the play's unsuccessful Broadway run, he turned to the cinema with the script. To heighten the realism of the film, Sulzer played himself in the starring role, but he took the unique opportunity that film provided to rewrite his own history with a happy ending. *The Governor's Boss* ended not with Sulzer's impeachment, but with the defeat of his opponents in court. Sulzer restored justice and democracy to New York City through the power of the cinema rather than the power of political office. Imagine Richard Nixon producing and starring in a cinematic version of Watergate in 1975 – with an ending in which he retained his grip on the presidency. Despite the vast differences between Sulzer and Nixon, the preposterous nature of the contemporary example is nevertheless a striking indication of just how unique this Progressive Era vision of film as political propaganda was.

Like the many previous melodramas calling for social change, *The Governor's Boss* restored democracy in such a way that rendered the film a less powerful statement against Tammany Hall. The *New York Times* critic found the ending so absurd that he sarcastically observed that "the Governor, his secretary, his daughter, and Virtue in general triumph." Even real occurrences took on fantastic proportions to assure a society in distress that its institutions worked for the good of all, despite the news broadcast in the nation's headlines.

The headlines were powerful material in a time when muckraking journalists and novelists like Ida Tarbell and Upton Sinclair constantly probed the underside of the "American Dream." Both Sinclair and Tarbell were among the era's crusaders who made their own films. Their cinematic efforts reflected a period in film history when the motion pictures were seen as a medium that might lie open to the public, particularly to those with a cause. Tarbell, who had condemned John L. Rockefeller when she exposed the ruthless practices of the Standard Oil Company in 1902, collaborated with Vitagraph Studios in 1914 as part of their series of photoplays scripted by "famous authors." Interestingly, she chose not a political subject but a historical play to dramatize, as part of a broader effort by the membership of the Authors' League of America to help less recognized writers. In 1913, Upton Sinclair ambitiously put his powerful expose of the meat packing industry, *The Jungle*, into five reels of a motion picture. At the same time, however, the issues that Tarbell and Sinclair were publicizing with their news articles and novels found their way into the cinema in ways that were less overtly political than *The Jungle*. Motion pictures took on the preoccupations of muckraking journalists and absorbed them into the ethos of individualism and the "virtue" that mended society in *The Governor's Boss*. In that process, they helped establish film as a respectable entertainment form, as they mediated the problems of society.

Many security minded reformers from the educated middle class saw that new function of film, and moved from their early position of unrelenting condemnation of the newly emerged entertainment form to an attempt to "re-form" it. These reformers realized that film had the capacity to solve problems, to suggest solutions that would

contain disorder and push forward moderate change. Their motion pictures raised issues among masses of people that the printed word might not reach, as Walter Fitch had commented in 1910. Film critics such as Louis Reeves Harrison and his colleagues at the *Moving Picture World*, W. Stephen Bush and the Reverend E. Boudinot Stockton, all had long stressed the use of film to "uplift." Jane Addams turned from her call for censorship of the moving pictures ("debased" and "primitive" she had called them in 1909) to actually starring in a melodrama in 1913 titled *Votes for Women*. Filmmaking seemed to have become fashionable among liberal reformers.

In their collaboration with professional filmmakers, the reformers used some of the conventions rapidly developing in the film to serve their own purposes. Through the "happy ending," the films presented the possibility that change could take place without massive upheaval or disruption. Such purposes led reformers such as Jane Addams to move from initial condemnation of the motion picture to praise for its capacity to "uplift" or "educate." Film could serve the interests of the middle class and of the film industry by appealing to a broader audience by using virtuous calls for reform.

The reformist dramas provided a respectable mission for a cinema in search of itself. By 1915, the poet and film critic Vachel Lindsay could observe that "the motion picture goes almost as far as journalism into the social fabric in some ways, further in others." Whatever their political message, however, films penetrated the social fabric even further than did muckraking journalists by tapping fantasy as well as reality, animating and heightening the stories told in print. The cinema offered fantastic solutions that appealed to unconscious human desire at the same time that it raised problems of everyday life. Some of this process had been observed as early as 1915 during the height of the early silent film era. In the summer of that year, a portly, balding psychologist from Harvard discovered a diversion from Boston's humid afternoons. Professor Hugo Munsterberg became one of the cinema's most ardent devotees. Munsterberg's first movie experience, a somewhat risqué film called *Neptune's Daughter*, had been, by his own daughter's account, one of the most startling adventures of the professor's life. Settled in the anonymous darkness of a theater, he had watched a fascinating phenomenon unfold. On the movie screen before him, the actress Annette Kellerman danced in a costume that left little to the imagination. But what fascinated the professor even more than Kellerman were the actual illustrations of the nuances of human perception that he had studied and taught for years in the university. Munsterberg was captivated by the manner in which the camera appeared to virtually become the human eye, and in which it might also create a new vision of the world controlled by moral forces. He spent the rest of the summer of 1915 carefully studying the new art form, even securing for himself a personal tour of the Vitagraph Studios.

Part of Munsterberg's interest lay in interpreting how the cinema dwelled on human needs and how it could direct the emotions of audiences. In a treatise on the motion picture, *The Photoplay*, published by the psychologist shortly before he died in 1916, he laid the foundation for a sophisticated theory of film. One of the greatest attractions of the cinema, he suggested, was its "stirring up of desires together with their constant fulfillment."

More than a simple mirroring of visual perception, motion pictures became immensely popular with the masses in those formative years because, in part, they captured the enduring subtleties of human desire, with their tales of wistful longing

for a better life. "The work of art," explained Munsterberg, "aims to keep both the demand and its fulfillment forever awake." The theater thus roused longing while it also left audiences with the "constant fulfillment" recognized by the psychologist. The popular culture emerging at the turn of the century acted as an agent of both social cohesion and the desire for change. That process emerges as the protest films addressed political and social subjects that held the capacity to rupture society.

Entertainment in itself involves a certain rupturing – a temporary suspension of belief in the outside world takes place along with a suspension of disbelief in the inner world constructed through entertainment. The melodrama of social protest suspended audiences between what they escaped from (their everyday lives) and what they escaped to (a more romantic version of the situation that structured those daily lives). By often resolving those situations in "happily ever after" endings, movies released their audiences from the grim cinematic creations of shabby tenement life, or sweatshop lines, into a world transformed, however briefly, into a realm where fantasy entered the tenement or sweatshop on the wings of romance or sudden wealth. If the melodramas refused to allow such interventions, they at least endowed their heroes and heroines with dignity.

A whole host of archetypal villains and victims danced in the flickering lights of the nickelodeons in a melodramatic exorcism of social wrongs. Such archetypes have never really left the motion picture – nor has the "happy ending," which restored faith in the enduring individual. In its early era of inventions, the cinema also set conventions. The primitive social problem films were the beginning of a long psychological trip into the present with which they are intimately joined. Like any pioneers, the early movies were original, but the trail they blazed into the American psyche became a familiar path marked with desires and frustrations – and so timeworn that we have taken its twists and turns for granted.

By the eve of World War I, most of the small film companies were gone, and with them the storefront nickelodeons and those primitive short films that raised social problems, much as the muckrakers did. Those formative years of the cinema, unique as they were, established the manner in which films continue to raise social issues while at the same time containing them in satisfactory bourgeois resolutions. America's dilemmas are in many ways similar to those faced by the country just after the turn of the century – overcrowding, sexual inequalities, political corruption, and corporate irresponsibility still find their way into a cinema that solves those problems in a private fashion, just as the early films did. But never again will the process be quite so blatant as in the silent social problem films.

Something was forgotten in the following decades, or lost in sentimentalized versions of the early period. In 1915, Vachel Lindsay expressed a thought that is poignant in retrospect. He dramatically claimed that film is a "new weapon of men, and the face of the whole earth changes." Lindsay, regrettably, was wrong. Much still remains to be explored and "remembered" from that era when "the whole earth changed" because of a new entertainment form.

In those one or two reelers are more than the origins of the social problem film. The films contain cultural signposts of paramount importance about how entertainment shapes the political issues affecting the lives of moviegoers. They are a reminder of the capacity of film to explore the problems of society and lessen their threat while still suggesting the need for change. When Stephen Crane's fictional Maggie attended

her turn-of-the-century melodramas, she would leave "with raised spirits" after watching people like herself defeat those with power over them. Though such triumphs in the cinema were measured in terms of religious redemptions or acts of fate, they were still significant glimpses into class conflict in America. Within that complex role is buried an even deeper significance. The films also reveal a society struggling to maintain order in a period of terrific unrest – an order that allowed inequality and the essential powerlessness of the average American to continue.

Those days when the film industry was young reveal that the cinema reverberates through time itself. It goes beyond its specific era to illuminate the ongoing power of the motion picture to dramatize the needs and desires of its viewers through generations of archetypal characters and situations. Like H.G. Wells's heroes, one can travel into the past with the flick of a switch on a projection machine and discover America at the turn of the century. Unfortunately, however, such a cinematic "journey" can be as difficult as a ride on Wells's time machine: many of the films simply no longer exist, and can be known only through reviews or synopses. When silent films lost their commercial viability within several years after release, the film companies, eager for fast production and quick profits, carelessly discarded them. Often the companies themselves were too short-lived to maintain their films. The perishable silver nitrate stock on which the motion pictures were printed further reduced their chance for survival. As early as 1906, one critic recognized the danger of losing such valuable cultural artifacts as the new motion picture. "We often wonder where all the films that are made and used a few times go to," he wrote, "and the questions come up in our minds, again and again: Are the manufacturers aware that they are making history? Do they realize that in fifty or one hundred years the films now being made will be curiosities." Now, some eighty years later, one only wishes that filmmakers had listened to his admonition. The films that exist today are rare cultural documents.

Though the preserved film footage offers valuable insight into the climate of American cultural and political tensions, an understanding of their full impact must, ironically, rely heavily on original printed material. Controversy over the issues of social protest spilled over into the pages of early trade magazines such as the *Moving Picture World*, *Photography*, *Variety*, and *Photoplay*. Their reviews testify to the lively arguments over workers' rights, class conflict, political graft, and sexual politics that the films once delivered.

Such themes that the films repeatedly explored illustrate the larger dilemmas of society in dealing with injustices and inequalities. [These include] the class-bound nature of early melodrama and what the sociologist Edward A. Ross called "criminaloids" – those who grew wealthy by exploiting the poor. Such characters made ideal villains in films that ventured into the inner circles of the nation's corrupt elites …. [These also include] the "cinema of the submerged," particularly as D.W. Griffith defined it. There, a cinema made heroes and heroines out of those "submerged" in powerlessness. Tenement dwellers attempted to flee the ghetto and escaped prisoners tried to elude their captors in plots that pointed out the plight of the victims of economic or legal injustice. ….

[Early silent films also showed] … working-class heroes [who] fought back against their employers. But the problem of "Capital Versus Labor," as the film of that title designated it, varied from visions of unruly "ferret-eyed workers" to cruel "fat cat" factory owners who exploited children and honest working people. White slavery … was

one of the most controversial topics ever sensationalized by the cinema. Taken alone, it was a euphemism for forced prostitution. The central concern of the explosive white slavery films and the melodramas on alcoholism and birth control was the preservation of the private sphere of the family.

The films about the woman suffrage movement … brought together a wide spectrum of propaganda for and against the movement. Caricatures of man-hating suffragettes paraded across movie screens as comedies ridiculed the notion of women voting. Suffragists themselves fought back with movie cameras, countering the comic attack with persuasive melodramas starring beautiful suffragist heroines. They elevated film into a significant political tool for their cause. The suffrage films, with their span of satire, newsreels, and melodramas, offer an opportunity to look at the tremendous range of political positions that the cinema took on a single subject.

The early risk-taking silent filmmakers saw their new medium as one that could both entertain and, in due course, instruct. They catered to the masses with a gamut of social commentary that reflected the traditional American belief that, once social wrongs were exposed to the people, the people would see to it that they were righted. More importantly, the companies catered to the masses to build their own business empires. Thus they were reformers who also sought a profit; with their sermons on social injustice and their faith in the individual, they became, quite unintentionally, America's newest street preachers, making movies that became indeed "loud silents."