

How Not To Read Pictures:

The History of Grain Elevators in Buffalo, Photography, and European Modernist Architecture
1900 to 1930

Granaries (Getreidespeicher) have been used by human societies ever since the time of ancient Egypt. One reads the following famous story in Chapter 41 of the book of *Genesis*:

And let them gather all the food of these good years that come, and lay up corn under the hand of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it ... And Joseph laid up corn as the sand of the sea, very much, until they left off numbering; for it was without number ... And the famine was all over the face of the earth; and Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold unto the Egyptians; and the famine was sore in the land of Egypt. And all countries came into Egypt to Joseph to buy corn; because the famine was sore in all the earth.¹

This is a crucial story for both the myth of the United States of America, and the American people themselves. According to the song "America the Beautiful", the country is beautiful "for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain". For *Henry Wallace*, the Secretary of Agriculture in the 1930s, the "Joseph Idea" – as he called his proposal for an ever-full American storehouse – would be sound government policy.² But these ambercolored waves of grain have always had the flavour, so to speak, of ancient Egypt. In 1927, the American painter *Charles Demuth* – needing a title for his painting of a granary in his hometown, Lancaster, Pennsylvania – was almost obligated to use the cryptic phrase *My Egypt*. In the words of the American art historian Karal Ann Marling, "the triangular patterns of the diagonal force lines, the subtle but insistent angles of the shed roofs, and the isolation of the image all locate the primary analogue (of *My Egypt*) at the Great Pyramid of Egypt".³

But America has required more than just "God's grace" to become the Egypt of the modern world. It has required the invention of a new kind of granary. In the United States, that new granary is called a grain elevator – a phrase for which there is no equivalent in a European language such as German. For example, throughout the recent translation of Reyner Banham's pioneering work on the subject of the influence of American industrial building on European architectural modernism, "grain elevator" is translated as *Getreidespeicher* or *Getreidesilo*, but not as *Getreideaufzug*. Paradoxically, this is done despite the fact that Banham himself writes that "what makes a grain elevator a grain elevator ... is ... its mechanical conveying equipment, which brings the grain up to the storage container".⁴

The modern grain elevator – or, to be precise, the granary that can move as well as store grain – was invented in the winter of 1842-43, in *Buffalo*, New York, by the businessman *Joseph Dart* and the engineer *Robert Dunbar*. A proverb has it that "necessity is the mother of invention", but, in the case of the grain elevator, it appears that necessity and the desire to make a profit were the parents of invention. Buffalo is located at the easternmost and, topographically speaking, lowest part of the Great Lakes, and at the western terminus of the Erie Canal. If Buffalo is used as the "trans-shipment" point – that is, the point at which grain