

## Cinémas

# Narration in the Transitional Cinema: The Historiographical Claims of the Unauthored Text

Charlie Keil

---

Des procédures historiographiques en cinéma  
Volume 21, numéro 2-3, printemps 2011

URI : [id.erudit.org/iderudit/1005586ar](http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1005586ar)  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1005586ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Cinémas

ISSN 1181-6945 (imprimé)  
1705-6500 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer cet article

Keil, C. (2011). Narration in the Transitional Cinema: The Historiographical Claims of the Unauthored Text. *Cinémas*, 21 (2-3), 107–130. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005586ar>

---

### Résumé de l'article

Notre connaissance de l'histoire du cinéma entre 1908 et 1913, cette période dite « de transition », s'est considérablement accrue depuis quelques décennies, notamment grâce aux études qui ont été menées sur les institutions-clés de cette transition, mais aussi sur différents sites d'exhibition et de réception des films, de même que sur certaines instances de régulation et de diffusion. Malgré ces avancées, l'analyse formelle des films de cette période repose largement sur un seul exemple, celui de D.W. Griffith, que Tom Gunning qualifie d'instigateur du « système narratif » dans son important ouvrage *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*. C'est pourtant un accident historique — lequel a voulu que les films de Griffith survivent, contrairement à ceux de ses contemporains — qui a façonné l'approche des historiens souhaitant retracer le développement des procédés narratifs durant cette époque charnière allant de 1908 à 1913. Plutôt que de mettre en doute l'importance de Griffith en tant que réalisateur avant-gardiste et influent, les historiens doivent chercher à mieux contextualiser l'apport de Griffith, réécrivant par là même une histoire formelle capable d'accueillir la dimension de l'auteur, sans qu'elle y agisse comme principe directeur. À cet égard, le présent article profitera du projet actuel de restauration et de distribution des films Thanhouser produits entre 1910 et 1913, afin d'expliquer comment les « textes sans auteur » de cette période contribuent à étoffer l'historiographie de la période dite de transition.

Tous droits réservés © Cinémas, 2011

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>]

---

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. [www.erudit.org](http://www.erudit.org)

# Narration in the Transitional Cinema: The Historiographical Claims of the Unauthored Text

Charlie Keil

## ABSTRACT

Though our knowledge of the transitional era has increased substantially over the last few decades, incorporating studies of pivotal institutions, exhibition and reception contexts, and forces of regulation and circulation, formal analysis of the period's films is still indebted to the singular example of D.W. Griffith, identified as the instigator of the "narrator system" in Tom Gunning's influential book, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of the American Narrative Film*. But the historical accident that resulted in Griffith's films surviving when those of his contemporaries largely disappeared has defined most historians' approach to charting a history of narrational changes during the pivotal years of 1908-1913. Rather than challenge Griffith's importance as an enterprising and influential filmmaker, historians require the means to better contextualize Griffith's contributions, rewriting in the process a formal history that can incorporate authorship without being defined by it as a governing principle. To this end, this essay will use the opportunity provided by the ongoing restoration and distribution of Thanhouser films from 1910-1913 to investigate how the "unauthored text" from this period can aid in our endeavours to expand the contours of the historiography of the transitional era.

*Voir le résumé français à la fin de l'article*

The historian is neither the humble slave, nor the tyrannical master, of his facts. The relation between the historian and his facts is one of equality, of give-and-take. As any working historian knows, if he stops to reflect on what he is doing as he thinks and writes, the historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his

interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. It is impossible to assign primacy to one over the other.

E.H. Carr, *What is History?*

One of the first lessons of historiography, elucidated by E.H. Carr some fifty years ago, is that historians make history out of the facts at hand. Despite Carr's reluctance to assign primacy to either the historian or the facts that she depends upon, the notion of "give-and-take" means that sometimes recently revealed facts push the historian to new insights, and sometimes the historian reanimates already familiar facts by posing paradigm-shifting questions. But what if we consider films as facts, or, to use Carr's more specific term, "historical facts"? If it is the case that all facts are mediated and require the historian's interpretive powers before being transformed into historical facts for the purposes of a particular historical account, then films do not function so differently from any other order of artifact ripe for use by the historian. And yet, film's materiality, which permits constant regeneration and increased circulation, particularly in the current digital era, poses challenges to the assumption that all facts are the same. Ironically, this very materiality of film, which has often contributed to its rarity, now functions as the literal base for its redefinition as a document from the past that can be acquired by going online or purchasing a DVD. Exhumed from the archive and released again to viewers, early films as historical facts can challenge received orthodoxies or confirm longstanding assumptions on a scale not possible when they existed only as rare prints available only to the most intrepid of researchers.

What might this change in the availability of selected early films mean to our sense of histories that derive from the textual record? Do the terms of historical inquiry (and the historiographical principles underlying them) undergo a noticeable change when historians see a paucity of documents replaced by a surfeit? As a way of understanding how the democratization of the archive changes the historian's relation to the film as historical fact, I will turn to the case of Thanhouser, a motion picture

manufacturer barely acknowledged in most histories until fairly recently. Through the efforts of a descendant of the company's founders, a healthy percentage of extant Thanhouser productions has become available for purchase, supported by a plethora of web-based research resources.<sup>1</sup> This change in status for the Thanhouser corpus as an historical fact mirrors how the vast textual past of the medium has become progressively more available to researchers with the advent of home video formats, and begun to approximate (and occasionally surpass) the visual standards of 35mm archival materials. In the case of Thanhouser, the changed access has been particularly dramatic, broadening substantially the range of American transitional-era texts that are readily available. (The only comparable initiative for the same historical period would be the much more modest box-set of Edison films released by Kino in 2005, with only the final two disks of the four-disk set devoted to productions from 1907 and later.)

In what follows, I will contrast the centrality accorded D.W. Griffith's work at Biograph within histories of American transitional cinema to the role that the output of other companies plays, one tied to the issue of textual access. I will then outline how the Thanhouser materials have been disseminated, before considering how their widespread availability might alter particular aspects of transitional-era historiography. More specifically, one could argue that formal analysis of the period's films remains dominated by attention to the work of Griffith (witness the publication of the multi-volume Griffith Project, coinciding with a comprehensive retrospective of the director's Biograph oeuvre), who has been heralded as the instigator of the "narrator system" in Tom Gunning's seminal book, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of the American Narrative Film* (1991). Rather than challenge Griffith's importance as an enterprising and influential filmmaker, historians require the means to better contextualize his contributions, rewriting in the process a formal history that can incorporate authorship without being defined by it as a governing principle. To this end, I will use the opportunity provided by the ongoing restoration and distribution of Thanhouser films from 1910-1913 to investigate how the

“unauthored” text from this period can aid in endeavours to expand our understanding of the transitional era. In so doing, I will explore to what degree the “narrator system” might be understood as a product of the period rather than a specific set of formal devices employed by its most famous practitioner.

### **The Griffith Legacy**

In 1913, D.W. Griffith pulled back the cloak of anonymity that had shrouded his career at Biograph by taking out an ad in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* wherein he identified himself as the “Producer of all great Biograph successes.” Eager to assert his pre-eminence within the U.S. film industry, Griffith went on to take credit for “revolutionizing Motion Picture drama and founding the modern technique of the art.” Beyond establishing himself as a formal innovator in this advertisement, laying claim to techniques as varied as “large or close-up figures,” “the switch-back” and “the fade-out,” Griffith (1913, p. 36) also argued for the influence of these innovations, “now generally followed by the most advanced producers.” The immediate goal of this ad was to position Griffith as a key figure in the shifting terrain of a post-Trust filmmaking landscape, as he departed the confines of Biograph for the opportunities he perceived to exist at his future employer, Mutual. More importantly for future histories of early filmmaking in the United States, Griffith’s self-promotional advertisement served as a template for how to define the contours of what was largely *terra incognita*: his stated achievements became the basis of many accounts of American cinema in the years prior to the advent of features. In the words of Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell (2003, p. 51) in their own, revisionist history textbook, “Early historians, unable to see many films from the pre-1913 period, took [Griffith] at his word, and Griffith became the father of the cinema.”

Key here is the issue of access to films. Unlike the work of his peers, virtually the entirety of Griffith’s Biograph output was saved for posterity, ensuring his importance to accounts of the pre-feature era. As Eileen Bowser (2009, pp. 52-53) has explained, the vagaries of preservation history kept the Griffith

legacy intact, while the films of his competitors largely disappeared, with the few remaining prints from such filmmakers dispersed around the globe:

Biograph produced about the same number of films produced by the other members of the MPPC at this time of the organized production and release systems, but almost all the Biograph original nitrate negatives survived: they were kept by the Empire Trust Company that ended up owning and storing them . . . and subsequently they were acquired and preserved by the Museum of Modern Art. The inventory of other companies suffered enormous losses, often surviving in only a few incomplete worn projection prints.

Even with the advent of revisionist historiography in the 1970s and 1980s, the preponderance of Biograph titles in circulation, largely supplied through Blackhawk Films and MoMA, meant that Griffith dominated the research agenda. Synoptic histories continued to craft their narratives of stylistic development using Griffith as the key figure<sup>2</sup>; similarly, groundbreaking attempts at defining the particularities of “post-primitive” early cinema style typically used the director as their exemplar.<sup>3</sup> As valuable as detailed examination of Griffith’s Biograph period proved to be, one cannot help but think now that the privileging of Griffith owed as much to the material constraints placed on researchers as the belief that he embodied the period he had come to represent.

Two exceptions to this tendency, the eighth chapter of Barry Salt’s *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* and Kristin Thompson’s main contribution to *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, entitled “The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909-28,” broaden their purview to incorporate the output of a more extensive cross-section of U.S. companies, though Salt still tends to concentrate on Biograph and Vitagraph to the exclusion of any others. (Salt dedicates his book to the National Film Archive, the chief repository of Vitagraph titles; the company’s dominant presence in this chapter proves once again that access to materials inevitably shapes the historian’s approach.) Not coincidentally, both of these authors explicitly challenge the established orthodoxy that Griffith’s achievements should be

construed as synonymous with developing period-based formal norms. Each scholar enfold a displacement of Griffith's accepted position as a representative—and oftentimes definitive—figure of the era within a discussion of methodology:

In the years from 1907 onwards the evolution of film form was still proceeding quite quickly. Because films were still mostly only one or two reels long it is possible to see a large number of them in a short time, and so get a good idea of comparative developments. . . . If one takes advantage of this situation and looks at most of the thousand or so films still extant from between 1907 and 1913, one finds that the accepted picture of what happened in those years, based as it is on a few handfuls of films by D.W. Griffith and one or two others, is largely mistaken (Salt 1983, p. 83).

In a study of standard practice, a concentration on filmmakers considered major—Griffith, Tourneur, Thomas H. Ince—would create a skewed impression of the norms. Rather, a variety of genres, filmmakers, and studios should contribute to create a broad picture. [For that reason,] I have included films of the early teens from many studios. . . . A study that focused entirely on the most famous filmmakers and studios would run the risk of giving undue prominence to certain devices which might in fact have been limited or idiosyncratic. For example, most historians who study the history of crosscutting devote their attention to the last-minute rescue situation, since they derive most of their examples from Griffith. Yet I shall be claiming that once crosscutting became standardized, it gained several other equally important functions. A cross-sectional survey of the type attempted here provides a tool for judging the actual importance of any given technique in the history of the American cinema (Thompson 1985, pp. 158-59).

As central as he has become to the unfolding history of American transitional cinema, Griffith remains something of a problem for historians, if not analysts. As Salt's and Thompson's comments attest, his contributions to the formal norms of the period are scarcely a settled topic. Salt (1983, p. 84) even argues that the disproportionate attention given to Griffith's more celebrated contributions obscures the full extent of the director's artistry: “[T]he usual idea that Griffith invented most of the

features of mainstream cinema is quite wrong; but more than that, he has not been given credit for all the things he *did* develop.” If we wish to assess Griffith’s role in helping to establish period-based norms, his tendency toward innovation is probably no more important than the degree to which he influenced other filmmakers and companies. Filmmaking conditions were such during this time that both widespread copying of successful storytelling approaches and wilful experimentation co-existed. Oddly enough, Griffith’s formal idiosyncrasies may be as indicative of the transitional era as any of his narrational approaches that would prove foundational for classical practice. And, of course, most transitional films are directed by figures who remain unknown to us, either because their studio refused to publicize their names or because information on their careers remains so scant that it is impossible to piece together anything resembling a coherent profile of their output. Within a context such as this, Griffith, his fame and contributions reinforced by both self-promotion and the survival of nearly all of his films, cannot help but emerge as anomalous.

### **Thanhouser and the Unauthored Text**

Although Thanhouser was one of the Independents, a group formed in opposition to the MPPC, the umbrella organization to which Biograph was aligned, the two companies shared a commitment to “quality” production. In an interview with *Moving Picture World* just prior to the release of Thanhouser’s first film in early 1910, the company’s founder, Edwin Thanhouser, outlined how he would maintain a high level of quality, predicated on such principles as generic selectiveness, a theatrical pedigree (the Thanhousers had managed a dramatic company for the preceding twenty years), and moral purity (even those Shakespearian plots that featured unpleasantness would be avoided):

Mr. Thanhouser made it clear that he has picked a high standard and that he intends to maintain it. “We hope,” he said, “to turn out artistic productions, particularly in the field of legitimate drama and comedy. And when I say comedy, I mean comedy, not slap sticks.”



“Do you mean when you say drama, such as will appeal to the educated class and keep them interested, or such as the masses can fairly grasp?” was asked.

“We do not care to do any pictures that the masses cannot grasp,” was the reply, “but that does not mean that our pictures cannot be of a high order. They must appeal to the best instincts of all audiences, and must always tell a moral and logical story.”<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Biograph, which depended on a dominant filmmaker to uphold its reputation for quality, Thanhouser made no attempt to maintain continuity in its stable of directors. While one figure, the company’s third partner, Lloyd Lonergan, appears to have been responsible for most of the company’s scripts, Thanhouser relied on a changing slate of filmmakers. For that reason alone, we can say that the company’s reputation rests on films of indeterminate authorship. Whereas most tend to describe the films that Griffith made at Biograph by using the hybrid moniker “Griffith Biographs” to indicate a strong authorship principle at work, Thanhouser films are known only by the company’s name. And the current campaign to ensure that the studio’s legacy is maintained rests with a descendant of the company’s founders, Ned Thanhouser.

How Ned Thanhouser came to transform his interest in his grandparents’ company into a viable research resource serves as an illuminating example of how one can harness archival holdings to improve scholarly access to rare materials. Growing up, Ned had been led to believe that none of the company’s films survived, but after watching a PBS program on the early industry that featured a clip with a Thanhouser logo, he realized that some of the work must have been preserved. He tracked down 16mm copies of the two titles available for purchase, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1912) and *King René’s Daughter* (1913), and then began to pursue other Thanhouser releases held by archives. For the most part, he has been successful in persuading archives to allow the materials that they hold to be reproduced by Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, a company that Ned incorporated in 1995. His express purpose is to increase access to the extant Thanhouser corpus through promotion of his efforts online. To this end, he has created a website that permits

a user to buy any one of the four multi-disk DVD collections available, as well as reproductions of assorted Thanhouser posters. The site also functions as a clearinghouse for information, alerting readers when Thanhouser prints have been discovered or restored; it also offers downloadable filmography databases and a history of the company. An additional feature is a research centre, where academic papers on Thanhouser-related topics have been posted. Kathryn Fuller Seeley has used the Thanhouser collection as a resource in her graduate course in film historiography, and assorted essays contributed by those students are available through the centre, along with those written by Ned Thanhouser himself.

Given the Thanhouser site's emphasis on the research results produced by increased access to the company's films, we can understand Ned Thanhouser's efforts feeding into the scholarly community's interest in the period. Though not an academic, Ned Thanhouser has begun to produce his own papers on the company, wherein he contextualizes Thanhouser's output in relation to the formal norms and production patterns of the day, as established by academic research on the transitional period. In one such paper, Thanhouser analyzes data derived from David Bowers' filmography to draw a contrast between the production of shorts and features at Thanhouser versus industry production rates, leading him to formulate a series of questions aimed at refining our sense of the company's relationship to period-based norms: "What made Thanhouser a leading producer in the early years with 'short' subject films? What forces were at play resulting in Thanhouser's delay in embracing the production of 'feature' films? Was Thanhouser unique or representative of the industry?"<sup>55</sup> This series of questions indicates that Ned Thanhouser aims to render the Thanhouser company relevant to governing research agendas, while also engaging in historiographically aware interrogation of the data that his own website supplies. Effectively, his own work on Thanhouser models how this research resource might prove useful to the broader academic community.

Similarly, his analysis of *The Evidence of the Film* (supplemented by a shot-by-shot breakdown) frames the film's formal

achievements in reference to Griffith's emergent style, appealing to causal mechanisms to explain how and why there might be similarities between the two companies: "The cross-pollination of talent between the two studios helped . . . the innovations [that] Griffith pioneered at Biograph to [migrate to] films produced by Thanhouser."<sup>6</sup> Positing Griffith's centrality to the definition of transitional style, Thanhouser aligns the evident formal tendencies of *The Evidence of the Film* with those of *The Girl and Her Trust*, a Griffith short made about one year earlier. Isolating narrative structure, editing, shot scale and staging for particular attention, Ned Thanhouser concludes that formal analysis reveals "Griffith's influence on Thanhouser's [style]."<sup>7</sup> Although Ned Thanhouser credits both Edwin Thanhouser and Lawrence Marston with directing *The Evidence of the Film*, Marston is mentioned only once in relation to a specific stylistic decision (the use of the medium shot); generally, "Thanhouser" is credited with an authorial role, suggesting a merging of Edwin Thanhouser's producing/directing roles and the brand name of the company. (In another paper, Ned Thanhouser explicitly labels his grandfather an "auteur."<sup>8</sup>) Ned Thanhouser's own work suggests how a developed formal understanding of Thanhouser films remains imbricated in established scholarship on Griffith's Biograph films and how his solution to the "unauthored" status of Thanhouser films derives in part from the privileging of the Thanhouser brand name over any of the filmmakers employed by the company. How this might affect our understanding of the narrational approach devised within the Thanhouser corpus and its bearing on the concept of the "narrator system" deserves further exploration.

### **Griffith and the "Narrator System" vs. Narrational Patterns in Thanhouser Films**

One of Tom Gunning's signal contributions to the study of both Griffith's Biograph oeuvre and transitional cinema more generally is his development of the concept of the "narrator system" as a means of describing and analyzing Griffith's unique contributions to the developing storytelling capacities of American cinema in 1908-9. Concentrating on three levels of

“filmic discourse” (the pro-filmic, the enframed image and editing), Gunning demonstrates through extensive analysis of selected films from Griffith’s first two years at Biograph how the director enlisted aspects of these three discursive levels to deepen characterization, create a variety of temporal and spatial relationships among shots, draw thematic parallels, and even comment on the depicted action. The combined force of these formal developments enhanced cinema’s ability to tell more complex and involving stories, resulting in what Gunning identifies as a different order of narrativization from that evident in previous years of early cinema.<sup>9</sup> Although Gunning is careful to temper any suggestion that the narrator system emerges as a direct result of Griffith’s genius,<sup>10</sup> he does not deny the importance of the “director function” to shifts in narrativization. Griffith served as the most dramatic example of an industry-wide trend that affected production practices in a manner essential to expedite new forms of storytelling:

With the director’s new involvement in the visualization of the film . . . the equivalent of the theatrical director appeared in film: a role that integrates elements of production around a unifying center. With Griffith, and most likely other film directors around the same time, the director was no longer an independent expert working with the actors and then relying on the cameraman’s expertise for visualization. Rather the dramatic purpose within a scene determined its visual presentation as well, creating a visual discourse which expressed dramatic situations. This constitutes the essence of the cinema of narrative integration and the narrator system (Gunning 1991, p. 47).

Gunning’s analyses of Griffith’s Biograph work leaves little doubt that the director developed his own formally distinct approaches to conveying the dramatic essence of narratives through largely visual means, by combining the aforementioned three filmic discourses. But can we profitably apply the concept of the narrator system to filmmakers other than Griffith? Are the developing approaches to narration that define what Gunning labels the cinema of narrative integration, but what I would call transitional cinema, a version of that system? Gunning chooses to label Griffith’s achievement as *the* narrator

system, leaving limited possibility that the concept could be modified to apply more broadly to changes evident across the body of U.S. cinema coinciding with the director's time at Biograph. Yet he also states unequivocally that we can only bring Griffith's narrational achievements into sharper focus when subsequent research helps us to adduce the nature of transitional-era formal norms:

This work on Griffith has tried to maintain a shifting focus, examining both the individuality of Griffith's films and their relation to a broader mode of film practice. Future detailed work on the surviving films of Griffith's contemporaries will define more clearly which elements of the narrator system are unique and which are shared with the norm of the cinema of narrative integration (Gunning 1991, p. 290).

If, indeed, overlap exists between the narrational dimensions of Griffith's style and that exhibited within the work produced by other companies, examining the output of Thanhouser can help us to define that overlap with more precision. But studying the narrational strategies of Thanhouser can assist us when we consider other questions as well: Can we attribute anything akin to the narrator system—perhaps a similarly motivated if differently articulated system of narration—to what are ultimately unauthored texts? Could a company such as Thanhouser, which appeared to refrain from investing the director function with the same power as did Biograph, hope to produce a body of filmic work that would acquire anything like the identifiable filmic discourse that Gunning analyzes in the Griffith Biographs? Particularly in the realm of the profilmic (the first of Gunning's discursive levels, and one we might otherwise describe as the realm of *mise en scène*), does the legacy of legitimate theatre play a role in Thanhouser's style similar to what Gunning finds in Griffith's early work? And does that shared legacy, in tandem with a publicly expressed desire to be understood as a company known for its quality productions, link Thanhouser to Biograph sufficiently to allow us to make a case for Griffith exerting particular influence on the newer company's filmmakers?

Analysis of Thanhouser's early films with an eye to their stylistic and narrational tendencies can provide us with only

provisional answers to these questions, but it can initiate a broader project of figuring out how to reconcile an authorially oriented understanding of distinct narrational choices with a period of history still largely defined by unauthored filmic texts. The dominance of the Thanhouser brand points to one possible solution: conceiving of the production company as author [Fig. 1]. Some of the more prominent film manufacturers came to develop a “house style,” and initial analysis of the extant Thanhouser single-reel canon indicates that this may have been true for the company. Certainly, market conditions at the time encouraged studios to make their mark, either through emphasis on particular genres or a reputation for quality product. In Thanhouser’s case, emulating the example of Biograph or Vitagraph was an option, but it was still preferable to demonstrate marks of originality. As a critic writing in *Moving Picture World* in 1911 declared, filmmakers would have “to discover new and original tricks of their own.” (Judson 1911) More often than not, such tricks would translate into distinct narrational approaches; whether they constitute some altered version



Figure 1: In the transitional era, companies like Thanhouser cultivated brand recognition. (Courtesy Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.)

of the narrator system that Gunning detects in Griffith's work remains to be seen.

To devise tentative answers to some of these questions, I have examined the one-reel films currently available for sale (or viewing online) by Thanhouser Company Film Preservation whose production dates fall within the same period that Griffith worked at Biograph. This amounts to 22 films in total for the time span covering 1910, the year of the company's founding, to mid-1913, when Griffith left Biograph.<sup>11</sup> For the most part, the changes in style at Thanhouser bespeak a narrational trajectory not uncommon for many production companies during this period: shot counts increase over the period, indicating mounting cutting rates in keeping with industry norms (although they were far outstripped by rates at Biograph)<sup>12</sup>; the number of distinct spaces deployed for staging dramatic action proliferates; analysis of that space occurs more frequently through a broadened range of shot scales and angles, including cut-ins to close-ups, either for reaction shots or details of small-scale actions that might be misunderstood otherwise; there is a shift from a reliance on staging to ensure that dramatically important narrative action is in the foreground of the playing space to the adjustment of camera position to draw the viewer's eye to the portion of the frame where that action occurs; and the number of expository titles decreases, with dialogue titles assuming a more prominent narrational role.<sup>13</sup> Overall, narration became progressively more communicative while avoiding self-consciousness. In the words of Kristin Thompson (1997, p. 432), who is speaking of general trends, not simply the changes evident at Thanhouser, narration "found ways of motivating the telling process so that it seemed for the most part to come from within the action of the scene."

While this overview confirms that the general narrational shifts at Thanhouser conform to those evident industry-wide, one can still point to certain distinctive stylistic features that indicate particularities of narration, and may constitute the foundation for identifying a house style. For one, Thanhouser seemed drawn to the possibilities that visions and flashbacks afforded for exploring character psychology, especially in 1912-

13. Vision scenes often performed the crucial role of precipitating the moral conversion of characters tempted to pursue an ill-advised course of action in the plots of several films from this period, evident in such examples as *Get Rich Quick* (1911), *The Voice of Conscience* (1912), *The Little Girl Next Door* (1912), and *Just a Shabby Doll* (1913) [Fig. 2]. For their part, flashbacks became a sufficiently privileged device for entire narratives to become structured around a central character's recollections, as in *In a Garden* (1912) and *Just a Shabby Doll* (1913). While the vision and the flashback doubtless aided in promoting increased viewer understanding of character motivation, their relatively obtrusive representational status relegated them to the status of narrational novelty and they were not relied upon consistently.

Of greater narrational significance, perhaps, are the varied means used at Thanhouser to expand or vary the view of depicted space. Most prominent within the company's arsenal of devices to promote spatial articulation is its use of panning shots. The majority of the films that I examined contained numerous examples of tilts and pans, and although the standard



Figure 2: A vision prompts moral conversion in *The Little Girl Next Door* (1912). (Courtesy Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.)



use of such camera movements was to capture character movement through reframing, at times this resulted in a rather extensive revelation of previously undepicted, offscreen space. One of the more elaborate versions of this exploratory dimension of panning can be seen in *The Farmer's Daughters* (1913), when an extensive pan follows the movement of the characters from a doorway at the right of the frame all the way across the space of the room to a staircase on the other side. In an instance such as this, the camera's ability to reveal and extend interior space operates in a fairly flamboyant fashion and reveals a certain degree of confidence in the narrational capacity of the pan (not to mention extensive planning of the trajectory of the camera's movement and its relationship to the visible parameters of a constructed set) [Fig. 3 & 4].

Even when the camera remained stationary, Thanhouser engaged in different forms of experimentation. Especially in 1912-13, one notes increased variation in the placement of the camera, especially in exterior locations where adjustment to produce high and low angles was achieved more easily. This lends dynamism to many of the compositions where such angling occurs, as in the depicted example from *His Great Uncle's Spirit* (1912) [Fig. 5]. But equally important, it positions the viewer in a privileged relationship to the depicted action, often prompting a particularized reaction to the dramatic material that would be less likely with more conventional camera placement. At the same time, the company also demonstrated an increased tendency to film the same space from a variety of camera set-ups. This results in the dramatic action being viewed from a variety of perspectives: such shifts in position can change the viewer's vantage point on narrative developments, cueing us to see aspects of the *mise en scène* that had been undisclosed in previous set-ups. It may also invite the viewer to understand the depicted action differently, shifting both the literal and figurative vantage point on the action, as the two set-ups from *The Voice of Conscience* (1912) reveal [Fig. 6 & 7]. All in all, this approach to space signals something of an anticipatory narrational stance, one that bespeaks both a high degree of knowledge (this narration knows what the viewer needs to see, to ensure narrative comprehension)



Figures 3 & 4: An especially extensive panning movement traverses an entire room in *The Farmer's Daughters* (1913). (Courtesy Thanouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.)

and of communicativeness (this narration wishes for the viewer to see it now, so as to understand fully).



Figure 5: An angled camera position emphasizes the character's plight in *His Great Uncle's Spirit* (1912). (Courtesy Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.)

But does this approach to spatial articulation, one that developed at Thanhouser slowly over a four-year period, constitute a distinct version of Gunning's "narrator system"? Certainly one can differentiate aspects of Thanhouser's approach from that devised by Griffith at Biograph. Thanhouser's willingness to vary its camera position emerges as a contrast to Biograph's resolutely fixed perspective, the latter dictated in part by the comparatively shorter running time of each individual shot. (Griffith's decision to maintain the same perspective in the majority of shots of a singular space rendered such spaces easier to identify, even though they often did not remain on screen as long as might be the norm for the period.) And the company's tendency to pan frequently finds no counterpart in Biograph's comparatively static camera. So, while Thanhouser may have been influenced in its approach to aspects of the *mise en scène*, in its verisimilar sets or performance style,<sup>14</sup> it did not emulate Biograph in every regard. (One can see how the prop-centred performance style perfected at Biograph may have influenced



Figures 6 & 7: Multiple vantage points on the same space enhance viewer understanding in *The Voice of Conscience* (1912). (Courtesy Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.)

Thanhouser as early as 1911: in *Get Rich Quick*, Marguerite Snow manipulates her apron to convey a range of emotions

[Fig. 8].) Although the general aim of many of its films closely resembled those of the Biograph company—to provide uplift through narratives that dramatized moral redemption—Thanhouser realized such narratives using its own formal means.

Having access to numerous Thanhouser films from the early teens certainly aids the researcher in reconstructing the fundamental formal traits of what we may tentatively label a Thanhouser house style. While it does not settle the issue of whether that house style constitutes its own version of a narrator system, it does suggest that even unauthored texts can exhibit a distinct narrational logic, especially during a period when narrational ingenuity seems to have been prized. The transitional era fostered novelty and formula in equal measure, as experimentation and repetition co-existed. Studying Griffith at Biograph allows us to consider the role of the director in the refiguring of film's dramatic potential, but analyzing Thanhouser's output permits a shift of focus, wherein we assess



Figure 8: Verisimilar performance style relies on costuming-as-prop to convey emotion in *Get Rich Quick* (1911). (Courtesy Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.)

how the manufacturing company aided in the same process. Whatever experimentation occurred existed within the constraints imposed by filmmakers' home studios. If Thanhouser did not produce a Griffith, it still contributed in meaningful ways to the narrational changes developed during the transitional period. Providing increased access to a useful repository of film facts, Thanhouser Company Film Preservation has made a similarly significant contribution to the current historiography of transitional-era cinema.

University of Toronto

#### NOTES

1. In March 2011, the entirety of the Thanhouser video library was made available free online.

2. For one influential example, see Cook 1996.

3. Aside from Gunning's book, two others published around the same time were Joyce E. Jesionowski (1987) and Roberta Pearson (1992).

4. *Moving Picture News*, February 26, 1910; quoted in C. David Bowers, CD-ROM, Chapter 2: Into the Film Industry, Edwin Thanhouser Interviewed (Portland: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 1997).

5. Ned Thanhouser, "Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Film," p. 2 <http://www.thanouser.org/Research/Thanhouser-A%20Microcosm%202-27-09-FINAL.pdf>.

6. Ned Thanhouser, "The Influence of D.W. Griffith on Thanhouser's 1913 Release *The Evidence of the Film*," p. 2 <http://www.thanouser.org/Research/Ned%20Thanhouser%20-%20The%20Evidence%20of%20the%20Film.pdf>.

7. Thanhouser, "Influence," p. 5.

8. Ned Thanhouser, "The Social Impact of Thanhouser's 1912 *The Cry of the Children*," p. 2 <http://www.thanouser.org/Research/Ned%20Thanhouser%20-%20the%20Cry%20of%20the%20Children.pdf>.

9. Gunning outlines his methodology in the first chapter of *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of the American Narrative Film* (1991).

10. For example, on page 183 he argues that the "narrator system took shape from [an] interweave of factors, rather than a single-minded discovery of the essential language of film."

11. These films are listed in the Appendix to this essay. I have also viewed an additional seven films from this period at various archives, but as these titles are not yet available through the Thanhouser website, I have not included them in the filmography.

12. For example, the average number of shots in a typical Thanhouser one-reeler from 1910-11 tended to hover in the high teens, somewhat below the industry average of the low twenties, and lagging far behind that established at Biograph (44 in 1910 and 71 in 1911). But by 1912-13, Thanhouser's cutting rates had increased

considerably, moving close to an average number of shots near 50, still well below the number established at Biograph (in the 80s), but in excess of the industry average of 38 for 1912 and in line with the 1913 average of 52.

13. For a more detailed account of these tendencies, see my “Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanouser, and Typicality” paper delivered at the symposium “Movies, Media, and Methods: A Symposium in Honor of Kristin Thompson,” Madison, Wisconsin, May 1, 2010 and now available online at <http://www.thanouser.org/Research/Charlie%20Keil%20-%20Narration%20and%20Authorship.pdf>. Subsequent examples of Thanouser’s house style and narrational approach that I will be providing are largely drawn from this essay.

14. Griffith’s successful experiments with prop manipulation and concentration on facial expression over emphatic bodily gesture contributed significantly to what Pearson has identified as a verisimilar performance style.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

**Bowser 2009:** Eileen Bowser, “Movies and the Stability of the Institution,” in Charlie Keil and Ben Singer (eds.), *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2009.

**Carr 1961:** Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?*, New York, Random House, Inc., 1961.

**Cook 1996:** David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 3rd Edition, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1996.

**Griffith 1913:** David W. Griffith, *New York Dramatic Mirror*, Vol. 70, no. 1824, 3 December 1913, p. 36.

**Gunning 1991:** Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of the American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1991.

**Jesionowski 1987:** Joyce E. Jesionowski, *Thinking in Pictures: Dramatic Structure in D.W. Griffith’s Biograph Films*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987.

**Judson 1911:** Hanford C. Judson, “What Goes Over,” *Moving Picture World*, Vol. 8, no. 15, April 15, 1911.

**Pearson 1992:** Roberta Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992.

**Salt 1983:** Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, London, Starword, 1983.

**Thompson 1985:** Kristin Thompson, “The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909-28,” in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985.

**Thompson 1997:** Kristin Thompson, “Narration Early in the Transition to Classical Filmmaking: Three Vitagraph Shorts,” *Film History*, Vol. 9, no. 4, 1997.

**Thompson and Bordwell 2003:** Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2nd Edition, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2003.

## APPENDIX

Filmography of Thanhouser one-reelers released between March 1910 and September 1913. Available through the Thanhouser Preservation Company website.

*The Actor's Children* (1910)

*Daddy's Double* (1910)

*The Winter's Tale* (1910)

*Young Lord Stanley* (1910)

*The Vicar of Wakefield* (1910)

*The Pasha's Daughter* (1911)

*Only in the Way* (1911)

*Get Rich Quick* (1911)

*The Coffin Ship* (1911)

*Cinderella* (1911)

*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1912)

*His Great Uncle's Spirit* (1912)

*The Portrait of Lady Anne* (1912)

*The Voice of Conscience* (1912)

*In a Garden* (1912)

*The Little Girl Next Door* (1912)

*Petticoat Camp* (1912)

*The Evidence of the Film* (1913)

*The Tiniest of the Stars* (1913)

*When the Studio Burned* (1913)

*Just a Shabby Doll* (1913)

*The Farmer's Daughters* (1913)

## RÉSUMÉ

### **La narration dans le cinéma de transition : les prétentions historiographiques du texte**

**sans auteur**

**Charlie Keil**

Notre connaissance de l'histoire du cinéma entre 1908 et 1913, cette période dite « de transition », s'est considérablement accrue depuis quelques décennies, notamment grâce aux études qui ont été menées sur les institutions-clés de cette transition, mais aussi sur différents sites d'exhibition et de réception des films, de même que sur certaines instances de régulation et de diffusion. Malgré ces avancées, l'analyse formelle des films de cette période repose largement sur un seul exemple, celui de D.W. Griffith, que Tom Gunning qualifie d'instigateur du « système narratif » dans son important ouvrage *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*. C'est pourtant un accident historique — lequel a



voulu que les films de Griffith survivent, contrairement à ceux de ses contemporains — qui a façonné l'approche des historiens souhaitant retracer le développement des procédés narratifs durant cette époque charnière allant de 1908 à 1913. Plutôt que de mettre en doute l'importance de Griffith en tant que réalisateur avant-gardiste et influent, les historiens doivent chercher à mieux contextualiser l'apport de Griffith, récrivant par là même une histoire formelle capable d'accueillir la dimension de l'auteur, sans qu'elle y agisse comme principe directeur. À cet égard, le présent article profitera du projet actuel de restauration et de distribution des films Thanhouser produits entre 1910 et 1913, afin d'expliquer comment les « textes sans auteur » de cette période contribuent à étoffer l'historiographie de la période dite de transition.