Frank Norris's "McTeague" and popular culture

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FRANK NORRIS'S MCTEAGUE
AND POPULAR CULTURE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Department of English
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ABSTRACT

Popular culture consists of the events and artifacts of which everyday life is composed. In *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*, the popular culture of 1890's working class San Franciscans is reported by Frank Norris with scrupulous accuracy. In twentieth century versions of *McTeague*, popular culture continues to be employed in innovative ways. Erich von Stroheim in *Greed* expands on Norris's use of popular culture in an attempt to create on film a mirror reflection of life. In the opera *McTeague*, William Bolcom and Robert Altman combine popular culture with elite culture in unconventional ways to bring the story to the musical stage. Finally, on television, in *The Real McTeague*, unconventional techniques are employed by Robert Altman to tell a multimedia tale with a moral.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Frank Norris's novel, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*, was published in 1899. The first quarter of the succeeding century saw the production of Erich von Stroheim's movie version, *Greed* (1925). Almost seventy-five years later, in 1992, the story of McTeague was adapted to the opera stage by composer William Bolcom and, in 1993, it was reduced to the small screen of television by director Robert Altman.

To tell this story, Norris and his adapters utilize various aspects of popular culture. Norris uses actual artifacts and events of San Francisco during the mid-1890's to create an authentic story of the city (or "The City" as its residents commonly refer to it). First, I will look at representative instances of these, both as Norris related them in the novel and as they actually were. Then I will examine how von Stroheim, Bolcom and
Altman used popular culture to convey their own stories of McTeague and San Francisco.

But first, what is *popular culture*? To define the term, I turn to Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause who discuss it at considerable length in the book *Popular Culture*. Popular culture encompasses our everyday lives, explain Nachbar and Lause, and "consists of artifacts (objects and people) and events (activities surrounding the objects and people)."

The word "popular" limits these artifacts and events to those which are accepted or approved of by a large group of people. At the same time, "popular" implies an important element of choice as well. "People must select a cultural artifact or event because they are voluntarily attracted to it--because they view it as an acceptable or appealing way of fulfilling a need or want--in order for it to be truly 'popular'. . . ."

The act of eating, for example, is not included in the realm of popular culture since it is not an activity in which we choose whether or not to participate. On the other hand, the times of day which are commonly accepted as the appropriate times for meals and the types of foods
commonly considered appetizing are aspects of popular culture because they include elements of choice.

Finally, the "popular" in popular culture relates to historical, as well as to current, events and artifacts; it is not restricted to what is accepted or approved of at the present time. We can, therefore, study the artifacts and events of earlier eras as well as of our own time as long as we apply the tests of choice and of acceptance or approval by a large group of people of the era under study.

The culture part of the term is defined in an equally straightforward and succinct manner by Nachbar and Lause. They deny the definition of culture as "only that which is great work and good for us" in favor of one that refuses evaluations of quality. What constitutes culture is custom, habit, lifestyle. It's the mall, MTV, and movie videos as well as the Met; it's Judith Krantz and Jackie Collins as much as Shakespeare; it's Budweiser and burritos as well as Dom Perignon and pate. The qualities of good taste and discrimination are irrelevant.

Nachbar and Lause also include in the realm of popular culture study the examination of subgroups within
the larger, mass society. This allows for the study of the popular culture of smaller, more narrowly defined groups such as, for example, "women," "youth," or "the working class" rather than limiting study to the much broader and more generalized "American" popular culture. The smaller groups are all, ultimately, part of the larger society and, as such, share some general characteristics in common. However, there are artifacts and events that are common specifically to the more closely aligned members of the smaller groups.

The cultural subgroup with which Norris's narrative is concerned is the working class of San Francisco of the 1890's, represented by the people of Polk Street. As a matter of fact, in a letter to William Dean Howells written several months before the novel was published, Norris says of it, "I think it will be called The People of Polk Street." In the end, the title chosen is more accurate; Norris tells the story of the title character, McTeague, and a story of San Francisco as well. However, the novel is not a history of San Francisco; there is no mention of the Big Four or of anyone else who influenced the development of San Francisco. There is no explanation
of the effects of the Depression of 1893 nor is there a catalog of the great artists, novelists or architects who lived and worked in San Francisco.

The San Francisco about which Norris tells us is the city of the lower working classes: the cable car conductors, the bakers, grocers, and saloon and shop keepers who live in flats above their shops. The story of this San Francisco is related through the reporting of precise and literal details of the everyday life of McTeague and his neighbors who live and work on Polk Street.

Norris accomplishes his telling of the story of San Francisco by reporting on the popular culture of this group of people with faithful adherence to actual fact. Polk Street did in fact exist almost as Norris describes it; the residents of that street packed up their picnic baskets on Sunday for a day in the park, drank beer at the saloon in the back room of the corner grocery store and sat in the balcony at the Orpheum Theater laughing at the comedians and marveling at the moving pictures of the vitascope.

This world was brought to the movie screen in 1925 by
silent film director Erich von Stroheim who was fascinated by Norris's detailed portrayal of these working class residents of San Francisco. Von Stroheim wrote his own script of the novel not only retaining but adding to Norris's representation of everyday life on Polk Street. The result was a movie of almost ten hours in length of which, unfortunately, only approximately two hours remains to us today.

Almost a century after Norris wrote *McTeague*, the people of Polk Street were brought to life on the stage when composer William Bolcom's new American opera, *McTeague*, premiered at the Chicago Opera House in 1992. Like the novel, the opera makes use of aspects of popular culture to convey its story of McTeague and Trina. However, in the case of the opera, 1990's popular culture is intermingled with that of the 1890's.

Events such as the picnics of which the Sieppes are so fond and which were of great popularity in 1890's San Francisco are included on the stage as they were in the novel. Picnics endure as popular and inexpensive weekend and holiday pastimes for today's city and suburban residents as well. The picnic in the park as one of the
opera settings, therefore, does double duty. It reflects
the original work and the culture of the earlier time, but
it also reflects a popular cultural event of the current
time.

But why is the decision to retain the picnic as one
of the necessarily few settings in the opera of any
importance? "You take your lunch," says Trina in the
novel, "you leave the dirty city all day; you race about
in the open air, and when lunchtime comes, oh, aren't you
hungry? And the woods and the grass smell so fine!"4
Things haven't changed; picnics meet the same needs for us
now as they did for those of a century ago. This easy
familiarity allows the audience at the opera to
participate with and understand the mood of the characters
in this scene to an extent which is otherwise difficult to
attain.

In addition, the opera employs aspects of today's
popular culture which are not common to the high or elite
culture of the opera world. For example, the flashback
concept so familiar to the viewer of movies and television
is employed on the stage. Rather than following the
linear time line of the novel, the opera progresses
through a series of flashbacks/flash-forwards; action alternates between desert scenes taking place after the murder of Trina and city scenes taking place before Trina's death.

In another utilization of popular culture, Bolcom intermingles popular music of the 1890's with standard operatic fare. Opera, through the orchestra and the singers, uses music to advance the action and to communicate emotion and feeling. Bolcom stretches the accepted bounds of operatic music by incorporating such popular forms as the cakewalk and the barbershop quartet. He blends the music of popular culture with that of elite culture.

Finally, it took television, the ultimate purveyor of popular culture, to bring us The Real McTeague in 1993. This version of McTeague is a one-hour PBS production that presents itself as "A Synthesis of Forms." It is a pastiche formulated of passages from Norris's novel read by Studs Terkel; cuts from Erich von Stroheim's 1924 silent movie, Greed, based on the novel; and filmed scenes from Lyric Opera's performance of Bolcom's opera.

In The Real McTeague, Norris's story is abbreviated
to little more than a skeleton outline of the most essential action. Plot and characterizations are immaterial to the production. The interest lies instead in the form, or rather the amalgam of forms, which is used to create the whole.

In his music for the opera, Bolcom crossed the boundary between popular and elite culture and successfully brought the two together. In the television production, Altman attempts to go a step further; he melds the opera and the movie with oral readings from Norris's narrative to tell his story of McTeague.

McTeague is a man of Frank Norris's imagination; his story was originally told through the unusually extensive use of the artifacts and events of the popular culture which would have surrounded him had he indeed lived in that flat on Polk Street. In his reincarnations in the succeeding century, the use of popular culture to tell his story remains extensive. In addition, forms of popular culture are being utilized in uncommon and unconventional ways to communicate McTeague's story to today's audiences.
NOTES


2 Nachbar 11.

3 Frank Norris, Letter to William Dean Howells, 29 Dec. 1898, Frank Norris Papers, U of California, Berkeley.

"A brute named Pat Collins stabbed his wife to death in the Felix Adler Free Kindergarten yesterday morning. She was the janitress of the school. . . . He killed her because she would not give him money."¹ This report of a local murder appeared in the San Francisco Examiner of October 10, 1893, when Frank Norris was a senior at the University of California in Berkeley. The crime made headlines for several days and was reported in detail. This is considered to be the genesis of Norris's idea for his novel about the brute McTeague who eventually murders his wife in a kindergarten where she worked because she refuses him money.²

McTeague was not only born of popular culture but became a story built on popular culture. Norris relies on the accurate and detailed representation of facets of popular culture to tell his story. These are frequently in

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the form of seemingly insignificant details, but these inconsequential and mundane particulars of everyday life form a framework and a unity for the story. McTeague's preferences in food and drink and the circumstances surrounding these constitute one such unifying device.

When we first meet McTeague, his drink of choice is steam beer; several times a week he stops in at Joe Frenna's saloon to imbibe; Frenna's is located in the back room of the grocery on the corner between McTeague's flat and the car conductor's coffee joint, a block below McTeague's.

Norris describes for us this place where McTeague pleasantly passes the time several times a week. There are a few tables and chairs scattered around; the floor is covered with white sand and the walls are "hung with gorgeously colored tobacco advertisements and colored lithographs of trotting horses." This mode of wall decoration was the rule in the 1890's for the less pretentious of the San Francisco saloons where "the owners catered to the aesthetic sense of their patrons by a display of colored lithographs, most often advertising products dispensed at the bar. . .."
McTeague always stops in at Frenna's on Sunday afternoons to drop off his pitcher to be filled with steam beer, a common practice at the time. Sigmund Krausz in his 1896 book, *Street Types of Great American Cities*, says, "Every saloon is a center to which, through the day and evening, flow streams of empty pitchers and cans, and from which radiate the same, filled to the battered rim." 5

Before leaving his pitcher at Frenna's, McTeague drops a dime in it for payment. Krausz mentions this custom as well as explaining that there are those who view the empty pitcher as "a maw ever open for the reception of nickels and dimes and were he not fed so faithfully, it is barely possible the children of the poor might receive a trifle more education. . ." 6

After leaving his pitcher to be retrieved on his way home, McTeague strolls on to the car conductor's coffee joint where he has his dinner. Norris tells us little about the restaurant except for the meal that McTeague eats there: "thick, gray soup; heavy, underdone meat, very hot, on a cold plate; two kinds of vegetables; and a sort of suet pudding, full of strong butter and sugar." 7

Little though it may be, however, this tells us all we
need to know about the quality of the food served there. The fact that nothing is identified indicates that the items are unidentifiable. The suet pudding that ends the meal is a mixture of flour, baking powder, salt, water and suet ("freed of skin and chopped fine") which is either steamed or boiled. The fact that this one is "full of strong butter" seems to indicate that the cook is adding rancid butter as well as suet. The sugar replaces the dried fruits commonly added and probably the sweet sauce with which it is generally served as well. Since McTeague eats at the car conductor's coffee joint every Sunday, it tells us about the less-than-discerning nature of his palate and that of the other patrons as well.

The cost of McTeague's dinner is undoubtedly quite reasonable. A travel book of the time, San Francisco, relates that San Francisco is referred to as "The Poor Man's Paradise" in part because "he can live better for the same amount of money than anywhere else on earth." It goes on to say that a good meal consisting of soup, an excellent roast, bread and butter and potatoes or some other vegetable and a cup of coffee "made from real coffee berries" or a cup of tea "from a fair brand of real Chinese
leaves" can be had for twenty-five cents.

The guide explains that the restaurants which serve twenty-five cent meals are known in San Francisco as "three-for-twos," because they offer three dishes for two bits. (A bit, the book explains, is a local term for the 12 1/2 cent shilling of our forefathers.) It does not recommend three-for-twos to those with "pampered palates and a hypercritical taste; but they are just the place for the man of small means, accustomed to the cooking of the home or farm, and to him the meal will be more than satisfying."^10

Felix Reisenberg also says that a poor man could eat well in San Francisco; a six-course dinner at Perini's Restaurant, for example, cost only two bits.^11 Albert Genth in his reminiscences of the 1890's recalls that a five-course dinner that included a bottle of native wine could be had for fifty cents.^12

McTeague, accustomed to the cooking of the mine where his mother cooked for forty workers, and not in possession of a "pampered palate," is apparently quite satisfied with his meals at the car conductor's coffee shop since he eats there regularly not only on Sundays but during the week as
After finishing his Sunday dinner at the coffee shop, he stops off at Frenna's again on his way home and carries away his brimming pitcher of steam beer.

Back in his second-floor office, he takes off his coat and shoes and settles back in his dental chair which is situated, Norris says, at the bay window. The bay window was common to San Francisco houses then and still is now. A local newspaper article of June 4, 1893, says that the stranger to San Francisco "will find interminable rows of wooden houses, nearly all lavishly provided with bay windows." The bay window was popular because it allowed more sunshine into the house due to its bowed shape. This sunshine, said The Examiner, provides a "slight degree of artificial heat."

Here in his bay window, where he can watch life go by in the street below, McTeague lazily peruses his newspaper, drawing on his pipe and drinking from his pitcher. Krause refers to the filled pitcher, or "growler" as it was often called, as "the poor man's sideboard" and explains that, unlike "broad-clothed and silk-hatted sybarites," the poor man "takes his straight out the growler."

Finally, full of steam beer, McTeague naps away the
rest of his Sunday afternoons. On awakening, he finishes off the remains of the steam beer, flat and warm though it is by this time. Later in the evening, he joins Marcus at Frenna's for another glass of beer.

We have observed McTeague in the novel on a Sunday afternoon for two paragraphs during which Norris has directly stated nothing about McTeague's personality. However, from the minutia of McTeague's Sunday afternoon, we know already that he is a man of quiet, even boring, routine with simple, uncomplicated tastes and limited means. Norris has shown us the visible aspects and events of McTeague's milieu which reflect the invisible aspects of the man's personality and means.

In addition to his Sunday visits, McTeague generally stops in at the corner saloon on one or two nights during the week to spend a pleasant hour doing nothing more than smoking his pipe and enjoying a glass or two of steam beer. Steam beer is one of the affordable pleasures in McTeague's life as it was for many in San Francisco in the late 1800's. It was a drink common only to the west coast.

Prior to 1850, beer was brought to California mainly by ship. The Empire Brewery of W. Bull, located on
Second Street near Mission in San Francisco, was the first regular brewery in California according to Hubert Howe Bancroft's 1890 History of California. The date when the brewery was founded is unknown; however, it is listed in Kimball's San Francisco Directory, 1850, as are three other brewers: John Neep's California Brewery on Vallejo between Powell and Mason; Ambrose Carner, "Beer Manufacturer," on Sacramento between Stockton and Powell; and G. F. Joseph, "Ale and Porter," on California between Pacific and Broadway.

"The difficulty of introducing malt liquor in good condition gave zest to the business, and breweries spread in all directions," says Bancroft. By 1856, the number in San Francisco had increased from four to fifteen. By the 1880's, the number had swelled to at least forty, among them the predecessor of what is now Anchor Steam Brewing which is still producing beer today. The Langley's San Francisco Directory for 1892 lists under "Societies" the Brewers Protective Association, organized in 1874, for the "protection of mutual interests and promotion of harmony among brewers."

The number of brewers was growing in other areas of
California as well. Placer County, where McTeague worked for years as a car boy in the Big Dipper Mine, had at least six brewers by 1860. It is likely, therefore, that McTeague had acquired a taste for beer well before his arrival in San Francisco, during his years working in the mine and, later, in his wanderings around the state as an apprentice to the traveling dentist.

Initially, American brewers made British-style beers: porters, stouts and various ales. However, sometime in the 1840's the German beer, lager, began to appear. Wherever there were enough Germans to make its manufacture worthwhile, even on a very small scale, lager was brewed.

The term "lager" derives from a German word that means "to store or stock" referring to the long period of "lagering" during which the beer, kept at a cool temperature, goes through a slow second fermentation. At the time, lager was stored through the winter in a cool place and was ready to drink when spring arrived. Its other primary difference from the initially popular British styles was the fact that it was manufactured with a yeast which sinks to and ferments at the bottom of the vat rather than at the top.
Through the 1850's and 1860's, lager beer continued to gain favor in this country and by the 1870's, it had surpassed the English beers in popularity. The American preference was for a Pilsen-type lager (pale, light-bodied, clear and effervescent, and relatively low in alcoholic content) rather than the Munich or dark lager which is dark brown, full bodied with a sweet malt flavor and slight hop taste, and more aromatic and creamy than a light lager.

California brewers, however, ran into a problem in the production of lager. In much of the state, it was not possible to obtain the ice that was necessary to provide the low temperatures (40-48 degrees) at which lager was fermented. San Francisco, however, has a relatively cool temperature year round. Brewers here took advantage of this by placing their beer in large, shallow pans exposing a larger surface of the beer to the cool air. In 1881, Bancroft reports, of thirty-eight breweries in San Francisco, two were producing lager beer, "but since then this production is increasing."

This adjustment to the usual lager process resulted in the combination of a beer fermented at the bottom like a lager but at the higher temperature of 60-68 degrees common
to the production of ales. The long, slow, second fermentation common to lager was eliminated. As a matter of fact, according to John Buchner, writing in *Western Brewer* in 1898, "Steam beer is allowed from ten to twelve days from the mash tub to glass." This major reduction in the length of time needed to produce the finished product was a decided advantage for the brewers!

A disadvantage, however, was the fact that after fermentation the beer was nearly flat. A method of adding carbonation after the beer was in the barrel had to be employed. The solution was a process called "kraeusening" (from the German word "kraeusen" meaning "crown") in which a portion of "green beer," beer at the early stage of fermentation, was added to the beer in the barrel resulting in after-fermentation. This caused a build up of new carbonation of fifty to sixty pounds per square inch in the barrel.

The term "steam" is said by some to have referred to the strong carbonation of the San Francisco brew which hissed like steam when the barrel was tapped." Another theory is that the term derived from the fact that some brewers boasted that they were using the "most modern
technology of steam power," a claim commonly employed in all kinds of advertising at the time, even though steam power had nothing to do in actuality with the production of the beer.®

Whatever the derivation of the name "steam" beer, in creating steam beer, San Francisco brewers conceived the only brewing method to be invented in this country. Steam beer is still this country's only indigenous beer style.® (World Guide 215). From San Francisco, its popularity spread throughout California, the Northwest, Idaho, Colorado and Utah.

Having conquered one problem in the brewing of beer, San Francisco's beer industry found that it faced yet another major obstacle. Frenna's, McTeague's favorite saloon, was not located on one of San Francisco's infamous hills but many other drinking establishments were. The horses that pulled the barrel-laden wagons of the beer delivery men were soon exhausted by the effort of climbing up and down the hills.

San Franciscans again showed their ingenuity by simply stationing their wagons at the top of a hill and then enlisting groups of young men who, in exchange for a few
glasses of beer, would roll the barrels of beer from the wagons down to the saloons. The same young men would then roll the empty barrels to the bottom of the hill where the delivery wagon would pick them up for return to the brewery.

Not everyone shared McTeague's enjoyment of steam brew. According to Baron, steam beer is "not a connoisseur's drink." John Buchner was apparently of similar opinion when he said in 1898: "At any rate, it tastes better than the raw hopped, bitter and turgid ales." However, for the poorer working classes, it had the appeal of the moderate price which was made possible by being a draught beer with a short brewing process.

Norris tells us McTeague pays a nickel for a glass of steam beer. This is confirmed by Felix Reisenberg who says that in the 1890's, a glass of steam beer could be had for a nickel. In As I Remember, Arnold Genthe also recalls that in 1895 "a glass of beer or port was at one's disposal for the large sum of five cents."

However, McTeague doesn't always drink steam beer. Trina, with her finer taste, induces McTeague to give up steam beer for the more expensive bottled beer which costs
fifteen cents a bottle. She "hated the idea of McTeague
drinking steam beer as common and vulgar." The Sieppes
drink bottled beer as McTeague learns on his first outing
with Trina. The occasion is Washington's Birthday and he
accompanies the Sieppes on a picnic to Schuetzen Park
across the Bay in Alameda at Central Avenue near
McPherson. 

In the 1890's, even more so than in the 1990's,
picnics were a popular Sunday and holiday pastime. The
Sieppes are avid picnickers who set out for the park or the
beach with their overflowing baskets on every Sunday and
holiday. They are obviously well provisioned and may well
have stocked up on supplies at The Golden Rule Bazaar.

Picnicking was so popular that The Golden Rule Bazaar
at 718 Market near Kearny Street ran advertisements in the
newspapers headed "Ye Picnickers! Take Notice." This was
followed by an extensive listing of picnic paraphernalia
including such necessities as can openers, corkscrews, and
tin pepper and salt shakers for five cents apiece, alcohol
stoves for fifteen cents, covered splint baskets (twenty
cents), picnic hats (twenty-five cents), and pocket flasks
and walking cane camp stools both priced at fifty
cents.

Norris relates that the "Sieppes—the mother, father, three children, and Trina—equipped for one of their eternal picnics" set out with four lunch baskets. Stashed in these baskets are huge loaves of rye bread, wienerwurst and frankfurter sausages, unsalted butter, pretzels, cold chicken, dried apples and a Gotha truffle. In addition to all the good food, a dozen bottles of beer are nestled in one of the baskets. McTeague is on his way to developing better taste.

After dating Trina for a period of time, he even goes so far as to invite her and her mother to the variety show at the Orpheum Theater. The Sunday night Orpheum was the "apex of every San Franciscan’s week." Patrons "held their regular seats for the gala Sunday night performances year after year." McTeague, however, attends the Monday night performance. He goes the previous week to buy his tickets in advance, a wise move since performances in the 1890's were always sold out days in advance.

For his orchestra seats, McTeague would have to pay twenty-five cents each. Had he chosen a box, the price would have doubled; on the other hand, he could have
purchased balcony seats for only ten cents each. At intermission, McTeague drinks a glass of beer, five cents here as elsewhere while Trina and Mrs. Sieppe have Queen Charlottes (fifteen cents each) and Owgooste has a lemonade, also fifteen cents."

To provide supper after the theater, McTeague has already bought bottled beer and has it ready at his flat and, because Trina and her mother love tamales, they buy them on the street corner near his flat. "The tamale-man or, more correct, the tamalero, is a new and interesting type"

Unfortunately for McTeague, after growing to appreciate better food and bottled beer, he loses the means to pay for them. He sorely regrets their loss: "He missed the cabbage soups and steaming chocolate . . . he missed his good tobacco . . . and he missed the bottled beer that she had induced him to drink in place of the steam beer from Frenna's.""

Norris uses the saloon, the car conductor's coffee joint, the show at the Orpheum and an entire network of popular culture artifacts and events, all of them accurately and meticulously represented, to show the
circumstances and mindsets of his characters. Our lack of familiarity now with some of the aspects of popular culture of the 1890's slows our understanding in some instances.

For example, the steam beer that identified McTeague a hundred years ago as a man of little taste and poor means would today identify him as a connoisseur of microbrews able to pay a premium for the beer of his choice. After almost dying out altogether, steam beer has once again risen to a prominent place in popular culture.

Similarly, the Orpheum Theater at Market and Hyde, the sole survivor out of all the vaudeville and variety theaters of McTeague's day, isn't the same one he visited (actually it's the fifth one). However, as a Broadway touring house, it is very much a part of today's popular culture.

Thus the twentieth century reader, while he cannot exactly experience McTeague's San Francisco, can with discrimination imagine it, bridging the century's gap by emphasizing the similarities in his own popular culture. This, as we shall see, is the technique used to bring subsequent versions of the novel to stage and screen.
NOTES


5 Sigmund Krausz, Street Types of Great American Cities (Chicago: Werner, 1896) 102.

6 Krausz 102.

7 Norris 1.


9 San Francisco (Chicago: Santa Fe Railroad, 1901) 50.

10 San Francisco 51.


12 Arnold Genthe, As I Remember (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1936) 55.


14 Krausz 102.

16 Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California*, vol. 7 (San Francisco: The History Co., 1890) 85.

17 Baron 202.

18 Bancroft 85.


20 Baron 207.

21 Baron 185.

22 Baron 175.


25 Bancroft 85.

26 Qtd in Baron 207.

27 Baron 207.


30 Baron 207.

31 Baron 207.

32 Riesenberg 250.

33 Genthe 56.
34 Norris 160.

35 Husted's Oakland, Alameda and Berkeley Directory, 1892-3.

36 The Golden Rule Bazaar, advertisement, San Francisco Call 20 Apr. 1890.

37 Norris, McTeague 37.


39 Herb Caen, Baghdad-By-the Bay (Garden City: Doubleday, 1949) 127.

40 Orpheum Program, 26 July, 1897.

41 Krausz 90.

42 Norris 160.
CHAPTER 3

MCTEAGUE: AFTER NORRIS

I. Motion Pictures

Within twenty-five years of the publication of McTeague, it was twice adapted to the screen, first in 1916 and again in 1924. By this time, motion pictures had come a long way from those that so intrigued McTeague and Trina at the Orpheum Theater twenty years earlier.

The "magic lantern," as McTeague called the moving pictures, was part of the evening's scheduled entertainment at the Orpheum. He excitedly described the action on the screen: "Look at that horse move his head. Look at that cable-car coming--and the man going across the street. See, here comes a truck." McTeague's Orpheum program listed this as "The feature of the evening, the crowning scientific achievement of the nineteenth century, the kinetoscope."

However, as Alfred Litton points out, the moving
pictures that they were watching could not possibly be generated by a kinetoscope. Thomas Edison's kinetoscope was indeed in use at the time; it had had its first public demonstration on May 9, 1893, at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. The motion picture seen at this premiere showing was called "Blacksmith Scene" and showed three men hammering on an anvil and passing around a bottle of beer. However, the picture was not viewed on a screen; the kinetoscope was a peephole viewing device, allowing only one person at a time to watch the show.

What McTeague and the rest of the audience at the Orpheum were viewing was not the kinetoscope; it was the vitascope, a new invention which projected motion pictures onto a screen. The vitascope made its debut at Koster and Bial's Music Hall at 34th and Broadway in New York City on April 23, 1896. May and June saw its debut in a dozen more cities including San Francisco on June 8, 1896, where it played at the Orpheum for three weeks.

During the next few years, the vitascope became an accepted feature on the program of the vaudeville theaters. However, the interest of many theater-goers soon began to wane as their initial wonder began to
subside. Theaters, therefore, began to either discontinue the vitascope feature or position it at the very end of the show so that those who were uninterested could leave without missing any other acts. Movies came to be known in the theater world as "chasers."

Some vaudeville theaters began to sell off their equipment to penny arcades; the arcade owners closed off sections in the backs of their amusement parlors, filled them with chairs, and charged ten cents admission to watch the moving pictures. This soon grew to be the most popular attraction in the arcades.

The amusement parlor customers were generally of a poorer class than the theater patrons and were less sophisticated; they did not soon lose interest as the vaudeville theater patrons had. In addition, the simplicity of the films made them easily understandable even for the illiterate, and the cheap price made them affordable for the majority of workers. Thus were moving pictures established as an inexpensive form of entertainment for the masses, a position they have generally continued to occupy through the twentieth century.
Thomas L. Tally, owner of a Los Angeles amusement arcade, was responsible for the next innovation in the field. In 1902, he eliminated the other amusements in his arcade and dedicated the entire auditorium to showing films. He advertised it as "Up-to-Date High Class Motion Picture Entertainment Especially for Ladies and Children" and charged ten cents admission for evenings and five cents for matinees.\[^7\]

The success of Tally's enterprise led to hundreds of similar movie theaters opening in cities around the country including San Francisco. At least two had opened there before the 1906 earthquake and, in the construction afterward, a number of them were built. Seven had opened by June, 1907.\[^8\] Initially, they were centered on Market Street. The first of these was the Silver Palace; the Gold Palace at Sixth Street on Market followed almost immediately, then The Unique, the Odeon, the Portola, the Market and the Imperial in quick succession. A number of theaters soon opened on Polk Street as well as in the Fillmore district, the Haight, the Sunset and the Richmond districts. In the immediate San Francisco Bay Area, "more than five hundred theaters were in operation in the first
decade."

These store-front theaters were frequently called "ten-cent houses" or, more commonly, "nickelodeons" referring to the common admission price of five cents. Nickelodeons quickly became established as an inexpensive form of entertainment and socialization. Unlike other forms of theater, moviegoing became a working-class activity.

Scaled ticket prices had made vaudeville and melodrama available to the poorer classes, but once inside the classes were segregated, with those with the cheapest tickets relegated to the gallery. In the nickelodeons, there was only one ticket price and one level of seating. Members of the upper and middle classes were not comfortable with this democratic seating; therefore, they generally were not part of the movie house audience. They were more likely to see films at illustrated lectures or in the vaudeville theaters.

Between 1903 and 1908, the motion picture business continued to grow and movies evolved both in content and length. Comedies and melodramas were common with a smattering of news and human-interest topics. The
newspaper, the dominant form of mass communication, commonly furnished producers with a story idea and moviegoers with a frame of reference when a story that had received wide press and made headlines became the basis for a fictional story. This practice continues today especially in the made-for-television movie genre.

In the expanding search for new stories, producers began to turn to short stories, novels and stage plays, a tradition still for today's filmmakers. They changed the character names and locales and simplified the plots and rarely credited the original sources. In her 1925 reminiscences, Linda Arvidson Griffith, silent film actress and wife of director D. W. Griffith, says, "As the days went by, we produced many works of literary masters... We never bothered about 'rights' for the little one-reel versions of five-act plays and eight hundred page novels. Authors and publishers were quite unaware of our existence."

A significant number of the movies available at this time were foreign made. The most important film of the year 1912 was not an American-made film but an Italian one, Homer's Odyssey. The New York paper Sunday American
devoted two pages to the movie, the first time a motion picture received such attention from the press.

W. Stephen Bush, writing about Homer's Odyssey in Moving Picture World, praised the film's "painstaking care and elaboration of details." Scenes concerning Scylla and Charybdis were based on classic paintings and those showing Polyphemus, the giant, used trick photography, a feature which fascinated the audiences. The film continued to play for several years at admission prices of twenty-five cents and more.

During this time, American producers also evidenced a growing interest in increased realism and fidelity to detail. As more theaters opened and competition grew, there was demand for longer films. Small theaters showed short pictures because they needed to fill their theaters several times a night and the shorter one- and two-reel films remained popular for some time while at the same time the longer films grew in popularity in the larger theaters.

II. Life's Whirlpool

In the years preceding World War I, America began to
develop a disposition of high moral tone. Like other manifestations of popular culture, movies began to mirror these high moral attitudes of its audience. Moral lessons and spiritual causes were emphasized, primary among them: poverty is less important in life than inner goodness; wealth does not buy happiness; the wages of sin are death; love is a spiritual bond, not an expression of sex.

Some titles of movies produced between 1908 and 1914 were: Gold Is Not All, More Precious Than Gold, Greed of Gold, Gold and Glitter, Tale of a Tenement, Plain Mame or All That Glitters Is Not Gold, Honesty Is Its Own Reward, Judge Not That Ye Be Not Judged, and Tempered With Mercy. The stage was set for the first feature movie to be made based on Norris's McTeague and on January 10, 1916 the five-reel film Life's Whirlpool, was released.

This little known movie was one of 677 feature-length films released in 1916 and one of more than thirty thousand films made between 1895 and 1917, almost none of which are in existence today, including Life's Whirlpool. The director was Barry O'Neil; Holbrook Blinn starred as McTeague, Fania Marinoff as Trina.

The film apparently met with considerable negative
criticism. Clippings in the Fania Marinoff collection in the New York Public Library, says Richard Koszarski, show that *Life's Whirlpool* "was viciously attacked by critics for its 'repellant' realism." There were many complaints in particular about McTeague's sadistic biting of Trina's fingers and about O'Neil's extravagant use of closeups.

O'Neil's *Life's Whirlpool* was quickly forgotten according to Koszarski but a review of the surviving still photos of the film shows a "stark visual quality" that was reflected in Erich von Stroheim's later remake, *Greed*.

III. *Greed*

*Greed* was released by Metro-Goldwyn on January 26, 1925. Its title notwithstanding, the film was not produced in response to the earlier moral climate that had generated *Life's Whirlpool*. The impetus to make the film came from its director, Erich Von Stroheim, who had been obsessed with Norris's novel for years. He claimed to have first encountered *McTeague* soon after immigrating to this country in 1909 from Vienna. The book had been left in his New York hotel room by an earlier occupant; he
read it because he had nothing better to do and had been
gripped by the universality of the story.

Von Stroheim had entered the film world in 1914 as an
extra in Birth of a Nation. For several years he had
acted, working his way up to better roles. He had
eventually convinced Carl Laemmle, studio head at
Universal, to back him as a director. His first film,
Blind Husbands, was released in 1919 and was a critical
and commercial success. This was followed by The Devil's
Pass Key in 1920 and Foolish Wives in 1922, also
successful.

But von Stroheim had not forgotten McTeague. As
early as 1920, he announced that he would be directing a
movie based on Norris's novel. His early successes
finally made the dream possible and in 1923 he arrived in
San Francisco at the first of the year to begin work. He
moved into the St. Francis Hotel at Powell and Geary which
he made the base of his operations; there he began work on
the script.

When not writing the script, von Stroheim wandered
the streets of San Francisco looking for suitable
locations for filming. Norris's Polk Street had been
destroyed in the earthquake and fire of 1906. Von Stroheim didn't feel that the current Polk Street accurately reflected the one of the 1890's of which Norris had written; it seemed too prosperous for the Polk Street of McTeague and his neighbors. After much exploration, Stroheim found what he was looking for in a house on the corner of Hayes and Laguna. He furnished the rooms exactly as Norris described them and then made his actors live in them so that they would be better able to feel and act their characters.

Von Stroheim pursued reality in all the other settings just as vigorously. He wanted to film, he said, "through real winding alleys, with real dirt and foulness, in the gutters as well as in real castles and palaces." He was intent on producing films "which would be believable, life-like, even if I had to make them realistic to the Nth degree. I intended to show men and women as they are all over the world, with their good and bad qualities, their noble and idealistic sides and their jealous, vicious, mean and greedy sides." His concern was not with moral judgment but with holding a mirror up to life and showing on film, not an illusion of reality,
but the image of life itself as it really is.

It is often said that von Stroheim filmed Norris’s novel page by page in every detail. This is misleading. He took what he felt were necessary liberties with Norris’s book. He did not leave much out, but he did not restrict himself to the action and events that were present in the novel.

The opening of the film is a primary example of one of von Stroheim's changes and demonstrates his principal reason for making the changes he did. It consists of an episode that does not exist in the book. The details are referred to briefly by Norris in two short paragraphs in which the reader learns that McTeague was once a car boy at the Big Dipper Mine, that his father was an alcoholic, and that his mother sent him off with a traveling dentist to learn the profession.

In von Stroheim’s script these few points have been expanded to twenty-three pages of action involving Mother McTeague, McTeague Senior, McTeague Junior, Dr. Painless Potter (the travelling dentist) and an assortment of minor characters. Most of this action was cut by the studio in the final editing of the film.
Von Stroheim, however, felt this addition was necessary in order to provide viewers with the information they would need to fully understand later events in the lives of the characters. The average film audience, he believed, could not be expected to react as perceptively as the average reader and must, therefore, be provided with more background and explanation. "Frank Norris would have put it in if he had been sitting next to me trying to make a film," he said.  

Von Stroheim's script shows the addition of a number of other scenes that were not in the novel. These include such scenes as Marcus at the dog hospital with a batch of puppies which he is about to kill with chloroform. He evidences no regret himself and indicates disdain for Old Grannis who shows regret at the necessity of the action by sadly petting and fondling the puppies one last time. With the same lack of remorse, Marcus will later destroy McTeague's livelihood by turning him in for practicing dentistry without a license. By seeing Marcus early in the film in a situation which demonstrates his lack of sensitivity and feeling, the audience is better prepared to later believe his remorseless and destructive behavior.
in a situation of much greater magnitude.

In another added scene, Trina argues with a butcher about being shortweighted on sausages. This care and attention on her part demonstrate nothing more at this point that an admirable frugality. However, by calling the viewer's attention to this trait, von Stroheim plants the seed for later recognition and acceptance of Trina's burgeoning miserliness.

A similar foreshadowing is intended in the scene in which a mousetrap accidentally snaps shut on Trina's fingers. The incident presages McTeague's sadistic biting of her fingers later in the film. By showing this earlier event which in a small way duplicates the later one, von Stroheim makes the larger event more readily accepted by his viewer.

Von Stroheim's additions to Norris's text are primarily simple, everyday events. For the most part, these small happenings prefigure larger events to follow; they serve to make the less ordinary, less familiar events more believable. In other instances, they make it clear to the viewer that an apparently innocent or even positive event will turn out badly. An example of this is in the
wedding scene in which a funeral procession is shown passing by in the street below, an event that did not take place in the novel. However, von Stroheim uses it to foreshadow the deaths of Trina and McTeague that will be the eventual result of the marriage.

Another interesting example of this type of deviation from the novel relates to the minor character of the lottery agent. Norris's agent is simply a "stranger in a drab overcoat." Von Stroheim's lottery agent, however, as described in the script, "speaks with the mien of an undertaker." In addition, on-screen he is tall, stooped and cadaverous, visually hinting at the eventual effect of the lottery win. (It is von Stroheim's lottery agent rather than Norris's that will later make it to the stage in William Bolcom's opera; on stage the character becomes even more discomforting by the addition of a sonorous bass voice!)

The genesis of the title for von Stroheim's version of Norris's story is unknown. During filming, it was always referred to in print as McTeague. However, Koszarski reports that on the studio's records the working title was Greedy Wives. A studio memo of February 20,
1923, says Koszarski, shows for the first time the ultimate title of *Greed* but who decided on the title or for what specific reasons this title was chosen remains unknown.

Reports vary as to the exact length of the initial finished version of *Greed* but it numbered between forty-two and forty-seven reels and ran from eight to ten hours. Reluctantly, von Stroheim edited this down to approximately half the original length. Unfortunately, a studio merger and subsequent changes in executives resulted in less favorable conditions for von Stroheim and he knew he must shorten the movie even more. At his request, a friend further edited the film and reduced it to fifteen reels to be shown in two parts. The studio, however, was still not satisfied and had their own editor cut the film to ten reels (approximately two hours). This is the version that is available today.

Among the portions cut from the film were those showing the secondary story involving Maria and Zerkow; the only scene involving Maria that was retained was that which showed her part in selling the lottery ticket to Trina. Along with Zerkow, the characters of Miss Baker
and Old Grannis (including the scene at the veterinary hospital with Marcus and the puppies) were eliminated altogether. The opening scenes involving McTeague's earlier life at the mine and his father are almost all gone with only a very few of the original ones remaining.

Von Stroheim disowned this final version of his movie. It has, however, come to be viewed as an important production in the history of filmmaking. The extensive cuts from the original version are thought to have been destroyed. The final version, though, is available to us on videotape.

IV. McTeague, the Opera

McTeague rested quietly for almost seventy years after his appearance in *Greed*. Then he was brought to life again as a tenor in the opera *McTeague*. For most of us, grand opera falls more into the realm of elite culture rather than popular culture. Nonetheless, the opera *McTeague* demands inclusion in this study of popular culture because of the composer's involvement in popular music, the director's successful primary vocation as a movie director, and the choice of nontraditional musical
forms to convey the story.

October 25, 1992, marked the world premier performance of the new American opera, *McTeague*, at the 3500-seat Civic Opera House in Chicago. Two hours long, with a 22-member cast and a 75-piece orchestra, it played nine sold-out performances, one of which was a non-subscription performance.

A new American opera is not a common occurrence. However, the Lyric Opera company in Chicago is not only one of this country's most successful opera companies, it is also one of our most innovative. In 1989, Ardis Krainek, general director of Lyric announced a long term project called "Toward the 21st Century." The plan was to perform, in the 1990's, ten American operas, three of them to be world premiers. *McTeague* was the first of these and the first opera commissioned by Lyric in twenty years.

The composer that Lyric commissioned to write its first new opera was William Bolcom, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for a set of twelve piano etudes. He had written, in addition, a number of symphonies, concertos for violin, clarinet, and piano, assorted chamber music, and a three-hour oratorio based on forty-six of William
Blake's poems.

Bolcom also had a career as a performer of 19th and 20th century popular music both as a solo pianist and as accompanist to his wife, singer Joan Morris. His experience included musical theater but until he was commissioned by Lyric, he had never worked with a major opera house.

Bolcom's choice of director for his opera was movie-director Robert Altman--*Ready to Wear, The Player, Short Cuts, Nashville, MASH*. Altman's only previous opera credit was a 1982 production of Igor Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress" at the University of Michigan.

Bolcom's choice for librettist was Arnold Weinstein, also a playwright, a poet and an author, as well as a lyricist. Altman is listed as co-librettist. He admits that Weinstein did most of the actual writing of the libretto; his own contribution had to do primarily with the construction.

It was Bolcom who chose *McTeague* as the subject of the opera. Father Andrew Greeley, the novelist, had suggested to him another of Norris's works, *The Pit*. The suggestion triggered Bolcom's memory of *McTeague*. He had
first encountered the dentist while a graduate student working on his Ph.D. in music at Stanford in 1962. At that time, Bolcom was playing accompaniment to silent films screened by the film department; one of those films was Eric von Stroheim's *Greed* which had been based on Norris's novel. The film made an impression on Bolcom and he later read the novel which, he said, "offered an incredible transition in style, from the strong naturalism of the first page to the impressionistic, surrealistic passages of the last page."  

So, thirty years later, Bolcom, Weinstein and Altman began the process of translating the story of the simple-minded, inarticulate dentist and a group of equally unmajestic and unsympathetic secondary characters from the written word to the world of music. Although the story had also been told on screen and it was von Stroheim's film that had first piqued his interest, Bolcom assured me that he, Weinstein and Altman worked solely from the novel. In planning and developing the opera, he said, they did not draw on the movie in any way.  

The first hurdle in translating the story to the stage was that of condensing the action from twenty-two
chapters to two acts of one hour each while retaining the characteristics and significant contents of the original. Omitting the less essential parts of the plot which resulted in eliminating some of the characters. For example, Mrs. Baker and Old Grannis, the sympathetic autumn lovers of the novel, are nowhere to be found. They are absent from the opera just as they are from the final version of the film *Greed*.

Maria Macapa retains her pivotal role as the seller of the lottery ticket but her relationship with Zerkow, the rags-bottles-sacks man, is replaced by one between her and Marcus Schouler, McTeague's best friend. Marcus now covets not only Trina's lottery winnings but the missing gold dishes in Maria's tale as well.

Among the scenes which were eliminated as a means of condensing the action is the one in which McTeague takes Trina to the vaudeville show at the Orpheum Theater to celebrate their engagement. In the novel, the lottery agent appears when McTeague and Trina return to his Polk Street flat after the show. On stage, however, there is no scene at the Orpheum Theater and the lottery agent makes his appearance at the wedding supper to inform Trina
of her winning lottery ticket.

The most forceful scenes in the book are retained and translated into scenes that are equally as striking on stage. One of these is the episode in which McTeague meets Trina and, as the novelist puts it, "... all at once he saw that there was something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer" (25). Here is where we see the beginning of McTeague's downfall.

In Norris's tale, McTeague meets Trina when Marcus brings her to have the dentist fix her broken tooth. She spends long hours in the dentist's chair. Little by little, McTeague becomes entranced with her. As he works on her teeth he finds the feminine odor of her hair so delicious it makes him weak. She begins to occupy his thoughts constantly. He even carries in his vest pocket one of her teeth that he extracted.

In spite of McTeague's growing personal interest, all goes well until the work begins on a painful cavity and he must use ether. As Trina lies in the chair unconscious and helpless, he watches her and "evil instincts leap to life." He struggles against them, repeatedly muttering, "No, by God! No, by God!" until, suddenly, he loses the
battle and leans over her and kisses her "grossly, full on the mouth." He quickly regains control, but "the brute within him is now alive" and it would "watch for its opportunity," because, says Norris, "in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer". This episode occupies seven pages of text.

The same episode occupies only a moment in the opera, but the action is intensified. On stage, as in the novel, McTeague kisses Trina from the side of the dental chair. But he doesn’t stop there; he positions his body on top of hers as she lies in the chair and he kisses her again. The more aggressive action combined with the dissonance of Bolcom’s music reflects the unleashed power within McTeague and his struggle against it.

While eliminating less essential characters and episodes, the opera retains the vital characteristics of Norris’s story by retaining many of the images that are present throughout the book. But these must frequently undergo a translation when they are transferred from one medium to the other. Gold, of course, is one of the most pervasive images in the book and remains so in the opera. In the novel, there are numerous direct and indirect
references to gold itself (in the form of the gold coins, gold dishes, gold mining), to things that look like gold (such as the pots and pans in Trina's kitchen that shine like gold), to the colors of gold and yellow (such as the repeated references to McTeague's blond hair, the canary and its gilt cage).

To reflect this emphasis, Yuri Kuper, the set designer, made gold a central design element in his sets. The huge gold molar which hangs outside the bay window of McTeague's office in the novel is a prominent part of the Polk Street set in the opera. Its presence is emphasized by the way in which it glints and glitters and by the numerous references to it. Trina's gold coins are burnished to a mirror shine. McTeague's yellow canary imprisoned in its gilt cage is present, and the cage is also magnified to a monstrous size that encompasses and imprisons the entire set in the opening and closing scenes.

But Kuper went even further to bring to the stage the pervasiveness of the image of gold by actually gilding his sets. He spent six weeks painting the sets himself with a spray gun containing gold dust and turpentine.
Omnipresent on the stage, the color reflects the growing obsession of all of the characters with gold in one form or another. Overstatement such as this and the grandly oversized birdcage are characteristic of grand opera and, as such, they reflect the expectations of the audience as much as they do the interpretation of the images of the work.

Another example of the translation of imagery from the book to the stage is the treatment of the recurring images of hands. Norris repeatedly focuses the reader's attention on his character's hands: Zerkow's claw-like, grasping hand; Marcus's biting of his hands when he is in a silent rage; McTeague's huge red hands and their enormous strength; Trina's fingers which McTeague bites in order to force her to give him money; and, of course, McTeague's killing of both Trina and Marcus with his hands. In the opera, too, we see McTeague biting Trina's fingers and killing Trina and Marcus with his hands. The repeated emphasis on hands of the novel is further translated in the opera when McTeague addresses his right hand as he wanders in Death Valley: "Remember me?" he asks in the opening scene. "Your were my servant, I was
your slave." Again, in the closing scene: "Hand, Devil hand. You damned devil hand..."

In terms of the music, Bolcom uses all of the set pieces of traditional opera in McTeague: arias, duets, ensembles. But what is of particular interest is his use of turn-of-the-century vernacular music that is not generally found in opera. A flugelhorn plays a Swiss march when Trina's German-Swiss family marches single file into the park with Papa Sieppe in the lead in the military fashion with which he conducts all of his affairs. When the people of Polk Street pause to marvel at McTeague's newly displayed giant gold molar, a group of young men express their admiration through barbershop quartet singing: "I'll be smacked and I'll be dipped,/ I'll be all wrapped up and shipped./ Look at that gold tooth shine;/ McTeague is gonna do just fine."

In the wedding supper scene, a line of waiters parades around the table balancing trays of food high over their heads. The music that accompanies this is a snappy ragtime, the predominant style of popular American music at the end of the nineteenth century. The waiters cakewalk leaning way back and stepping with high strutting
steps. This dance originated among black slaves and subsequently became popular in the 1890's through stage shows and later became a ballroom craze. An article in the San Francisco Call of September 17, 1897, indicates the popularity of the cakewalk. It begins, "The Pavilion was packed; every available bit of space was filled with eager spectators. . . . Promptly at 9 o'clock the band struck up 'El Capitan' and the cake-walkers made their appearance."  

In the opera, the toetapping syncopation of the ragtime music causes the wedding guests to raise their glasses in toast and break out in song: "Here's to the bride, Here's to the bridegroom, And here's to you and you;/ Here's to the Mama, Here's to the Papa, Here's to the whole damned crew." My theater sense made it necessary to try to give my characters something to sing they might conceivably have thought up themselves," Bolcom says about his use of contemporary music. 

However, Bolcom does not use 1890's popular music forms to the exclusion of the more standard opera fare; rather, he integrates short pieces into the expression of emotion and feeling that is the whole of the opera. He
erases the boundary between popular and classical music and synthesizes the popular with the serious.

Robert Altman, as director and co-librettist, had a major impact on the structure of the opera. He too crossed a boundary—the one that lies between the classical tradition of the opera house and the popular one of the movie house. It was he who suggested the structure of flashback that is so familiar to movie-goers but that is not commonly seen on the stage. The opera opens in Death Valley, after McTeague has killed Trina and fled San Francisco. This corresponds to Norris's final chapter. The next two scenes of the opera transport us back in time to Polk Street and the dentist's office which is where Norris opens his novel.

In the opera, we return to the desert five times. The action alternates between the episodes leading up to Trina's murder and the events which take place in the desert as McTeague tries to escape. The effect is to dramatize the inevitability of McTeague's fall, a fact that Norris repeatedly emphasizes to his reader.

Altman brings to the opera stage another device that is familiar to the moviegoer—that of sexually explicit
action. The first illustration of this is the scene in which McTeague kisses Trina while she lies unconscious in his dental chair. On stage, McTeague lies on top of Trina while kissing her rather than leaning over and kissing her from his position at the side of the chair. The audience of the 1990's is familiar with the much publicized phenomenon of doctors and dentists who take sexual advantage of female patients who are under the effects of anesthesia. A comparatively chaste kiss from the side of the chair could not convey to this audience the level of depravity to which McTeague is tempted. The action of lying on top of her, however, elicits a more appropriate level of loathing.

The lengthy sex scene has become almost obligatory in current movies but is not expected in grand opera. Altman, however, declines to honor this distinction and brings explicit, unmistakable sexual intercourse to grand opera. In the novel, Maria Macapa's entire relationship with Zerkow is based on his reaction to her tale of the gold plates. This is demonstrated in the opera in a scene in which Maria lifts her skirts and Marcus/Zerkow unzips his pants; they proceed to engage in sexual intercourse
leaning against the wall of an alley while she sings to him about the gold dishes. The scene serves to illustrate, in no uncertain terms, Marcus's growing obsession with gold.

Popular culture is intermingled with high culture throughout the opera McTeague and the blurring of the boundary between the two is a great success. The opera retains and communicates a clearer and more accurate rendering of Norris's novel than it could otherwise have accomplished.

V. The Real McTeague

McTeague reached television, possibly the most pervasive communicator of American popular culture, on May 26, 1993, through the PBS series Great Performances. The Public Broadcasting System is noncommercial and as such it is television's elite culture; it provides "quality" programming that does not necessarily carry mass appeal. Great Performances is television's longest running performance series primarily showing stage productions of performances such as opera and symphony.

The title of Altman's production is The Real
McTeague: A Synthesis of Forms. The first half of the title remains a mystery; why this rendering of McTeague in three different forms should make clear to us the real, true McTeague never becomes clear. Actually, the McTeague that results is a multi-media Cliff Notes rendition with the plot reduced to the barest outline of the most prominent action.

However, characterization and plot are not the focus in this version. What holds the viewer's interest is the method employed to convey the story line. Altman, who originated the idea, brought together three forms of culture to tell his story of McTeague and Trina. The result is an interesting multi-layered mosaic.

For his one-hour production, Altman employs cuts from the 1992 opera and from the 1924 movie, Greed. The silent film is a form of popular culture from an earlier time while the opera is a form of contemporary elite culture containing aspects of an earlier popular culture. Altman builds in yet more layers by adding oral commentary and the reading of brief excerpts from the novel; Studs Terkel, with his rich, expressive voice, contributes to the production by setting the scene for us, by reading
from Norris's narrative and by explaining to us the lesson that the story teaches.

The opening consists of Terkel reading a brief introduction, "Their undoing had already begun..." while the text of the passage scrolls past on the screen. Then the story begins in medias res with the scene, first from the movie and then from the opera, where McTeague bursts through Trina's window as she cowers against the wall just before he murders her. This approach is not only that of Homer and Milton but is common to the detective show so popular with television audiences: the story starts by showing us a moment of extreme conflict to hook our interest; it then goes back to the beginning to show the events that led to this situation and continues on past this moment to show the resolution.

While the credits run, the characters of McTeague, Trina and Marcus are introduced. The other characters, with the exception of Maria who appears briefly to sell the lottery ticket, are not present in this version. Terkel reads brief passages from the novel in which Norris describes the characters while split screens show the characters in both their movie and the opera incarnations.
Before the production begins, Terkel chats with the viewer. He is in a room furnished with a free standing coatrack on which hangs a fedora, and a big rolltop desk on which sits an old style, round-faced fan and a big manual typewriter. Terkel reminisces: "It was 1926 and I was about fourteen years old. I saw the movie at a neighborhood theater in Chicago. About twenty-five other people were in the house. An old lady was up front pounding away on a piano trying to find the proper portentous chord."

Seeing Terkel among the everyday artifacts of the earlier time and describing the experience of going to a movie theater of the 1920's serves to prepare the viewer for the cuts from the silent film better than any description of the movie itself could.

Now the camera angle shifts and, as Terkel turns to face his viewers again, the backdrop becomes a poster which was not clearly seen from the previous camera angle. It is enlarged as though it forms a wall behind him and is also in poster size sitting on an easel. To a theater patron, its rectangular shape and colorful representation of a canary in a cage immediately bring to mind a theater
program. "And in our own time..." begins Terkel as he goes on to tell that an opera was also made from the Frank Norris novel. Again, the producer has structured a visual frame of reference for the viewer by the use of a familiar cultural artifact.

Norris's narrative read by Terkel provides transitions from one scene to another and fills in gaps in the action. Scenes are shown that represent the major action of the novel: McTeague meets Trina; Marcus "gives up" Trina; McTeague marries her; she wins the lottery; a jealous Marcus turns McTeague in for not having a license to practice; McTeague and Trina are impoverished; she refuses to part with her gold; he murders her and steals the gold; Marcus pursues him into the desert; McTeague kills Marcus but finds himself handcuffed to the body in the middle of the desert.

This version of McTeague is a story with a message and, to be sure that his audience doesn't miss it, Terkel prepares us for it while reminiscing about going to see Greed, "Those eyes, I remember those eyes, crazy eyes, doomed, despairing. The man is stranded in the great American desert hauling his bag of gold, the money he
thirsted for and yet he's about to die of thirst--crazy."

At the end of the tale, Terkel claps his book shut and, shaking his head, says, "McTeague is stuck, a bag of gold in one hand, death in the other." Then, just in case the lesson still hasn't been fully comprehended, he goes on: "The Frank Norris novel was published in 1899. . .yet the novel, the film, and the opera could be today because the obsession that possessed McTeague and Trina may possess us all. In short, it's about us." (Emphasis mine.) Like the fable common to the oral tradition of folk culture, the oral portion of this version of McTeague closes with the moral being clearly stated.

As for the film cuts from the movie and the opera, their primary interest lies in their clever juxtaposition. For example, when Marcus brings Trina to McTeague's dental parlor, the title from the scene in the movie, "Don't you hurt her too much, Mac" is flashed on the screen at the exact moment that the opera Marcus says to Trina, "He won't hurtcha too much, will ya, Mac?"

In other scenes, the singing from the opera is juxtaposed with a close-up of the same character talking in the film. In their day, silent films were shown with
musical accompaniment as Terkel casually reminded us in his reminiscence and this fact reduces the strangeness of the sound of the opera over the film clips. In addition, the juxtaposition of the two is so well coordinated that we seem almost to be hearing the silent film character singing. For instance, in the scene in which Marcus relinquishes Trina to McTeague, we first see the park setting in which this took place on the stage and then the Cliff House setting of the film. Marcus sings, "Go ahead, you can have her," while we see on the screen the film Marcus; the effect is that the words appear to be his. Then as the film character turns on his heel and walks away, in an instant replay, the opera character does the same thing.

The effect of playing the sound of one medium over the silent movements of the other is to blend the two mediums. They no longer seem to be separate, distinct forms. The line between the two is further eradicated by showing on the screen the supertitles shown above the stage during an opera performance. This parallels the subtitles of the silent movie. At the same time, Norris's narrative is blended with the film and opera clips in the
form of Terkel's voice-over which bridges the gaps in the action.

Like Norris and Bolcom before him, Altman makes extensive use of popular culture to tell his story of McTeague. He goes further, however, and merges the diverse forms of oral narration, silent film and musical stage into a single production. In so doing, he makes the process become the focus and the moral become the end point; the story of McTeague and Trina is simply a means of conveying these emphases.
NOTES

1 Norris 60.


5 Musser 123.


7 Jacobs 7.

8 Musser 428.


10 Today's average ticket price is $4.35 (although it runs as high as $8.50 in New York City); in 1970 it was $1.55 and in 1950, $.46. Elaine Dutka, "Who's No. 1?" Las Vegas Review-Journal, 11 July 1996, 14D.

11 Today's filmmakers credit the source but they still feel free to change the plot and characters in any way they wish!


13 Tarbox 93.

14 Jacobs 138-139.

16 Tarbox 3.

17 Samuel Dickson recalls that as a child, he used to play in the halls of the Richelieu Hotel on Van Ness Avenue at Geary. He played with two boys who were some years older than he; one was Holbrook Blinn, the other was Frank Norris. Samuel Dickson. *San Francisco Is Your Home* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1947) 209.


20 There was a second silent movie also with the name *Life's Whirlpool* which was released by Metro Pictures in 1917. It was directed by Lionel Barrymore and starred Ethel Barrymore, Paul Everton and Alan Hale. Kenneth W. Munden, ed., *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States* (New York: Bowker 1971) 517.


24 Von Stroheim, "Dreams of Realism," 7.


31 Norris 19.

32 Norris 14-20.

33 Von Stroheim also made use of ragtime, although in his case it was for the benefit of his actors. He is said to have kept musicians on hand during the filming of all scenes. During the filming of the picnic scenes and the Orpheum Theater-vaudeville scenes, the musicians played ragtime to help establish the proper mood for the actors. Thoman Quinn Curtiss, Von Stroheim (New York: Farrar, 1971) 173.


39 A practice started because few operas are performed in English.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Frank Norris relayed to his readers the visual aspects of the everyday culture of McTeague and his working class neighbors on the Polk Street of one hundred years ago. The dentist was a man who took form and grew in Norris's imagination rooted though the character may have been in the subject of a local news story. The culture in which Norris placed him, however, was real, and Norris reported the details of that culture with the meticulous care and attention to accuracy of a sociologist.

The extraordinary detail and realism of Norris's novel about a working class neighborhood fascinated von Stroheim and led him to make his own version on film. In *Greed*, he expands on Norris's use of popular culture. Besides attempting to use every item and event in the book, he adds even more detail of action and uses it to
foreshadow later events. By planting an early idea in his viewer's mind, he combats later disbelief. By foreshadowing an event, he prepares his viewer to accept its occurrence. He uses popular culture to duplicate life in both its positive and negative aspects and draws his viewer into that life.

William Bolcom raised McTeague to the level of elite culture in the form of grand opera. However, he relied on popular culture to keep his opera in touch with the people of Polk Street. He maintained a connection between his audience and 1890's San Francisco by interspersing forms of popular music of a century ago among the more conventional forms of opera.

Robert Altman brought to the opera a different form of popular culture. He imported techniques which are common to today's popular culture form of movies and integrated them into the structure and stage action of the opera. First, he rejected the linear time line of the novel and constructed the opera around the flashback/flash-forward pattern to which moviegoers are accustomed. In this way, like the reader of the novel, the audience of the opera is repeatedly reminded of the
inevitability of McTeague's fate.

Altman also introduced to the opera the simulated sex scene that is de rigueur in today's movies. The scene in the alley between Marcus and Maria Macapa relates the erotic nature of Maria's tale of the gold dishes for Marcus (Zerkow in the novel) and its position as the basis of their relationship. More important, it shows us Marcus's growing obsession with gold.

Altman did not include the sex scene in his television production of *The Real McTeague*. To create a version with a strong moral stance, he brought together in an unusual combination of the three forms of oral reading, silent film and musical stage. Blending cuts from the movie and the opera with narrative from the novel, he employed an intriguing method to tell a simple tale with a moral.

In spite of the widely diverse nature of the forms in which Norris, von Stroheim, Bolcom and Altman worked, they all used popular culture in an innovative and uncommon manner to tell the story of McTeague.
APPENDICES

I. CREDITS: Life's Whirlpool

A Shubert Feature
A William A. Brady Production
Distributed by World Film Corporation
Directed by Barry O'Neil
Scenery by Barry O'Neil and E. M. Ingleton
Released January 10, 1916

The Cast

McTeague .............. Holbrook Blinn
Trina Sieppe ............ Fania Marinoff
Marcus ................... Walter Green
Maria .................... Eleanore Blanchard
Mr. Sieppe .............. Phil Robson
Mrs. Sieppe .............. Julia Stuart
Selina Sieppe ............ Rosemary Dean
II. CREDITS: Greed

A Metro-Goldwyn Picture

Presented by Louis B. Mayer

Directed by Erich von Stroheim

Adaptation and Scenery by Erich von Stroheim

Title by June Mathis

Photography: William Daniels, Ben Reynolds,
and Ernest Schoedsack

Art Directors: Cedric Gibbons, Richard Day

Editing: Joseph Farnham, Erich von Stroheim, Rex Ingram,
and June Mathis

Assistant Directors: Eddy Sowders, Louis Germonprez

Released January 26, 1925

The Cast

McTeague .............. Gibson Gowland

Trina Sieppe .......... ZaSu Pitts

Marcus Schouler ....... Jean Hersholt

Mr. Sieppe ............. Chester Conklin

Mrs. Sieppe ............. Sylvia Ashton

Maria ................... Dale Fuller

Selina Sieppe .......... Joan Standing
August Sieppe ........ Austin Jewel
The Sieppe Twins ........ Oscar Gottell, Otto Gottell
Old Grannis .......... Frank Hayes
Miss Baker ........ Fanny Midgley
Mr. Heise .......... Hughie Mack
McTeague's Father .......... Jack Curtis
McTeague's Mother .......... Tempe Pigott
Sheriff ........ James F. Fulton
Gribbons .......... Jack McDonald
Lottery Agent .......... Lon Poff
Mr. Oelberman .......... Max Tyron
Dr. Painless Potter .......... Gunther von Ritzau
The Palmist .......... William Mollenheimer
The Photographer .......... Hugh J. McCauley
Frenna .......... S. S. Simon
Minister .......... William Barlow
Mrs. Hiese .......... Mrs. E. Jones
Mrs. Ryer .......... Mrs. Rita Rebla
Mr. Ryer .......... J. Libbey
Deputy .......... James Gibson
III. CREDITS: MCTEAGUE, THE OPERA

Music by William Bolcom

Libretto by Arnold Weinstein and Robert Altman

Directed by Robert Altman

Conducted by Dennis Russell Davies

Sets by Yuri Kuper

Commissioned and Performed by Chicago's Lyric Opera

Performed at Civic Opera House, 20 N. Wacker, Chicago

Performed 25 Oct. & 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24 Nov., 1992

The Cast (in order of appearance):

McTeague ..................tenor, Ben Heppner

Maria Miranda Macapa ..........mezzo, Emily Golden

Marcus Schouler ...............baritone, Timothy Nolen

Trina Sieppe .................soprano, Catherine Malfitano

Sheriff ..................baritone, Patrick Denniston

Papa Sieppe .................bass-bar., William F. Walker

Mama Sieppe .................soprano, Martha Jane Howe

Owgooste .................boy soprano, John Capone

Lottery Agent/Health Inspector .bass, Wilbur Pauley
Dentist. . . . . . . . . . . . . baritone, Victor Benedetti

The Scenes:

ACT I
Sc. 1 Desert I
Sc. 2 Polk Street
Sc. 3 Dentist Office
Sc. 4 Desert II
Sc. 5 Fairgrounds
Sc. 6 Photo Studio

ACT II
Prelude Desert
Sc. 1 Polk Street
Sc. 2 Dentist Office
Sc. 3 Desert III
Sc. 4 Polk Street
Sc. 5 Desert IV
Sc. 6 Trina's Bedroom
Sc. 7 Desert V
NOTES

1 Kenneth W. Munden, ed., The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States (New York: Bowlker 1971).

2 Munden 315.

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