

# The Pastoral Fantasy on the Silver Screen: The Influence of Film on American Cultural Memory of the Agrarian Landscape

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## Abstract

Entertainment media are a powerful source of cultural influence. Films are especially adept at capturing and preserving for posterity the attitudes, actions, and landscapes of historical events and eras, making them part of cultural memory — society’s shared recollection of past events as depicted in cultural artifacts. Nowhere is this ability better demonstrated than in cinematic portrayals of American agrarian life. In 2001, the Kellogg Institute found Americans recall agricultural landscapes as a sort of pastoral fantasy of rolling green hills, forests, and pristine fields crisscrossed by dirt roads. These images, which constitute Americans’ shared cultural memory of agrarian existence, may have been influenced by film portrayals of agriculture. For this study, nine films that met criteria for inclusion of agricultural imagery, cultural significance, and release at least 10 years prior to the Kellogg study were content-analyzed for their visual and thematic adherence to the pastoral fantasy described by Kellogg respondents. Of those films, only two presented agrarian imagery that did not conform to the pastoral fantasy, including depictions of a West Texas cattle ranch at the height of summer and a Midwestern farm muddied by fall harvest. The remaining films contained imagery strongly associated with the pastoral fantasy, indicating they may serve as vehicles for traditional agricultural themes.

## Keywords

Agriculture, cultural memory, film, visual imagery

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# The Pastoral Fantasy on the Silver Screen: The Influence of Film on American Cultural Memory of the Agrarian Landscape

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## Abstract

*Entertainment media are a powerful source of cultural influence. Films are especially adept at capturing and preserving for posterity the attitudes, actions, and landscapes of historical events and eras, making them part of cultural memory — society's shared recollection of past events as depicted in cultural artifacts. Nowhere is this ability better demonstrated than in cinematic portrayals of American agrarian life. In 2001, the Kellogg Institute found Americans recall agricultural landscapes as a sort of pastoral fantasy of rolling green hills, forests, and pristine fields crisscrossed by dirt roads. These images, which constitute Americans' shared cultural memory of agrarian existence, may have been influenced by film portrayals of agriculture. For this study, nine films that met criteria for inclusion of agricultural imagery, cultural significance, and release at least 10 years prior to the Kellogg study were content-analyzed for their visual and thematic adherence to the pastoral fantasy described by Kellogg respondents. Of those films, only two presented agrarian imagery that did not conform to the pastoral fantasy, including depictions of a West Texas cattle ranch at the height of summer and a Midwestern farm muddied by fall harvest. The remaining films contained imagery strongly associated with the pastoral fantasy, indicating they may serve as vehicles for traditional agricultural themes.*

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## Introduction

Entertainment is embedded in humanity's understanding of culture. Per Stromberg (2011), "entertainment is by now so thoroughly woven into the fabric of our existence [that] ... the culture of entertainment is arguably the most influential ideological system on the planet" (p. 3). History is constantly being recreated and repackaged for successive generations in film and television dramas, comedies, and documentaries (Eley, 2001; Steveker, 2009). Film provides a means of historical recollection, contextualization, and even rehabilitation: As movies capture the oeuvre of a particular era, they also preserve for successive generations the attitudes, actions, and landscapes of bygone days as framed by screenwriters, directors, and producers (Caldwell, 2008). The real power of entertainment media, therefore, lies in their ability to alter and naturalize specific interpretations of sociocultural phenomena (Chadwick, 2002).

Agricultural production in the United States is limited to a fraction of the nation's population, though the food and fiber industry once reigned as the primary occupation of the majority of Ameri-

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cans (Conkin, 2008; Hurt, 2002; Kolodny, 1975). As the nation has moved away from its agricultural foundations, a sort of mythology of the agrarian U.S. has emerged, hearkening back to — and even yearning for — the bucolic imagery of pre-industrial rural America. Marx (1964) notes this fantastic portrayal has pervaded American culture for centuries, culminating in cultural symbols replete with images of “a fresh green landscape ... a virgin continent!” (p. 3).

This “agrarian myth” (Appleby, 1982) has been in part shaped by entertainment media; to understand society’s cultural construction of U.S. agriculture, we must first understand the apparatuses through which Americans glean their knowledge about the food and fiber industry. To date, little research has been done to describe and catalog entertainment media portrayals of food and fiber production and their influences on public perception (Holt & Cartmell, 2013; Ruth, Lundy, & Park, 2005). As part of a larger endeavor to aggregate and analyze media texts that describe, discuss, or portray American agriculture, this study was undertaken to explicate how films have created and reified the pastoral ideal of rural American life in fulfillment of National Research Agenda Priority 1: Public and Policy Maker Understanding of Agriculture and Natural Resources (Doerfert, 2011).

### Literature Review

The mechanism through which visual and narrative discourses are crystallized and preserved in the collective mind — how they come to constitute social reality — is cultural memory. Since its inception, the term has been used to describe a wide array of phenomena “ranging from individual acts of remembering in a social context to group memory ... to national memory with its ‘invented traditions,’ and finally to the host of transnational *lieux de mémoire* such as the Holocaust and 9/11” (Erl, 2008a, p. 2). “Cultural memory,” therefore, is a broad conceptual framework that transcends traditional scholarly boundaries of social, material, and mental aspects of human life.

Interest in cultural memory grew in the late 1980s and early 1990s as traditional memory scholars found themselves increasingly studying questions of identity, the politicization of imagery, and the ability of narrative to shape historical thought (Sturken, 2008). Cultural memory conceptually redefines memories as “narratives, as fluid and mediated cultural and personal traces of the past” (Sturken, 2008, p. 74), rather than semi-permanent historical artifacts. In short, cultural memory may be defined as “the store of background knowledge that one calls upon when interpreting the everyday commonsense world” (Wekesa, 2012, p. 235; Werner, 2003) — a store dependent upon the individual’s experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and values.

Film and television tend to present an idealized and sentimentalized version of a culture’s history to their audiences:

Fictional media ... are characterized by their power to shape the collective imagination of the past in a way that is truly fascinating for the literary scholar (and somewhat alarming for the historian) ... [possessing] the potential to generate and mold images of the past which will be retained by whole generations. (Erl, 2008b, p. 389)

These media mainstream cultural memory toward sociocultural norms and allow audiences to “discover a past that makes the present more tolerable” (Anderson, 2001, p. 23).

In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson declared filmmaking to be “writing history in lightning” (Hansen, 2001, p. 128) after viewing *Birth of a Nation*. The film, which depicted an antebellum Southern society in which the Ku Klux Klan protected innocent white women and children from the threat of freed Blacks, set the stage for continued mythmaking on the silver screen. Hansen (2001)

compared *Birth* to Steven Spielberg's 1993 Holocaust opus *Schindler's List*, stating both films "managed to catalyze contesting points of view but ... they make visible the contestation among various and unequal discursive arenas in their effort to lay claim to what and how a nation remembers" (p. 127).

In her analysis of *Schindler's List*, Hansen (2001) described the film as a "Hollywood product" (p. 131). Spielberg's work, Hansen argued, suffers from a Barthesian "reality effect," in which the film not only subsumes the tropes, themes, and images of previous Holocaust movies but also "uses them to assert its own truth claims for history" (2001, p. 132). *Schindler's List*, Hansen contended, also perpetuates anti-Semitic stereotypes — "money-grubbing Jews, Jew-as-eternal-victim" — while decrying the inhuman treatment of those same characters (2001, p. 132). In this way, the film attempts to present an idealized picture of an appalling event while at the same time failing to refute the negative characterization of the victims themselves.

Cultural memory provides a flexible, innovative framework for the study of entertainment media portrayals of sociocultural issues, events, and epochs. This study focuses on a particular industry integral to culture, economy, and history of the United States: agriculture.

## Methods

Film has long been studied as an important cultural artifact; this study treats feature films as texts for a semiotic, or visual sign-based, content analysis. Content analysis is defined by Krippendorff (2004) as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 18). The term "context" deserves special attention: As McKee (2001) notes, "There is no way that we can attempt to understand how a text might be interpreted without first asking, Interpreted by whom, and in what context?" (p. 138). Content analysis cannot prove or disprove whether or not a text reflects reality; the purpose of content analysis is to interpret texts as artifacts of particular sociocultural contexts (Crawford, 1988).

## Text Selection

For inclusion in this study, texts met three criteria: They incorporated post-industrial agriculture as a plot device and/or setting; fulfilled the requirements to be considered "culturally significant," operationally defined by the researcher as receiving recognition for excellence and/or wide viewership; and were produced and distributed between 1950 — the dawn of modern agriculture — and 1990. The National Film Preservation Board (NFPB) states films cannot be considered "culturally significant" until 10 years after their release; 1990 marks approximately 10 years prior to the collection of data that grounds the semiotic framework of this study.

Texts were identified as agriculture-related using keyword searches on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), an online resource that compiles development, distribution, box office, and thematic information related to films, television programs, performers, production personnel, and fictional characters ("IMDB Database Statistics," 2012). To develop a substantive sample for analysis, a variety of keywords were used, including "farm," "farmer," "agriculture," and "rural," with snowball sampling effected using the "Find Similar Titles" command.

## Coding

Social semiotic codes classify and frame relationships among meanings, their realizations, and their contexts (Thibault, 1991; Bernstein, 1981). The selected texts were coded into a typology based on the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's study of perceptions of American rural life. The Kellogg study, con-

ducted in late 2001, reported the results of more than 200 telephone interviews with rural, suburban, and urban Americans. The Kellogg study unearthed three primary themes related to perceptions of the rural United States that are directly connected to the nation's food and fiber system: *the pastoral rural landscape*, *the traditional family farm*, and *the decline of the agrarian tradition*. This paper focuses on the first of these: the pastoral fantasy as described by Kellogg study respondents.

### **The pastoral fantasy.**

Based on the results of the Kellogg study, the most common perceptions of rural America are tied to the bucolic landscape. A majority of respondents described rural America as a farm-filled pastoral dream world:

Respondents' notions of rural America are dominated by images of the family farm, crops and pastures ... Family members toiling over a small farm stand at the center of the painting, but in the background are broad brushstrokes of rolling hills, open space, abundant trees, ditch banks and dirt roads. Taken together, this landscape comprises what many respondents refer to as "the country." (Kellogg, 2002, p. 4)

### **Results**

Nine texts met the criteria for selection in the study, beginning with 1955's *Oklahoma!* and culminating with 1989's *Field of Dreams*. These films represent a wide variety of production varieties and commodities, ranging from small livestock farms to massive produce operations.

#### **Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1955)**

*Oklahoma!* (Hornblow, Jr., & Zinneman, 1955) is considered a classic film of the movie-musical genre. The film, adapted from the Rodgers and Hammerstein stage production of the same name, was directed by Fred Zinneman with cinematography by Robert Surtees ("*Oklahoma!*", n.d.). The stage play and film provide a slice-of-life homage to a tightknit agricultural community in Oklahoma Territory circa 1906. The plot details the turbulent romance between cowboy Curly McClain (Gordon MacRae) and his headstrong amour, Laurey Williams (Shirley Jones), which is complicated by the presence of Jud Fry, the lecherous hired hand who runs Laurey's small farm. Underscoring the romantic foibles of the community's young people is a current of tension between the footloose cowboys and the farmers who have more recently settled the territory.

*Oklahoma!* is rife with imagery related to the agrarian ideal. The film's opening credits fade in over a still shot of a traditional farm scene: a red barn surrounded by white fence, haystacks dotting the landscape, and a tidy yellow farmhouse (see *Figure 1*). Following the credits, the camera pans to Curly, greeting the day on horseback to the tune of "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'." A long tracking shot follows Curly as he rides past a field of waving green corn silhouetted against a brilliant blue sky and a pasture full of well-fed, bald-faced cattle. (These tracking shots are especially effective thanks to the film's screen ratio: *Oklahoma!* was shot simultaneously in Cinemascope and Todd-AO, two widescreen formats that allowed the filmmakers to take advantage of the natural scenery in wide shots and to compensate for the movement of the actors during dance sequences and large musical numbers.) Curley's destination is the home of Laurey and her Aunt Eller, the picturesque homestead from the opening credits.



Figure 1. Laurey and Aunt Eller's homestead from the film *Oklahoma!* (Hornblow, Jr., & Zinneman, 1955).

### Elia Kazan's *East of Eden* (1955)

In 1955, Warner Brothers and director Elia Kazan released *East of Eden* (Kazan, 1955), an adaptation of John Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name ("*East of Eden*," n.d.). *East of Eden*, Steinbeck's variation of the Biblical tale of Cain and Abel, is set in 1917 in Salinas, California, and tells the story of prosperous farmer Adam Trask (Raymond Massey) and his twin sons, Cal (James Dean) and Aron (Richard Davalos). Adam, who longs to be a man of "great ideas," attempts to create a refrigerated train car to carry his produce to New York City. When the project fails, he loses his investment. Seeking his father's approval, Cal invests in bean production, believing the incipient war with Germany will raise the market value of his crop. The gamble pays off, and Cal gives the profits to his father as a birthday gift. Adam rejects Cal's money, being morally opposed to war profiteering; in retaliation, Cal shares an upsetting family secret with Aron, who decides to join the army. Adam is felled by a stroke, and Cal remains behind care for his father.

In his review of *East of Eden*, *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther remarked upon director Elia Kazan's virtuosic filmmaking:

The use that Mr. Kazan has made of CinemaScope and color in capturing expanse and mood in his California settings is almost beyond compare. His views of verdant farmlands in the famous Salinas "salad bowl," sharply focused to the horizon in the sunshine, are fairly fragrant with atmosphere. (Crowther, 1955, para. 5)

Like Steinbeck's novel, the film allegorically transforms the California countryside into Eden itself: a rich paradise of green fields where mankind may flourish. As Crowther noted, director of photography Ted McCord's palette is deeply saturated, the colors lush, the expanses wide, thanks in large part to the contemporary film technologies of Technicolor and Cinemascope (see *Figure 2*).



Figure 2. Adam Trask oversees harvest in the lush fields in the Salinas Valley (Kazan, 1955).

### George Stevens' *Giant* (1956)

In 1956, American audiences were introduced to *Giant* (Ginsburg & Stevens, 1956), a sweeping, oversized ode to the state of Texas based on the novel of the same name by Edna Ferber. Helmed by George Stevens, *Giant* was filmed on location in Marfa, Texas ("*Giant*," n.d.). *Giant* follows the Benedict family of Reata from the days of scion Bick (Rock Hudson) and his East-Coast-bred wife Leslie's (Elizabeth Taylor) marriage in the early 1920s to the oil boom of the 1940s and '50s. While wildcatter ranch hand Jett Rink builds an oil empire, Bick and Leslie raise three children and face the turbulent sociocultural changes of life in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Texas.

The pastoral fantasy is traditionally associated with rolling green hills and copious trees: imagery that is somewhat at odds with *Giant's* more desolate West Texas setting. However, the film does pay homage to popular perceptions of rural America. The opening scenes, filmed in rural Virginia, are a kaleidoscope of verdant hues, the hills lined with white fence and dotted with farmhouses and wooden barns (see *Figure 3*). The agrarian gentility of the East Coast countryside is a stark contrast to later scenes set at Reata (see *Figure 4*).



Figure 3. Leslie and her father take in the scenery of their Maryland horse farm (Ginsburg & Stevens, 1956).



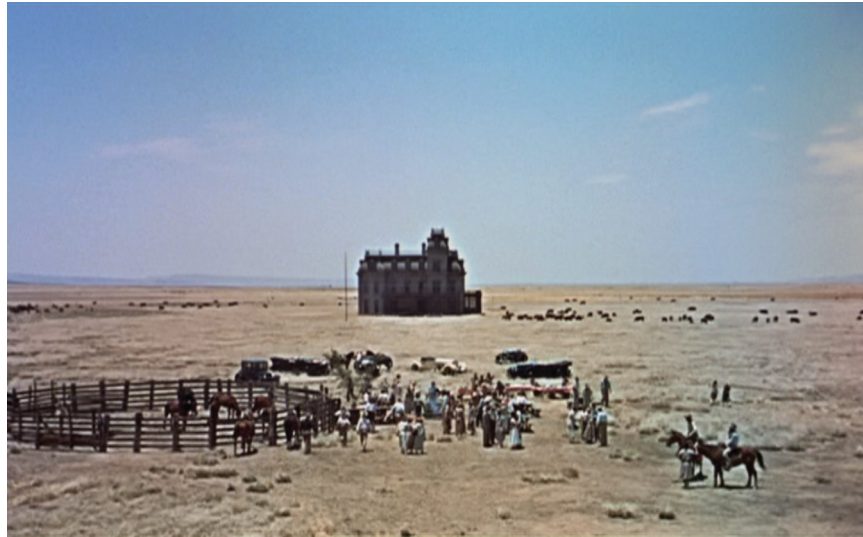


Figure 4. Reata's ranch house looms above its desolate West Texas setting (Ginsburg & Stevens, 1956).

### Charles Nichols and Iwao Takamoto's *Charlotte's Web* (1973)

Produced by Hanna-Barbera and directed by Charles Nichols and Iwao Takamoto ("*Charlotte's Web*," n.d.), *Charlotte's Web* (Barbera, Hanna, Nichols, & Takamoto, 1973) reached theaters more than 20 years after the publication of its eponymous novel. Though not a box-office hit when it debuted in theaters in March 1973, *Charlotte's Web* became a family classic upon its release on VHS in the early 1990s. Set on a New England farm in the 1980s, *Charlotte's Web* follows the titular spider (voiced by Debbie Reynolds) and her porcine companion Wilbur (Henry Gibson) from Wilbur's arrival from the Arable farm — where he has been spoiled by Fern (Pamelyn Ferdin), farmer John Arable's pre-teen daughter — and subsequent discovery of his inevitable fate at the hands of new owner Homer Zuckerman (Bob Holt) to the county fair, where Wilbur is honored for his exceptional qualities, thanks in large part to Charlotte's ingenious campaign on his behalf.

*Charlotte's Web* represents an amalgam of elements inherent to the pastoral fantasy. So powerful is the film's adherence to the conventional portrayal of American agrarian life that the narrator (Rex Allen) describes the rural landscape's flush of beauty in the springtime: "But to me, there's no place more wonderful than a farm in springtime, when the sun is just lifting on the skyline ... Buds swell into blossoms. Eggs hatch. Young are born. Everything's off to a fresh start, and everything is good and busy and brand new." Befitting a children's film, the animation's color palette is rich and vibrant, taking full advantage of the bucolic landscape and agrarian subject matter. The film's visual background, designed by art directors Ray Aragon, Paul Julian, and Bob Singer ("*Charlotte's Web*," n.d.), is a patchwork of fields — a reflection, perhaps, of heroine Fern Arable's surname — peppered with farm buildings, green forests, and winding dirt roads (see *Figure 5*).



Figure 5. Homer Zuckerman drives through the scenic New England countryside (Barbera, Hanna, Nichols, & Takamoto, 1973).

### Robert Benton's *Places in the Heart* (1984)

Set in rural Texas during the Great Depression and filmed on location in Waxahachie, *Places in the Heart* (Donovan & Benton, 1984) was written and directed by Oscar-nominee Robert Benton (*"Places in the Heart,"* n.d.). The film revolves around the struggles faced by widow Edna Spalding (Sally Field) as she fights foreclosure on the family farm. When a drifter named Moze (Danny Glover) offers his expertise in cotton production, Edna jumps at the chance to turn the farm into a profitable business and keep the local bankers at bay. She also takes in a blind boarder (John Malkovich), who, though he wants nothing more than to be left alone when he arrives, quickly adapts to life on the farm with Edna, her two children, and Moze.

*Places in the Heart* was based on writer-director Robert Benton's own experiences growing up in Waxahachie, Texas, in the 1930s (*"Places in the Heart,"* n.d.). *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby (1984) wrote of Néstor Almendros's cinematography: "They have given the film the idealized look of the work by some of the better, now-anonymous painters who, supported by Federal subsidies during the Depression, traveled around the country covering the walls of public buildings, in small towns and large" (para. 7). As the film progresses, the beauty of East Texan agriculture comes even closer to the forefront. The day of Moze's arrival dawns beautifully: a bright sunrise over the horizon complemented by a rural score of chirping birds and lowing cattle. As the Spaldings' cotton fields bloom with snow-white bolls, the camera pulls away from a close-up of Edna, Moze, and the children feverishly picking (see *Figure 6*) to reveal the remaining acreage left to tend. The moment is clearly intended to emphasize the Sisyphean task ahead of the group, but the shot also depicts the rugged splendor of the harvest.



*Figure 6.* Edna and her family struggle to pick cotton in the blazing Texas heat (Donovan & Benton, 1984).

### **William Witliff's *Country* (1984)**

Distributed by Touchstone Pictures, *Country* (Lange, Witliff, & Pearce, 1984) was written by William D. Witliff and filmed primarily in rural Readlyn, Iowa (“*Country*,” n.d.). Witliff co-produced the movie with Jessica Lange, who stars as Jewell Ivy, an Iowa farm wife whose husband, Gil (Sam Shepard), runs her family’s sheep farm with the help of her aging father, Otis (Wilford Brimley). After a tornado destroys part of their corn crop, the Ivy family faces the default of their Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) loans and the loss of the farm, which has been in Jewell’s family for generations. The struggle for the land tears at the family, leading Jewell to separate from her husband. However, the suicide of a local farmer harassed by FmHA officials eventually inspires the community to turn against the government administrators, and the Ivy family reunites to fight for their property.

*Country* is one of the few agriculture-themed films that does not cater to bucolic depictions of farm life in rural America. Roger Shearman and David M. Walsh’s cinematography (“*Country*,” n.d.) is spare, as Ebert (1984b) notes: The filmmakers seemingly tried to “avoid pulling back into ‘Big Country’ cliché shots” (para. 1). The landscapes are not green and sumptuous; spring and summer have long past by the Ivy farm. Instead of the blazing sun and heat of a summer setting, the audience is treated to an Iowa harvest and, later, a bleak Midwestern winter. The film opens with Jewell Ivy taking lunch to her husband, son, and father as they toil in the cornfields of their farm. The men are busy unloading seed corn from a rusting combine into an aging truck (see *Figure 7*). The land is fecund but not lush, the cornstalks bowing to the elements rather than reaching for the sky — a visual motif later employed by 1989’s *Field of Dreams*. When winter arrives, the snowfall does not cover the grime of production but highlights the messiness of farm life as it sinks into tire ruts and puddles.



Figure 7. Gil and Carlisle Ivy bring in the harvest on a chilly Midwestern fall day (Lange, Witliff, & Pearce, 1984).

### Mark Rydell's *The River* (1984)

*The River* (Cortes, Lewis, & Rydell, 1984), written by Robert Dillon and Julian Barry and directed by Mark Rydell ("*The River*," n.d.), completes the trio of agriculture-themed films released in 1984. *New York Times* writer Esther B. Fein (1984) wrote of the three films: "All three movies contain elements of a family's devotion to their farm, a devastating force of nature, an unsympathetic bureaucracy and a strong-willed woman who binds her family during adversity" (para. 4). In *The River*, that strong-willed woman is Mae Garvey (Sissy Spacek). After losing a spring corn planting to devastating flooding, Mae and her husband, Tom (Mel Gibson), seek help from the local bank, where they discover they are at risk of foreclosure. Tom travels south to work as a scab in a steel mill to avoid selling the farm to local entrepreneur Joe Wade (Scott Glenn), but when he returns for the fall harvest, floods once again threaten the Garveys' livelihood.

*The River* shares with *Country* a number of thematic and even narrative elements, but the differences in their cinematography are glaring. Unlike the stark, realist representation of Midwestern agriculture depicted in *Country*, *The River* turns the Tennessee Valley into a picture postcard of rural beauty. Under the supervision of cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond ("*The River*," n.d.), sunrises and sunsets caress the ramshackle but picturesque Garvey farm with golden light (see *Figure 8*); Tennessee hills blaze with fall color as harvest approaches; tall green stalks of corn wave in the summer breeze; even the oft-terrifying river occasionally deigns to trickle peacefully through the landscape.



*Figure 8.* Despite recent flood damage, the Garvey farm at sunrise is a beautiful sight (Cortes, Lewis, & Rydell, 1984).

Perhaps most interesting element of the film's visual magnificence is its creation. The beauty of the Tennessee wilderness is Nature's own, but the filmmakers fashioned the Garvey farm themselves: "The land was turned into the Garvey farm. Workers combined old, worn wood with artificially-aged [sic] lumber to build the farmhouse, barn and various chicken coops, corrals and pigsties on the property, so that they would blend in with the century-old homesteads in the valley" (Fein, 1984, para. 14). The farm had to be fabricated to fulfill both the film's narrative and the director's dramatic vision for the work. The finished product seems incomplete, however, especially compared to the authenticity of *Country's* set decoration. The barn, though antiqued, feels orderly, the old harnesses and tools hung just so, the cattle residing in individual stalls, the goats roaming the property freely.

### **Peter Weir's *Witness* (1985)**

In 1985, director Peter Weir (*Witness*, n.d.) introduced American film audiences to the Amish, a conservative sect of German Anabaptists, in his film *Witness* (Feldman & Weir, 1985). The movie tells the fish-out-of-water tale of John Book (Harrison Ford), a Philadelphia police detective who travels to rural Pennsylvania to protect Samuel Lapp (Lukas Haas), the young Amish witness to a gruesome homicide, and his mother, Rachel (Kelly McGillis). As Book adjusts to life among the Amish community, the trio eludes two crooked police officers until a dramatic gunfight at the Lapp farm spells the denouement of the case and Book's budding relationship with Rachel Lapp.

Critics considered the film's cinematography (by director of photography John Seale [*Witness*, n.d.]) a highlight, emphasizing as it did the pristine farmland, dirt roads, and undulating landscape of eastern Pennsylvania. So beautiful were these depictions of idyllic Amish country that Pauline Kael, the renowned reviewer for the *New Yorker*, wrote of the film's depiction of rural life: "*Witness*' seems to take its view of the Amish from a quaint dreamland, a Brigadoon of tall golden wheat and shiny-clean faces" (Kael, 1985, para. 1). Wide shots depict green fields drenched in sunlight surrounding whitewashed farm buildings in the distance — buildings fashioned by the film crew to recreate an Amish homestead (see *Figure 9*). This imagery is repeated in the film as Book and the Lapp family

travel to a neighboring farm for a barn raising, an Amish celebration of community and hard work.



Figure 9. The Lapp farm represents the quintessential agrarian locale (Feldman & Weir, 1985).

### Phil Alden Robinson's *Field of Dreams* (1989)

In 1989, the “mortgage melodrama” genre added another film to its ranks: *Field of Dreams* (Gordon, Gordon, & Robinson, 1989). The movie was filmed largely in farming towns Dubuque and Dyersville, Iowa (“*Field of Dreams*,” n.d.); the titular field became a major tourist attraction after the film was released. Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner), a Berkeley graduate and lifelong baseball fanatic, hears a voice whisper from his Iowa cornfield: “If you build it, he will come.” One of cinema’s most famous lines sets off a series of events: Ray plows under several acres of valuable cropland and builds a baseball diamond, travels to Boston in search of a reclusive novelist named Terence Mann (James Earl Jones), and road-trips with Terence to a small Minnesota town in search of a former ball player named Moonlight Graham. Back at home, Ray’s wife Annie (Amy Madigan) deals with her brother (Timothy Busfield), who wants to buy the farm before the property falls into foreclosure.

As a narrative work, *Field of Dreams* is a literal pastoral fantasy, combining imagery associated with agriculture with fantastical themes: ghosts, precognition, and time travel. In her review of the film, *New York Times* critic Caryn James (1989) wrote: “Kevin Costner, as an Iowa farmer named Ray Kinsella, looks across his cornfield and sees a vision that glimmers like a desert mirage” (para. 1). The farm, shot by cinematographer John Lindley (“*Field of Dreams*,” n.d.), itself fulfills the pastoral fantasy of most filmmakers: In the midst of the fertile fields, the Kinsellas’ white farmhouse and neatly painted barns and outbuildings stand as monuments to the small-farm idyll memorialized for decades (see *Figure 10*). To punctuate the film’s finale, Robinson affords Shoeless Joe Jackson (Ray Liotta) and Ray the film’s second-most famous piece of dialogue, a telling metaphor for the grandeur of agrarian life:

Joe: Hey, is this heaven?

Ray: No, it’s Iowa.



*Figure 10.* Working in his fields at twilight, Ray Kinsella envisions the field he will build. This mirage contributes to the fantastical nature of the film (Gordon, Gordon, & Robinson, 1989).

### Discussion

Based on the results of the Kellogg study (Kellogg Foundation, 2002), Americans' perceptions of agriculture and rural life continue to be dominated by romanticized visual tropes associated with the pastoral fantasy. These perceptions, based on recycled and often-sanitized depictions of events, constitute our cultural memory of food and fiber production and the agrarian lifestyle. The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the visual elements of well-known films that support the pastoral fantasy and, in doing so, link American cinema to its propagation.

Between 1950 and 1980, portrayals of agriculture tended to idealize food and fiber production and the people involved in the process. Films such as *Oklahoma!*, *Giant*, and *East of Eden* took advantage of new cinema technologies and formats to increase the visual scale of agriculture-centered texts to epic proportions. By the early 1980s, contentious agriculture policies, coupled with the gradual decline of farm numbers, brought the problems facing agriculturalists to the forefront, resulting in the spate of foreclosure-centered agricultural melodramas that endeavored — some more successfully than others — to more realistically depict the struggles of the American farmer.

Of the nine texts examined in this study, only two — *Giant* and *Country* — subvert the idyllic representation of the pastoral wonderland described in the Kellogg report (Kellogg Foundation, 2002) and instead show rural, agrarian America in less-than-stellar form. *Giant*, filmed on location in West Texas, truthfully illustrates the bleached-out prairies of Reata in high summer, a stark contrast to the more idealized agrarian landscapes shown early in the film. *Country*, on the other hand, provides the audience a realistic, almost documentary depiction of the Midwest in fall and winter. The land is bare from harvest, the skies gray and overcast, and the muddy disorder that follows a snowfall is presented without embellishment.

Despite some attempts at realism, most of the films produced in this time span aspire to present agricultural life according to the principles of the pastoral fantasy as described by the Kellogg Foundation researchers: small, storybook family farms replete with crop fields and pastures; rolling hills dotted with acres of forest and crisscrossed by dirt roads. The symbolism of rural America con-

stitutes a typology of visual language related to traditional values. The aforementioned rolling hills and pastures represent the viability and fertility of agrarian land; the verdant shades associated with those landscapes also connote the economic prosperity associated with such fruitful country. The dirt roads, favored by a majority of cinematographers, seem to signify the rugged individualism of the traditional family farmer, set apart both geographically and dispositionally from conventional society.

The continuous and consistent repetition of these visual tropes has, over time, cemented them in American cultural memory. Though it cannot be conclusively stated that film representations of this rural archetype are solely responsible for the propagation of the pastoral fantasy, the abundance of such imagery in the films studied and their parallels to the findings of the Kellogg researchers suggest that media texts have played a key role in the cultural acceptance of this paradigm.

Entertainment media remain an understudied entity within agricultural communications scholarship: To date, only Ruth, Lundy, and Park's (2005) analysis of reality program *The Simple Life* and Holt and Cartmell's (2013) study of the documentary *Food, Inc.* populate the canon of entertainment-media research. This study, therefore, represents a preliminary attempt to delineate the sociocultural influence of entertainment media portrayals of food and fiber production across time. Based on the responses of Kellogg study participants, the agrarian mythos retains a powerful sway on society's perceptions of rural America, and further research is needed to better understand the channels through which idealized depictions are disseminated, the immediate impacts of exposure to these representations, and how agricultural communicators and other industry professionals can counteract those potential audience effects.

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