

The Cry of the Children

By Ned Thanhouser

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On April 30, 1912 Edwin Thanhouser released his social justice tour de force "The Cry of the Children." The film's topic was ripped from the headlines, as just two months before, 25,000 textile workers had walked off the job at the American Woolen Company in Lawrence, Massachusetts to protest wage reductions, triggering one of the nation's largest and most widely publicized strikes. Most of the workers were immigrants who toiled for low wages in grueling and dangerous conditions, and half of them were young women and children. As histories note, the mortality rate for children working in the mills was 50% by age six, and a third of all adult workers died of injury or disease by the age of 25.¹ Thanhouser's two-reel film was produced in an era when the economic exploitation of working class women and children was common practice, and Thanhouser's production, along with other films (such as Edison's 1912 "Children and Labor")² advanced the national discussion during the Progressive Era that redefined the discourse surrounding child labor.

The title of the film is taken from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1843 social protest poem, "The Cry of the Children,"³ which contributed to the movement for child labor reform in the coal mines of England. Stanzas from the poem are used as inter-titles in the film to create a narrative structure that condemns the rampant exploitation of the working class (little Alice and her family) by the ruling rich (the mill owner and his wife) as they heedlessly pursue maximum profits at the lowest wages. These intertextual references, combined with smart marketing that linked Thanhouser's sentiments with those of President Theodore Roosevelt's condemnation of child labor, positioned the movie as a powerful Progressive Era plea for labor reform in the United States.

Thanhouser's effective use of mise-en-scene created three distinct settings to establish a cinematic discourse for the film. First, scenes were shot in an actual textile factory to illuminate the harsh working conditions in the mill in places like Lawrence, Massachusetts. Historically accurate shots show mill workers engaged in the repetitive and dangerous work that appalled Thanhouser and other Progressives. Second, the factory workers' home depicts a run-down flat to establish the poverty-stricken life of

Tues., April 30 "CRY OF THE CHILDREN" IN TWO REELS

THE THANHOUSER

WO-A-WEEK

Tues., April 30 "CRY OF THE CHILDREN" IN TWO REELS

ASK YOUR EXCHANGE FOR 3-SHEETS FOR

The Cry of the Children

Also 2 Kinds of 1-Sheets. Ask Hennegan & Co., Cincinnati, O., for Heralds



IN 2 REELS, TUESDAY, APRIL 30th
Suggested by the Poem of
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Roosevelt said at Louisville: "When I plead the cause of the child toiling at inhuman labor, I am not only fighting for the weak; I am fighting also for the strong." Are YOU fighting for the strong? Then get your date TO-DAY.

MISS ARABELLA SNAITH Florida Funnyfilm
RELEASED FRIDAY, MAY 3d

This is a comedy that makes you roar and isn't slapstick. There CAN be such comedy—we've proved it before. This story of the adventures of the man who wrote a "best seller" is refined, first and last. And said adventures ARE ludicrous—they bring him a wife and they lose him one! Desirable funny film for discriminating audiences.

Thanhouser Co., New Rochelle, N. Y.
Send me FREE Lobby Decorations for your features "In April." I am not getting "The Thanhouser News."

Thanhouser Company
New Rochelle, New York
Sole Company Agents for U. S. and Canada

TUESDAY, MAY 29... "JESS"
BY THE AUTHOR OF "SHE"



An advertisement promoting "The Cry of the Children" to theater owners. Courtesy Thanhouser.

the working class. Watching the family awake in the morning to a cold breakfast and their despondence as they go to work each day reinforced the hopelessness of the situation forced upon them by the mill owner. And finally, juxtaposed with the workers' hovel, the scenes of the mill owner's wife being pampered by butlers and footmen in her opulent home is painful for the viewer to watch.

The remarkably fluid and well-paced editing of "The Cry of the Children" foreshadowed the future of filmmaking 1920s and beyond. Lap dissolves were used for psychological effect, and subtle camera tilt-followed the actors.

Thanhouser staged scenes to emphasize depth and fore-to-back movements, and groups are handled well with crowds progressing towards the camera, providing a feeling of depth and motion. Finally, the clever use of double-exposure in the closing scenes introduced a subjective view of the working family that little Alice's death was preferable to her miserable life on earth working at the mill.

These examples, along with his bold choice of subject matter, demonstrates Edwin Thanhouser's role as a pioneer in the world of early cinema. Twice as long as most productions from that period, it reflected Thanhouser's advocacy of films made at "natural length," rather than the standard one-reel format supplied by other producers for commercial reasons. Although some elements of the story are melodramatic, these clichés were expected in that era, and do little to detract from the cinematic skill and social importance of this film itself. There should be no doubt that Thanhouser's "The Cry of the Children" contributed to a new social realism style of filmmaking in the America, and helped mark both the emerging political power of cinema, and the potential for movies to make significant contributions to society.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_textile_strike, accessed Dec. 20, 2011.

² <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0002098/>, accessed Dec. 20, 2011.

³ <http://www.bartleby.com/246/260.html>, accessed Dec. 20, 2011.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Ned Thanhouser is the grandson of silent film pioneers Gertrude and Edwin Thanhouser and is president of Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc. Since 1986, he has been actively involved in the research, acquisition, preservation and publication of the history, surviving films, and related ephemera from the Thanhouser studio that operated in New Rochelle, NY from 1909 to 1918. Working with film archives and private collectors, Mr. Thanhouser has produced [fourteen DVD](#) titles that contain 57 surviving Thanhouser films not seen by the public for over 100 years. His most recent accomplishment is the 50 minute documentary "The Thanhouser Studio and the Birth of American Cinema" (2014) that is available on demand at www.vimeo.com/ondemand/thanhouser.