

## **Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality**



**Figure 1**

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When I first studied the transitional cinema for the purposes of a book-length study of American film from 1907-1913, I deliberately avoided the thorny question of authorship, preferring instead to frame the formal contours of the period using the inclusive concept of ‘group style’. I did this in part to differentiate my work on these years from that preceding it, much of which had used the films of D.W. Griffith as the principal textual exemplar of the period’s tendencies. I did not ignore Griffith’s accomplishments so much as enfold them within the broader currents of industry practice. But the question of how we might position Griffith within this period continues to intrigue me. As the key director at one of the most successful and prominent production companies of the time, Biograph, Griffith seems certain to have influenced other filmmakers. We know that the trade press held up Biograph films as preferred models of effective storytelling, even as Griffith’s pronounced tendency toward quick cutting rates raised concerns amongst the same group of industry taste-makers. Trying to find a suitable place for Griffith within the tumultuous years of the transitional era, I have come to the conclusion that we should treat him neither as a period-defining trailblazer nor as a distinctive anomaly who can tell

## **Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality**

us next to nothing about period-based norms. Instead, we need to recognize that his current status as the sole auteur that we can confidently associate with American cinema of the transitional years blunts the importance that narrational innovation possessed for many filmmakers during this time. As I have written elsewhere, “The protean nature of the transitional period resists any one figure standing as paradigmatic, but it also accommodates the experiments of Griffith as readily as the efforts of any other filmmaker of the era.”

I have studied Griffith shorts fairly consistently over the last twenty years or so, prompted in part by the recurring demands of the Griffith Project, a comprehensive reexamination of every one of his films undertaken by a host of early cinema scholars, some of them in this room. That endeavour, twelve years in duration, was complemented by a formidable retrospective of all of the director’s extant films, mounted by the Giornate del Cinema Muto over the same time period. Scholars contributing to the Griffith Project volumes covering the Biograph years all followed the same strictures when analyzing his films from the period: the director’s output, arranged in chronological order according to date of production, was divided into lots of five films; when writing about Griffith’s achievements in any given year, one could not select the canonized highlights, but rather addressed whatever grouping of five films the exigencies of production led him to make during what was usually no more than a month’s worth of shooting time. This way of approaching Griffith’s output encourages the analyst to note the range of the director’s accomplishments: the sporadic attempts at innovation, the repetition of reliable devices, and the ringing of variations on well-worn scenarios. It also reinforces how grueling the rate of production was during this time, resulting in many films that may strike us as arid exercises in fulfilling contractual obligations to deliver prints on time, but at the same time leading to others where the charge of experimentation is palpable. As a regular contributor to the Griffith Project, I was struck by how pedestrian many of the director’s efforts

## **Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality**

were, while also remarking that nearly every film featured at least one moment of narrational ingenuity, be it an inspired bit of staging, an impressive composition, or a bout of expertly executed editing.

All of this is to say that close attention to the entirety of Griffith's oeuvre recasts his reputation as an iconoclastic genius constantly pushing at the formal boundaries of the medium. In many ways, Griffith was a product of his time. Yet that observation doesn't eliminate the obvious differences in style and narration one finds in a Biograph film when one compares the company's output to that from a wide range of rivals. Tom Gunning has tied his concept of a developing 'narrator system' during the transitional years to the manner in which Griffith insinuates an expressive control of the story material into his films with increased confidence during the director's Biograph tenure. Identifying Griffith as an auteur possesses an unassailable logic; extrapolating from his case to make claims about transitional narration, however, still poses problems. Could a different model of authorship, one not tied to notions of expressive individuals, provide us with a way of thinking about how narration was developed during this period? If one's aim is to identify typicality, then authorship remains relevant, but perhaps not at the level of the individual director.

The circumstances of film production during this time all but ensured that the majority of filmmakers would remain anonymous. Griffith has proven attractive to scholars of the transitional period in part because he was the lucky beneficiary of an accident of history, which saw virtually the entirety of the Biograph output survive in the form of original nitrate negatives, eventually preserved by the Museum of Modern Art. We will never be afforded similar opportunities with other directors or companies from the period, as no other studio has benefited from the rate of title preservation that Biograph enjoyed. But we should not let the vagaries of print survival discourage us from attempting to refine further our sense of how style and

## **Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality**

narration developed during the transitional period, and in particular, taking into account the role played by production companies of the day. One such approach was initiated by Kristin Thompson shortly after the publication of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, when she executed a comparative study of one Vitagraph film from each of the years 1911, 1912 and 1913 to trace narrational shifts across these years. Though she acknowledges that “Vitagraph is generally held by historians to have been one of the most innovative of the early American studios,” she still maintains that “we can take many Vitagraph films of this period to be largely typical of what was going on across the industry.” (p. 411) I would qualify this by pointing out that the high level of variation that marks the stylistic and narrational attributes of transitional-era film makes establishing typicality a particularly vexing task. Even so, trends do establish themselves, and tendencies toward certain narrational strategies become more noticeable as the period progresses. Storytelling proved a sufficiently demanding activity that no one filmmaker consistently adopted the same solutions to the problems that rendering a one-reel scenario compelling and comprehensible might pose. As I have noted before, one of the pleasures of studying the transitional cinema in detail is the range of narrational strategies devised, a range that makes the analyst’s task of establishing norms and defining narrational self-consciousness all the more challenging. Accordingly, the question of how to measure formal norms cannot stop with Griffith/Biograph, or even Vitagraph, though their status as industry leaders indicates they were helping to establish standards.

Thompson’s groundbreaking examination of transitional-era Vitagraph films, then, deserves to be revisited using the output of other companies as the focus. This paper is one such modest step in that direction.

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

I have selected Thanhouser [#2], in part because the Thanhouser family has pursued a program of transferring archival copies of the company's surviving films onto home video format, allowing me to review many titles that I first saw nearly twenty years ago, as well as watch others for the first time. Beyond that, Thanhouser's



Figure 2

status as a prototypical transitional-era company is cemented by its formation in 1910, at the midpoint of the period. Established with the aim of providing morally respectable entertainment, influenced in part by the legitimate stage, Thanhouser primarily specialised in non-sensational genres for the most part, emphasizing domestic dramas and situational comedies over action-oriented fare such as westerns or even slapstick. Like Biograph and Vitagraph, it cultivated a reputation for high standards of production, and like the latter company, it gravitated toward the occasional culturally-sanctioned literary adaptation, drawing on sources from Dickens to Shakespeare. The overall tonal uniformity of Thanhouser's output makes it an ideal company for my purposes. For if my main aim in pursuing this study of three films from Thanhouser remains in line with what motivated Thompson--to understand with more precision the developing narrational logic of the transitional period—I have another objective as well. Studying Thanhouser in some detail will also provide an opportunity to explore an altered notion of authorship more befitting the transitional years—that of production company as author. Because we do not know who directed many of the films from this period, and because directors were often beholden to a flexible but still operative 'house style,' it makes sense to see the producing company as responsible for the stylistic tendencies that develop within individual studios. Identifying the production companies as primarily determining the stylistic qualities of their output needn't negate the contributions of a significant figure like Griffith; nonetheless, it

## **Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality**

focuses attention on the efforts of filmmakers to forge solutions to period-specific problems of narration as part of a larger production company strategy: to elevate one's product above that of the competition. One can safely say that Thanhouser modeled itself after Biograph and Vitagraph and was aiming for the same critical approval that those companies had already secured. Even so, Thanhouser could not content itself with merely replicating the house style of either manufacturer, or, even some amalgam of both, for a premium was placed on perceived originality by the time of the company's formation. In other words, standing out in a crowded marketplace meant more than slavishly aping the efforts of rival companies. Novelty was prized, though ideally not at the expense of crafting coherent and involving stories that adhered to developing standards of verisimilitude and spatiotemporal legibility. In 1911, for example, a critic writing in *The Moving Picture World* declared that directors would have "to discover new and original tricks of their own". What constituted "original tricks" of storytelling in the early teens? What did a company like Thanhouser contribute to the formal landscape of transitional cinema, and how are those contributions distinctive from what Griffith was accomplishing at Biograph? This study of three Thanhouser films from the period sketches out some provisional answers to these questions.

A few words on the method of selection before I begin. As I decided to limit my sample to single-reel films made between 1911 and 1913, my pool of available titles totaled 25, with the majority released in 1912 and 1913. I chose three films that I had not originally examined for the purpose of my book-length study of the transitional period, which further reduced the pool by about 50 per cent. I tried to space the intervals separating production dates of the films chosen by as much time as possible, so that 18 months separate the 1911 and 1912 entries and 14 months the 1912 and 1913 selections. The three films that I selected, *Get Rich Quick*, *The Little Girl Next Door*, and *An Elusive Diamond*, are all dramas, though the last film tilts more toward

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

action than do the other two. The films share basic narrative traits, insofar as both *Get Rich Quick* and *The Little Girl Next Door* are what I would label ‘conversion’ stories, wherein the protagonist undergoes a change in his or her moral character, spurred in this case by the suffering of someone less fortunate (as is *Get Rich*) or the prompting of a sage innocent (*Little Girl*). Meanwhile, both *Little Girl* and *Diamond* feature rescues, though they perform different functions in each film. In *Little Girl*, a failed rescue at the plot’s midpoint precipitates character anger that launches the events in the narrative’s second half. In *Diamond*, the rescue occupies a more traditional position at the film’s climax, but it is the titular gem that requires saving, not the plucky heroine. While the complexity of the scenarios of these three films requires a certain level of narrational ingenuity to render the stories comprehensible, we will see that the company’s approach to storytelling changes over time, incorporating a greater preference for spatial dissection and a diminished reliance on tableau-style representation of dramatic action. This broad-based tendency conforms to trends evident in most companies’ films from 1910-1913. What distinguishes Thanhouser’s approach, as we will see, is some of the individual stylistic and narrational choices made when shaping the story into a manageable plot fitting the parameters of a single reel.

### *Get Rich Quick* (1911) [#3]

*Get Rich Quick* tells the tale of a couple who quickly climbs the socio-economic ladder through the husband’s involvement in a profitable but ethically dubious investment scheme. Though the profits yield wealth and social standing, the two are reminded of the price paid



**Figure 3**

when one of the victims of the scheme visits their home. Eventually they offer restitution and return to their original circumstances, recognizing the value of properly observed moral

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

imperatives. The cautionary moral tale was a staple of high-minded production companies such as Biograph, Vitagraph, and Edison, and the stories tended to follow a familiar trajectory of temptation, indulgence, and, alternately, ruin or redemption. *Get Rich Quick* opts for the latter and, like other Thanhouser moral tales of the following year, including *The Cry of the Children* and the aptly named *The Voice of Conscience*, it focuses on the female protagonist as the figure crucial to the success of the conversion. In doing so, the film places a premium on establishing character traits as causal mechanisms throughout, though its means for doing so vary considerably.

*Get Rich Quick*'s dramatic action occurs within a limited number of key locales, two of them associated with the central couple. Each of the domestic spaces features two linked rooms



Figures 4 & 5



Figures 6 & 7

[#4-5, 6-7], while the remainder of the dramatic action, dedicated to the dodgy business venture, is limited to a single room [#8]. With only five spaces employed over the course of the entire narrative, recognition of the discrete locales poses no problem for the viewer. Counterbalancing this spatial restriction, the film's dramatic scope incorporates a fairly extensive timeframe, with temporal progression signaled consistently by expository intertitles. Fully a third of the film's titles are dedicated to clarifying the forward momentum of the narrative [#9],



Figure 8

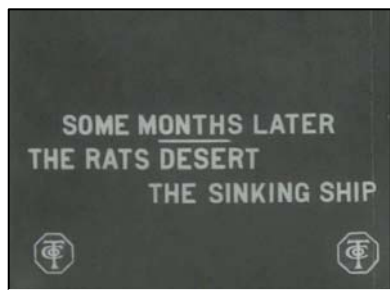


Figure 9



## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

particularly in the plot's first half, before the events depicted become telescoped to a single evening for much of the film's latter portion.

Crucial narrative information is typically conveyed through either performance style or intertitles, and often the two work in concert to ensure audience comprehension through redundancy. Even so, some moments within the narrative emerge more clearly than others. For example, the film never spells out the nature of the business deal that the husband becomes involved in, nor does it expend any effort explaining why his partners dissolve it. Because of this limited degree of communicativeness concerning the business, we must take it on faith that clients of the company have lost money and will not be able to reclaim it. (The closest the film's narration comes to an explanation is to convey the scope of the effect on the clientele via an inserted newspaper headline that says "hundreds of poor depositors wait in line". [#10]) When one of the clients, driven by desperation, seeks out the husband for help, we receive no clue as to how she knows his address or what she requests of him. During these shots, the film relies almost entirely on the performative capacities of its actors to suggest the nature of the interaction between distraught depositor and guilty husband [#11]. So we can say that the narration is intermittently communicative, varying in the degree of communicativeness that it provides scene by scene.

Generally speaking, the narration restricts itself to the actions of the husband and wife, but there are notable exceptions, such as the moment when the husband leaves the office and we are shown his two partners deciding to abandon the business without his knowledge, setting up a

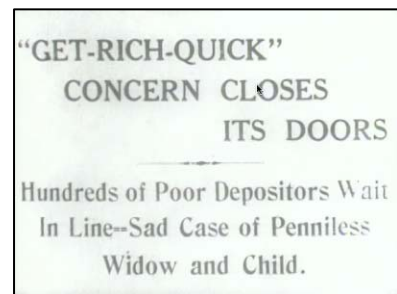


Figure 10



Figure 11

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

sign that says “The Utopia Investment Company Forced to Stop Payment” [#12]. Similarly, the distraught depositor comes to the couple’s home and is shown making entreaties to their butler before the two become aware of her presence [#13]. Even if the narrative action focuses on these two principal protagonists, the narration shows itself to possess knowledge that exceeds that of its main characters. For example, the intertitles commonly anticipate actions that the characters will later perform – “The rats desert the sinking ship” [#14]--; divulge their thoughts before we come to perceive them through other means—“He loathes his ill gotten gains” [#15]--; or offer commentary on subsequent developments – “They find real happiness in honest endeavour” [#16]. But while the film’s narration does tend toward the omniscient, it only selectively provides sufficient information for optimal audience comprehension. In certain instances, performance style, décor, and intertitles work in concert to render narrative information as clear as possible; the film’s relatively leisurely cutting rate promotes a reliance on aspects of the mise-en-scene to bear the narrational burden, simply because individual shots last a sufficient amount of time to highlight staging and the actors’ performances. One such instance is the film’s opening. The first shot effectively establishes the living conditions of its protagonists by showing



Figure 12



Figure 13

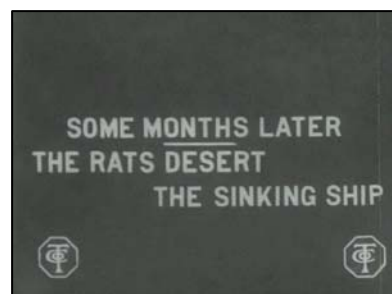


Figure 14

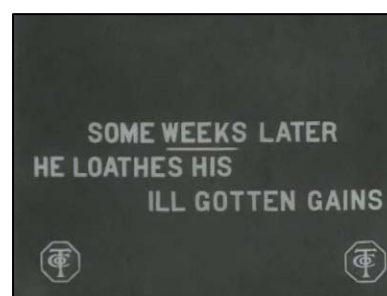


Figure 15

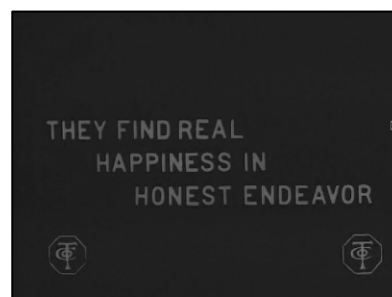


Figure 16

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

them working together in a cramped kitchen. Functional parts of the décor extend outward toward the camera and past the frame line, creating the illusion of an occupied space. Both actors do bits of business (the wife checks what is on the stove and shuts the upper kitchen door, while the husband washes his hands in



Figure 17

the kitchen sink [#17]) that promote the sense that we are observing a representative moment in a daily domestic routine. The first of the expositional title cards anticipates later narrative action by informing the viewer that “[the wife] persuades her husband to go into a dishonest deal” [#18]. While this title does not tell us why the wife would convince her spouse to become involved in shady financial dealings, the first shot has already indicated that their straitened

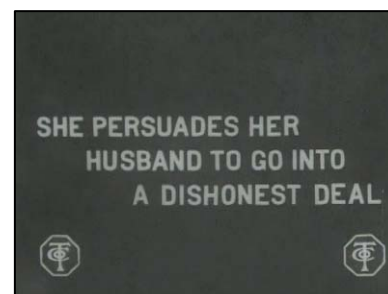


Figure 18

existence could be a compelling reason. The performance of Marguerite Snow, who plays the wife, provides additional cues in both the first and second shots that suggest why she would support the deal: she often brushes an errant lock of hair from her brow [#19], and her posture is stooped when she brings in the plates containing their dinner [#20]. When the prospective business partner shares his plan with the husband, Snow’s character, now seated at the dinner table, observes from the background of the shot, her face clearly visible to the viewer [#21].



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

An insert shot of the note that outlines the plan fills in essential information economically, establishing that the plan will be both lucrative and ethically dubious [#22]. By the time the insert shot is complete, the wife has stood up, her hands clasped, and her expression indicating eager acceptance [#23].

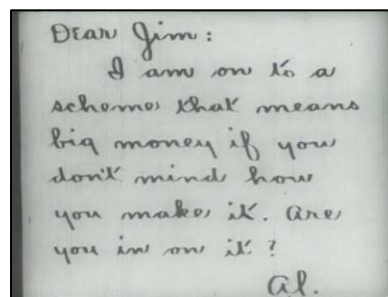


Figure 22

This changes to disappointment when she discerns that her husband will be turning down the deal, and so she intervenes to convince him. Here, costuming functions as a prop to performance, as Snow uses her apron to mime dissatisfaction with their lifestyle [#24]. Within a moment, she switches tack and uses the same apron to make a demonstrative gesture of frustration [#25] before it quickly becomes a support for her muted sobbing [#26]. Her protestations convince her husband, who signals his change of heart by shaking the hand of his new partner [#27].



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

The film will continue to use aspects of performance and costuming to chart the wife's attitudes toward wealth and its benefits. Once the husband's business deal has started to pay off, we are

shown how the wife has used their increased earnings, as she is laden down with packages.

When she shows her husband her purchases, her jaunty

demeanor, replete with

skipping steps [#28] and arms raised to model fancy hats [#29], contrasts sharply with her previous behavior and quickly convinces him that the new income has a worthy justification.

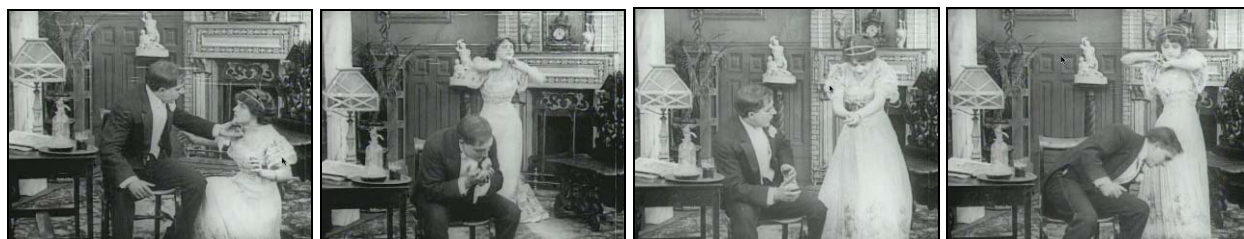
Later, when they have moved to a new home, her clothing becomes far more expensive and elaborate [#30]. But at the moment when the wife comes to disavow her tainted lifestyle, her jewelry becomes the main way she conveys her distaste with the “havoc [it] has wrought”: she tears a necklace from her throat [#31], and pulls a bracelet from her wrist [#32] and rings off her fingers [#33].



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figures 30 to 33

Fittingly, the film comes full circle by returning the couple to their spartan surroundings of the first shot—with the wife now happily outfitted once again in her apron [#34].



Figure 34

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

The film's most showy moment, which one review singled out as “novel,” is when the husband reads about the destitute creditors in the newspaper [#35] and the headline dissolves [#36] to show the mother and child, who had earlier come to him for help, now out on the street [#37-39].



Figures 35 to 39

One could understand this as a literal representation of the subhead to the newspaper story—“Sad case of penniless widow and child”—but it seems more likely that we are to understand this as the husband’s mental representation of the situation the impoverished woman has now been forced to endure. Providing direct access to a character’s thoughts [#40] endows the narration with more depth, though the manner in which it happens stands



Figure 40

out as a moment of narrational self-consciousness, especially with the image of destitution seemingly springing out from the newspaper headline. But such is the case in the transitional period: attempts to convey character psychology will often draw attention to themselves, particularly in contrast to other narrational strategies that seem far less overt.

*The Little Girl Next Door* (1912) [#41]

Unlike *Get Rich Quick*, which is easily defined as a moral tale, *The Little Girl Next Door* is something of a hybrid, using a rescue scenario, which constitutes the first half of the running



Figure 41

## **Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality**

time, to motivate a revenge story, capped by a conversion. One could see this film as relying on a variant on the double causal structure: rather than intertwining two causal strands, one self-contained narrative line produces another. The film's title hints at the doubled nature of the story, as either of the two young girls featured in the film could be understood as the titular character, and the actions of each propel the narrative in important ways. The story is initiated by Lucy and her parents asking a neighbouring child to accompany them to a park, while the child's father elects to stay at home. With the family maid distracted, Lucy and her friend venture to a lake in the park and commandeer a rowboat. The boat tips over, stranding the girls in the water. Lucy's parents notice that no one has returned to where they are stationed in the park, and look for the girls. Meanwhile, the neighbouring girl's father finally decides to come to the park after all. At virtually the same time, the parents discover the girls' plight. Lucy's father reaches the girls first, and, at the neighbour child's urging, takes his own daughter back to shore. Before either man can reach the remaining girl, she slips under the water and drowns. Overcome by grief, her father resolves to ruin Lucy's father financially. However, Lucy is able to convince the man to change his mind and the families patch over their differences.

Standing in stark contrast to *Get Rich Quick*, *The Little Girl Next Door* spreads its action over a greater range of locales, particularly in the first half, when the events primarily occur in exteriors. Conversely, there is only one temporal leap in the plot, a year-long ellipsis directly following the accident; the narration conveys this ellipsis through a succinct intertitle. Otherwise, most of the events depicted occur more or less in direct succession, with only insignificant compression of story time resulting. The most noticeable difference between the storytelling approach of *Get Rich Quick* and that of *Little Girl* is that the latter elects to spread its attention across separate pools of action, not only during the rescue scene, as might be expected, but also when depicting Lucy's father's ruination at the hands of the drowned girl's parent. One

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

obvious way that the narration can create meaningful relationships among such actions (and the spaces in which they occur) is to deploy crosscutting, a preferred means of depicting rescues in particular. But the narration also occasionally links contiguous spaces through pans, as in the first shot, when Lucy's family members walk from their car to the home of their neighbours [#42-45],



Figures 42 to 45

or when the girls take a walk in the park with their maid [#46-47].



Figures 46 & 47

The sense of space has become more fluid in *Little Girl* than was evident in *Get Rich Quick*, such that one can also note different framings of the same space on several occasions, either to accommodate additional activity within a newly enlarged space (as when the neighbouring father arrives on the scene after Lucy has been brought to shore [#48-50]),



Figures 48 to 50



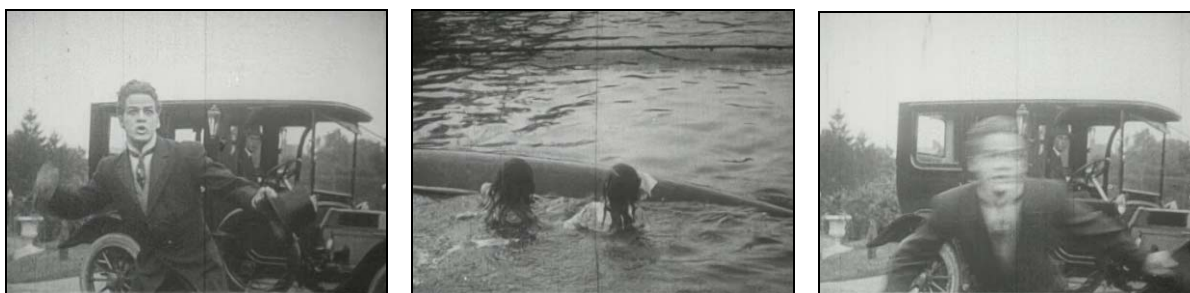
## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

or to draw our attention to a more circumscribed sector of a previously unoccupied locale (as when Lucy hides in the neighbour's automobile [#51-52]).



Figures 51 & 52

The narration also employs editing to frame action as a viewed event when the neighbouring father arrives at the park only to see the girls in peril [#53-55],



Figures 53 to 55

or to isolate an intense emotional moment, as in the much closer framing of the same man when he is gripped by the thirst for revenge [#56]. The increased mobility of the camera, literally manifest in the various camera movements employed throughout the film, acts figuratively as well, insofar as the different camera positions place the spectator in a variety of vantage points on the action [#57], shaping our response to the material in more varied ways than was encouraged by the static framing of *Get Rich Quick*.

As communicative as the narration is in such instances, aspects of the narrative remain relatively unclear. An intertitle



Figure 56



Figure 57

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

blankly informs us that “the other father decides to join [Lucy’s family]” [#58] once they have been at the park for some time, but we neither understand why he has changed his mind nor why he chose not to go with them in



Figure 58

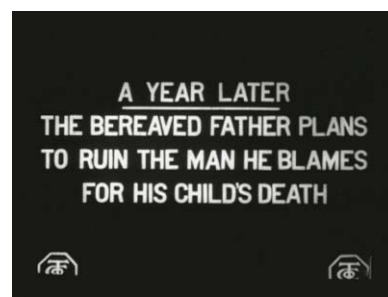


Figure 59

the first place. Later, when the man decides to exact revenge on Lucy’s father [#59], the narration expends seven shots on the process, but all that one can reasonably glean from the depicted events [#60-65] is that the one man gives the other faulty advice, possibly concerning

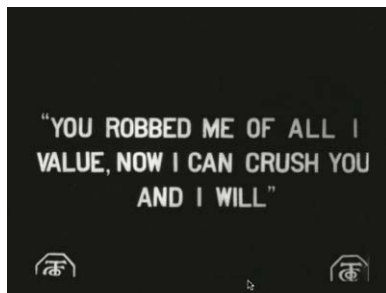


Figures 60 to 65

stocks. (The main cues exist on the level of the mise-en-scene, with stock ticker machines prominently featured in both men’s offices, and the lettering on the vengeful father’s door indicating that he works with stocks.) Because we do not know what kind of business relationship exists between the two, and because we are not privy to the nature of the advice the neighbouring father provides, only the outcome is certain, confirmed by a dialogue title of the

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

man exclaiming “You robbed me of all I value, now I can crush you and I will.” [#66-67]



**Figures 66 & 67**

Clearly, the film’s narrational energies are directed toward establishing the motivation for the character’s revenge (underscored by two intertitles) rather than divulging the intricacies of his plan.

Similarly, we understand that Lucy’s presence and her entreaties prompt the moment of the father’s conversion, but the exact nature of what persuades him remains unexplained. The narration goes to great effort to place Lucy in close quarters with the father [#68], by having her choose to hide out in his car’s cab, but once he discovers her there [#69], we don’t learn what Lucy says, or, at the crucial moment when his daughter appears as a vision, what she expresses either. [#70]



**Figure 68**



**Figure 69**



**Figure 70**

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

(What we do notice is that the framing and character positioning in the shot prepare for the appearance of the apparition on the left side of the image [#71-72], as a suitably large gap has been left for it to occupy.) Before she drowned, the man's daughter had urged Lucy's father to save Lucy first; perhaps, in spectral form, she is now explaining that to her own father [#73]. Or she may simply be advocating a principle of forgiveness.



Figures 71 to 73

The narration provides no clues as to what the daughter says, only that it has the requisite effect on her father [#74-75].



Figures 74 to 75

And like the vision scene from *Get Rich Quick*, one is left to decide whether the vision depicted is what the father imagines when prompted to think of his daughter by Lucy or a visualization of what Lucy says. If one understands this vision as the former, it stands as the culminating moment of a narration that has foregrounded character-based motivation, through such devices as dialogue intertitles, implied point-of-view, and cut-ins for emotional expressiveness.

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

### *An Elusive Diamond* (1914) [#76]

In many ways, *An Elusive Diamond* is the most conventional of the three narratives under examination, and the one least dependent on character psychology. Its plot involves multiple deceptions, however, so the narration must operate in such a way



Figure 76

as to ensure that viewer knowledge exceeds character knowledge at the appropriate moments, avoiding confusion in the process. As one might imagine, the narrative centres on a coveted gem. A wealthy woman promises to send a favoured relative an expensive diamond via her secretary, but her untrustworthy butler overhears and plots to steal the jewel. Suspicious of the way he lingers when the gem is mentioned, the secretary decides to hide the diamond in a carved-out bar of soap, even while she tells her employer that she will be keeping the jewel box in her hair. Joining his co-conspirators, the butler devises a trap for the secretary, who is deceived at the train station and taken to the thieves' lair rather than to her appointed destination. The thieves try to find the jewel but cannot, and their task is further complicated when the secretary tosses the ring box out the window. Eventually she escapes and brings the police back with her. Only when the crooks are in handcuffs does she reveal that the diamond was encased in soap all along.

Probably no more compelling indication of changing stylistic (and, by extension, narrational) norms at Thanhouser can be cited than the mounting shot count for each successive film, as one moves from *Get Rich Quick* (which has 18 shots) to *The Little Girl Next Door* (53) to *An Elusive Diamond* (74). (The latter count rivals the highest of any Thanhouser single-reeler from this period that I have encountered.) The rise in cutting rates speaks to the increased number of individuated spaces used in *An Elusive Diamond*, even while its time frame is the



## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

most compressed of any of the three films, with the action seemingly all taking place within the same day. The film provides not only a series of contiguous spaces [#77-79] within its two



Figures 77 to 79

primary locales, but also relies on different framings of the same spaces, with the area under a second-story window rendered via no fewer than six different framings [#80-85].



Figures 80 to 85

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

And cut-ins depicting intricate actions or those involving small objects occur so often as to constitute one of the film's primary narrational tools [#86-91].



Figures 86 to 91

With only two expository titles, the narration of *An Elusive Diamond* depends on editing and altered shot scale to a much greater degree than its predecessors to convey the details of the narrative.

Because the story centres on a small, hidden item, the narration is all but forced to provide close views from time to time, else the viewer would find much of the crucial action mystifying. But cut-ins to specific, small objects and details of actions account for only some of the adjustments to shot scale that persist throughout *An Elusive Diamond*.

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

Reframings of already established spaces occur at key junctures in the film, either to underscore character reactions (as when the butler overhears [#92-93] the secretary discussing the diamond with her employer)



Figures 92 & 93

or to prepare for a character's dramatic exit (as when the secretary makes the decision to leap out the window to escape her captors) [#94-95].



Figures 94 & 95

The narration's willingness to explore the resources of space in this way eliminates the need to always push important action to the foreground; instead, an adjustment of shot scale achieves the same aim. *An Elusive Diamond*'s treatment of space indicates that an increased reliance on fragmentary editing tended to displace manipulation of staging as a preferred narrational strategy at Thanhouser by the mid-teens.

As Kristin Thompson has pointed out in her summary analysis of trends in late transitional narration, it progressively “found ways of motivating the telling process so that it seemed for the most part to come from within the action of the scene.” (p. 432) This meant combining maximal communicativeness with a minimum of self-consciousness. The overt nature of expository titles tended to give way to a greater preponderance of dialogue titles. Cut-



## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

ins and altered shot scale rendered space more amenable to fragmentation, while faster cutting rates tied separate spaces together with increased rapidity and fluidity. But while these changes to style bespoke and abetted a shift in narrational norms, moments still persist in later films where narrative clarity is lacking. In *An Elusive Diamond*, for example, we do not learn where the secretary is taking the diamond, nor why it is that she needs to take a train to reach her destination when the butler is able to ride a motorbike and arrive at the same locale with apparent speed. And the butler's co-conspirators are able to dupe the secretary by convincing her that they have been sent by "Mr. Gray" to escort her, but we have never been informed who Mr. Gray is [#96]. (It is possible that

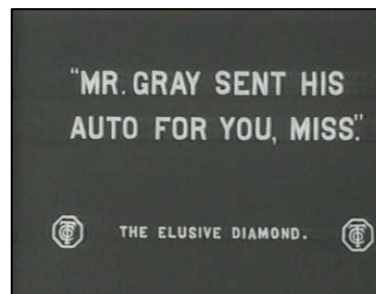


Figure 96

the film's first title indicated that the aunt was writing to a nephew named Gray, who is the intended recipient of the diamond.) But these are minor points of confusion; otherwise, the narration manages to shift quite ably in distributing essential narrative information, so that we know that the secretary has hidden the diamond in the bar of soap [#97-99] to keep its true



Figures 97 to 99

location a secret from the butler, just as we understand later that the secretary is being misled when she accepts the ride from one of the butler's colleagues. And at the end, it is easy to follow the secretary's deception of the crooks, so that when she throws the ring box out of the window [#100], we



Figure 100

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

recognize that she is deliberately inviting them [#101] to search for a gem [#102-104] that remains right under their noses. *An Elusive Diamond* proves anything but for the viewer who is able to follow the deliberately dropped cues that the film's narration provides.



Figures 101 to 104

This snapshot of narrational tendencies in Thanhouser films over a three-year stretch indicates that the company's developments were in line with those evident in the industry as a whole, but certain predilections may point us toward preliminary identification of a house style and particularities of narration. If we can agree that many of the leading companies of the day evinced an intermittent interest in exploring character psychology for its contributions to narrative causality, Thanhouser seems particularly intrigued by the possibilities that visions and flashbacks afford for such explorations. The company relied on these two devices with surprising regularity, especially in 1912-13, going so far as to subject entire narratives to a recurrent flashback structure [#105-106].



Figures 105 & 106 – *Just a Shabby Doll* (1913)

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

And, as we have seen in the films already examined, visions were often privileged within the company's output, both for their status as narrative turning points, but also by the self-consciousness of their representation [#107-109].



**Figure 107 - *The Portrait of Lady Anne* (1912)**



**Figure 108 - *The Voice of Conscience* (1912)**



**Figure 109 - *Just a Shabby Doll* (1913)**

But the novelty of the vision scene is probably a minor component of Thanhouser's house style, which I am inclined to understand primarily in terms of its powers of spatial articulation. First, the company was much more prone to use panning to expand depicted space or to reframe than any other manufacturer at this time save Lubin. Most of the films that I examined had numerous pans and tilts sprinkled throughout [#110-111; #112-116].



**Figures 110 to 111 - *The Portrait of Lady Anne* (1912)**



**Figures 112 to 116 - *The Farmer's Daughters* (1913)**

## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

One also notes a somewhat more adventurous approach to camera placement in Thanhouser films than is typical, with a greater openness to angling of the camera for particular compositions [#117-123].



**Figure 117 - *His Great Uncle's Spirit* (1912)**



**Figure 118 - *His Great Uncle's Spirit* (1912)**



**Figure 119 - *Just a Shabby Doll* (1913)**



**Figure 120 - *The Tiniest of Stars* (1913)**



**Figure 121 - *The Voice of Conscience* (1912)**



**Figure 122 - *The Portrait of Lady Anne* (1912)**



**Figure 123 - *The Farmer's Daughters* (1913)**

A third, related approach to space that marks the company's output is the use of different camera set-ups to film the same space [#124-131].



**Figures 124 to 126 - *The Voice of Conscience* (1912)**



**Figures 127 to 131 - *The Farmer's Daughters* (1913)**

Collectively, these stylistic tendencies mark Thanhouser as a company that demonstrates an ongoing commitment to the principle of dynamisation of space. If Griffith came to depend on a version of axial cutting for closer scaled shots, typically maintaining a marked degree of frontality, Thanhouser adopted quite a different approach.



## Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality

One sees, for example, in the company's handling of telephone conversations [#132-136]



Figures 132 to 136 - *His Uncle's Wives* (1913)

or cut-ins [#137-138],



Figures 137 to 138 - *The Tiniest of Stars* (1913)

a relatively less restrictive placement of the camera, in line with the general spatial tendencies I have indicated. Overall, the company's style differentiated their films both from those of Vitagraph, where more consistent attention was devoted to the potential of the mise-en-scene, and Biograph, which persisted in its exploration of the resources of parallel editing patterns and of an insistent contiguity. [#139]



Figure 139

## **Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality**

The transitional period offers up films dependent upon both novelty and formula, repetition and experimentation. If I disagree with Tom Gunning that the narrator system that developed during this period should be tied to the figure of the auteur (personified most obviously by Griffith), I do concur that filmmakers faced unique challenges in the transitional era. Gunning has written that “the integrative and dominant role of the director at Biograph was not the simple result of the force of Griffith’s personality, but the product of an industrywide redefinition of the film commodity through a new emphasis on film as a fictional dramatic medium.” (p. 48) But what if we were to emphasise instead the role each company played in that process of redefinition? Companies provided the framework and seemingly determined how the narrational and stylistic tools would be deployed. Filmmakers at Vitagraph had to observe the 9-foot line when filming, as surely as directors at Biograph adopted a largely frontal perspective on all interior sets. The lessons that Thanhouser teaches us are that filmmakers experimented within the bounded contexts that their home studios provided them. Even as Griffith helped propel Biograph to a position of industry leadership, he did not define the transitional period: its complex formal contours incorporated his achievements at the same time that his bold experiments occasionally stretched its conceptual boundaries. To understand the achievements of both we must persist in our analysis of that most elusive object: the typical transitional film.

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## **Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality**

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All images are taken from the Thanhouser DVD Collection, Volumes 1 thru 12,

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