

The Evidence of the Film

By Ned Thanhouser

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The transitional era in US cinema (ca. 1907 to 1913) bridged the end of the “primitive” period with the beginning of multi-reel “feature” films. Early “primitive” films were characterized by a single shot, in full frame, with a single point of view that told familiar stories people would recognize and understand. Editing was used to join shots to extend the action or to clarify the events for the audience by showing the same action from a different perspective. “Transitional” films developed new cinematic techniques that allowed the introduction of motivated characters and enabled more complex cause-and-effect narratives.

Thanhouser Company was founded in 1909, early in the “transitional” era. The films it produced over the next four years were a reflection of the changes pioneered by D.W. Griffith from 1908 to 1913 while he was at American Biograph. The Thanhouser factory, based in New Rochelle, New York, was “Forty-five Minutes from Broadway”¹ and the Biograph studio, located on 14th Street. By 1913 when D.W. Griffith ended his tenure at Biograph, he had directed over 450 films. It was during this period at Biograph that Griffith developed and refined his ideas on narrative development, cinematography, and editing.²

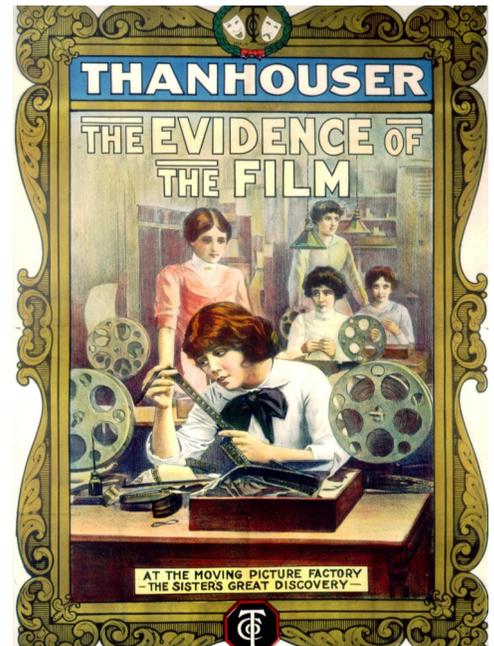
Griffith and Thanhouser had direct contact during this period. As recounted in a 1976 interview with Victor Heerman (who in 1909 worked at a New York theatrical booking agency while Thanhouser was just getting started), the first contact was the hiring of a cameraman by Thanhouser from Biograph.³ In 1911, Edwin Thanhouser hired Florence Labadie, the lead actress in “Evidence,” after she had spent a year at Biograph. In 1913, Griffith left Biograph and moved to Mutual where he became, among other jobs, a consultant to Thanhouser.⁴ He subsequently went on to direct his epic Civil War drama, “The Birth of a Nation.” The prime investor allowing Griffith to produce this groundbreaking film was Harry E. Aitken. He was also the money behind Charles J. Hite who bought out Edwin Thanhouser’s interests in his film enterprise in April 1912 and became part of the Mutual program. The cross-pollination of talent between the two studios helped proliferate the innovations Griffith pioneered at Biography to films produced by Thanhouser.

“The Girl and Her Trust” (1912) is an excellent example of Griffith’s pioneering techniques while at Biograph. This film consists of approximately 142 shots that tells a dramatic story about two tramps that assault a telegraph office to rob \$2000 delivered by train. The telegraphist girl, entrusted to protect the money, telegraphs the next station resulting in the men being captured. Griffith advances the narrative through the use of parallel actions

of the girl and the tramps.

The *medium shot* (aka *American shot*) is used extensively with an occasional *close up* to emphasize detail and *long shot* to show scale; the second half of the film utilizes multiple *traveling shots* to highlight chase sequences.

All shots are *high-key* lighting with several showing *multiple planes of action*. While Griffith did not invent these shots, he made their use standard and combined them to make whole film sequences.



Original release poster.
Courtesy Thanhouser.

Griffith’s most significant contribution to early film, *cross-cut* editing, is utilized in “Trust” to weave together the two sets of parallel action at an increasingly frenetic pace as the film builds to a climax with the girl being rescued and the tramps arrested. Griffith’s films, like “Trust,” were released to the public to meet commercial demands of his employer. At the same time, they set the benchmark for “state of the art” conventions of the “transitional” era for all to see on a weekly basis, including the directors and cameramen at Thanhouser Company.

“The Evidence of the Film,” produced in the autumn of 1912 and released to distribution on January 10th, 1913, was typical of the dramas produced by Thanhouser. In this one-reel melodrama, directors Edwin Thanhouser and Lawrence Marston demonstrate many of the innovations Griffith had pioneered in narrative development, cinematography and editing. This one-reel melodrama runs approximately 14 minutes and 30 seconds and consists of 57 “shots.”⁵ The narrative development of “Evidence” progresses through six logical segments:

1. Establishing the relationship of the messenger boy and his sister who works at the motion picture company.
2. Introduction of the dishonest stockbroker who plots to cheat a woman out of her \$20,000 investment by substituting a dummy package for the real bond certificates.
3. The dishonest broker exchanging the dummy bonds for the real bonds and place blame on the messenger boy. This exchange is inad-

- vertently captured on film by the moving picture company that employs the sister
4. The messenger boy is accused and sent to jail for theft of the bonds
 5. The sister discovers the stockbroker's exchange of packages through examining of film clips at the moving picture company where she works
 6. The sister exonerates her brother with "the evidence of the film" and the dishonest stock broker is arrested

As in "Trust," the main characters have highly contrasting personalities that come into conflict – a dastardly stockbroker and a loving sister. The stockbroker has no conscience when he plots to exploit the young messenger boy for his own purposes. The distraught sister goes to great lengths to exonerate her brother. The resolution of this conflict is by the actions of the sister and advanced by the use of cinematography and editing techniques pioneered by Griffith.

The cinematography used in this film is consistent with Griffith's principles established at Biograph.⁶ The lighting is consistently *high key*, indoors and out, and the camera remains fixed with no movement. Sixty-five percent (36/57) of the shots in "Evidence" are *medium shot* exposed at eye level. Director Marston, who was a strong proponent of the *medium shot*, was quoted in a January 15, 1913 interview with "The New York Dramatic Mirror," "Let's walk down to the ten-foot foreground, focus sharp enough to show the red vesicles in the blue of the eye and tell what we look like."⁷ *Close-up* shots are used of Florence LaBadie talking on the phone to her brother and *two-shots* of the policeman and the brother on the phone. These shots are utilized in the same manner as Griffith to indicate a change in emotions or to draw attention to details that could not otherwise be seen by the audience, such as the extreme *close-up* images of the filmstrip or a hand written letter.

Multiple planes of action are used several times in "Evidence" to advance the narrative. In shot #16 we see the clerk with the package to be delivered by the messenger boy, the secretary is typing in the middle ground, and in the background we see the broker enter the room, walk to the foreground and discuss matters with the clerk. Also, in shot #56 we see the judge in the background informing the broker of the new evidence. The broker then walks towards the camera to look at the film as he realizes he has been caught.

Thanhouser and Marston use many of the editing techniques in "Evidence" that were developed by Griffith. First, we see *analytical editing* as the camera moves in from the medium shot to a *close up* to reveal additional details and to focus the attention of the viewer. An example is the *medium shot* (shot #34) of LaBadie editing film at the factory as she is summoned to the phone. Next is a *two-shot* with her and a co-worker handing her the phone, followed by a

close up of her of her talking on the phone with her brother. The use of *continuity editing* is also seen throughout "Evidence" such as when characters walk thru doors between rooms inside the broker's office (shots #12 & 13) and when people leave the office building to the street outside (shots #16 & 17). A cut to an *extreme close-up* is also used as a *point-of-view* shot to reveal the contents of a letter (shot #6) and images on a filmstrip (shot #48) that would otherwise be invisible to the audience. Finally, the use of the *cross-cut* editing between close-ups of LaBadie and her brother on the telephone (shots #35 to #42) establishes not only their physical distance but heightens the drama by the use of rapid cuts back and forth as the dialog progresses summarizing the boy's plight.

"The Evidence of the Film" demonstrates Griffith's influence on Thanhouser's narrative development, cinematography, and editing. Thanhouser exploited these innovations to successfully produce and sell silents as one of the pioneering independent studios in the early days of film. Thanhouser quickly adopted Griffith's innovations shows he was not only a state-of-the-art filmmaker, but also an astute businessman. Anthony Slide summarized Edwin Thanhouser's role in the early film industry, "He is best viewed as a theatrical businessman who concentrated on doing two things and doing them well: producing and selling films."⁸

¹ As made popular by George M. Cohen's 1906 play and song *Forty-five Minutes from Broadway*.

² Mast, Gerald and Kawin, Bruce F. *A Short History of the Movies*, 7th Edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000. Page 51.

³ Bowers, Q. David. *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, CD-ROM. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation. 1997. Chapter 2: Into the Film Industry – Victor Heerman's Recollections.

⁴ Ibid. Biographic entry for D.W. Griffith.

⁵ Thanhouser, Edwin W. Synopsis and Shot-by-Shot analysis of *The Evidence of the Film*. 2002.

⁶ Bowers, Q. David. *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, CD-ROM. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation. 1997. Chapter 2: Into the Film Industry – Victor Heerman's Recollections.

⁷ Ibid. Biographic entry for Lawrence Marston.

⁸ Bowers, Q. David. *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, CD-ROM. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation. 1997. Forward by Anthony Slide.

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

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