

The Rise and Fall of Thanhouser and the Silent Drug Film Genre: A Case Study

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## **The Rise and Fall of Thanouser and the Silent Drug Film Genre: A Case Study**

With the rise of narrative cinema, the social problem film became an important genre in pre-World War I American filmmaking. Both independent filmmakers and members of The Trust produced reels addressing issues like political graft, poverty, birth control and child abuse. Kay Sloan (1988), in her book on the origins of the social problem film, calls these studio heads, “reformers who also sought a profit” (p. 16). There is an assumption in Sloan’s description that two forces gave birth to these films: the drive for money and a true desire to cast light on problems and injustices within American society. This is a viewpoint shared by other film historians, such as Kevin Brownlow (1990). So, while filmmakers may have been spurred to action by an issue, a picture’s social purpose still had to be weighed against its cost and potential profit.

In the social problem genre, drug addiction was one of a group of topics that created a unique problem with this balance between message and money. Portrayals of addiction, like that of other social issues that tread on the seedier side of life, were open to complaints of pruriency and encouraging viewer interest in the very actions they were criticizing. At the same time, it would be exceedingly naïve to assume some filmmakers did not realize those very same titillating details might bring in more audience members. The line between depicting an opium den and reveling in its debauchery is, indeed, fine—if it exists. So beyond balancing profit and purpose, producers of drug films were further conflicted by an uneasy navigation between trying to illuminate the horrors of addiction and not vicariously dwelling upon them.

To understand how studios during the early years of American filmmaking attempted to negotiate the conflicting pressures of producing drug films, I will examine the output of one particular company, Thanhouser Films. Thanhouser produced a large range of social problem movies about issues like child labor, poverty and women's suffrage, and seemed actively concerned about furthering progressive ideas of the era. Following trends in the industry, the company began producing what can be called "drug films," cautionary tales prominently featuring substance abuse (including alcoholism) or addicts in their narratives. Thanhouser's 1910-1917 production years roughly coincide with the rise and fall of drug films as a popular genre, increasing in numbers during the early 1910s and falling out of favor about the time of America's entry into World War I (Brownlow, 1990). With the exception of 1912's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, no prints of Thanhouser's drug films survive; however, plot descriptions, critical reactions to the productions, and statements by studio officials reflect the conflicting concerns about the content of these movies at the time of their release. Through these sources, I will chronologically examine the development of the drug film at Thanhouser and the pressures surrounding them.

### Sample

Using plot descriptions and reviews found in *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History* (Bowers, 1997), I have identified nine movies produced by the company that can be identified as drug films (Appendix A). For the sake of comparison, I also generated a partial list of American drug films produced by other companies from 1910-1918 that verifies the increased production and eventual decline of drug films during this time period (Appendix B). As no central film archive of this period exists, this second list

was created with information found in Stark's (1982) history of drug cinema, Brownlow's (1990) account of silent social problem films, and keyword searches on internet film databases. Undoubtedly, many more pictures were released during this era that are lost forever. Therefore, it would be highly speculative to compare the output of any single company with Thanhouser's release of drug films, given the limited data available. A general comparison of the lists does, however, verify that Thanhouser was not alone or unique in their production of drug films.

#### Early Thanhouser

After a career in theater, Edwin Thanhouser founded his own film company in 1909. The fledgling Thanhouser Films began distributing pictures in 1910, specializing in literary and theatrical adaptations. That same year, the studio released what could be considered its first drug film—*Ten Nights in a Bar Room*. The story was well known and had been adapted from a successful temperance novel and play. According to published synopses, the film chronicles the descent of Joe Morgan, who turns to drink and leaves his family behind. Joe's daughter, pleading with her father to stay sober, is accidentally killed at the saloon. Her death leads Joe back to the straight-and-narrow (*Moving Picture World*, 1910a).

Although released early in the development of the drug film, reviews of *Ten Nights* articulate three main discourses that will continue to circulate throughout the life of the genre. Documents reflect a constant struggle to identify films as educational or sensational, a controversy over whether scenes of vice should even be shown in drug films, and a questioning of realism in the filmic presentation. These points reflect a

critical framework used to critique future works, so I will spend some space providing an example of how these pressures circulate in discussions of *Ten Nights*.

*Ten Nights* was released just one year after the establishment of the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures. The Board was created to discourage material that might elicit criticism of the industry—a growing concern amongst filmmakers and exhibitors (Sloan, 1988, p. 5). This fear lead movie reviewers to deal harshly with any social problem pictures they believed crossed the line between educational and sensational. Even before its release, the very name of the film, *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, brought admonishment from *Moving Picture World (MPW)* (1910b): “Whoever suggested the above title for a photoplay in these days of ‘uplifters’ and ‘reformers’ should be sentenced to 10 days’ imprisonment.” Although assuring readers the company will follow through on the “dramatic moral teachings” of the book, the magazine urged caution in dealing with the topic. A review after the release of the film similarly warns, “some sporadic ‘reformer’ who does not know the original...will fill ‘space’ on the iniquity of moving pictures founded on this title” (Walton, 1910). *Ten Days* was faulted by some reviews as being unequal to its cautionary task; however, the film was never accused of sensationalism. Interestingly, an advertisement placed in *MPW* (1910c) actually recommends marketing the picture to “temperance folk,” since “very few go to picture shows.” This continual push and pull between educating and pandering becomes a common critical scale by which to judge each film.

The second theme mentioned in reviews of *Ten Days* is a concern over scenes of vice. The previously mentioned preliminary coverage makes the plea, “let us hope that the makers of this film will use discretion so that the films will be used as a booster for

and not a club against our common interest” (*MPW*, 1910b). The industry seems especially cautious of including lurid details and sexual suggestion in these films. Apparently, *Ten Days* agreed with contemporary mores, because further reviews lodged no actual complaints against the picture.

The last discourse that emerges in the literature is a concern for verisimilitude within the films. Several film scholars have noted how reviewers and trade publications became focused upon realism during the transition to the classical Hollywood style (Keil, 2001; Thompson, 1985). It seems an interesting conflict that reviewers were encouraging the deletion of objectionable content in drug films, while also continually calling for true-to-life pictures. The very presence of realist situations in these depictions would have likely resulted in condemnation from the same reviewer. Instead, critics turned their attention to plot plausibility and *mise en scène*. Despite other conflicting concerns particular to the drug films, reviewers reflect this drive for continual drive for true-to-life pictures. *Ten Nights* took hits from several critics on this count, who complained that shadows fell opposite from their light source (*The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1910) and that the impoverished family had lace curtains in their home (Jeanval, 1910).

These three discourses of education, vice and reality structured critical reception of the drug films. However, whether Thanhouser Films should depict edgier, more lurid scenes never seemed to be in question. The year after the release of *Ten Nights*, both Edwin Thanhouser and Publicity Director Bertram “Bert” Adler both were featured in articles as being generally supportive of the censorship of motion pictures. Adler (1911) argued the need for a national body to censor material, while also reassuring the public, “the picturemen have grown adverse to turning out the objectionable subject which is

sure to meet death at the hands of the censors.” Thanhouser, while selectively supporting regulation, argues that film companies were being painted with a broad brush and that films could be a positive moral force, as well as a negative (Film maker says, 1911). Based on such public statements and reported film output, the film company seems to have had little interest in providing more fuel for the moral fire.<sup>1</sup>

The second drug film released by the company was also one of their best-remembered productions. Their 1912 adaptation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* received glowing reviews from critics. In viewing the film, the connection between drugs, like cocaine, and the potion that turns the good doctor into the murderous Mr. Hyde seems largely suggestive. The parallel, however, is evoked in the *New York Dramatic Mirror’s* (*NYDM*) (1912) description, “he is prone to abuse the discovery by too frequent use and thus finds himself turning into the grosser character without any volition or administering of the drug.” Other adaptations of the tale focused more on the narcotic connection (Starks, 1982), but this angle is largely ignored by Thanhouser.

1912 also saw the release of the thriller *A Message From Niagara*. The film tells the story of a retired father who becomes an opium addict. His daughter tries to cure him, but the father dies. She learns the location of the opium dealers who sold drugs to her father and, in trying to enact vengeance, is captured. Her sweetheart comes to her rescue after finding a message she has placed in a bottle (*The Moving Picture News*, 1912). The film was Thanhouser’s first entry in the popular opium smuggling genre. Films chronicling opium dens and the lure of the drug were prevalent in early cinema, beginning with Edison’s 1894 *Chinese Opium Den* (Starks, 1982). These were often short

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<sup>1</sup> Although a 1915 controversy where Edwin Thanhouser advocated for artistic nudity and included it in his film *Inspiration* seems an exception

kinetographs or films of tourist opium spots—unusual scenes in the tradition of what Gunning (1993) calls, “the cinema of attractions.” After the passage of the Opium Exclusion Act in 1909, smuggling was in newspaper headlines. Films like Selig’s *The Opium Smugglers* (1912) popularized the theme for motion pictures. *A Message* was produced by the Niagara Falls office of Thanhouser and received considerably more praise for the scenery of the falls than for the story and its plausibility.

As the Thanhouser company matured, the popularity of drug pictures grew. During this transition, in 1913, Edwin Thanhouser decided to sell part of his interest in the company, step down as executive, and travel to Europe. After his departure, the studio released its most controversial entry in the drug film genre.

#### Later Thanhouser Films

Appendix B reflects the limited number of early drug films reportedly being produced by studios from 1910-1913. Two factors led to significant increases in the release of such films in the coming years. First was the “white slave” hysteria of 1913. The issue of prostitution began to be discussed in papers around this time and appeared on-screen in several sensationalist pictures during the year (Brownlow, 1990). These “white slave” films often lumped drugs into the narrative and proved increasingly popular with audiences. The second reason for the increase was the Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914, which brought more attention to the problem of drug addiction, further criminalized the addict, and mandated that pharmacists could only supply drugs for valid reasons, not to supply people addicted to substances.

During this period, in 1914, Thanhouser produced its most thorough analysis of addiction, *Dope*. The film was an adaptation of a 1909 play about the horrors of cocaine



addiction. The six-reel picture depicts the ravages of drugs upon a family, as the mother becomes a prostitute and dies. Several other people, likewise, die due to their addiction and blame passes from the druggist who sells the cocaine, to the company manufacturing it. D. W. Griffith had tackled the subject of cocaine addiction two years earlier in his Biograph film, *For His Son*. However, after viewing the film, Griffith's treatment must be tame compared to descriptions of *Dope*.

In his history of Thanhouser, Bowers (1997) claims the film was meant to tap into the "white slavery" market and that the company probably wanted the picture to be associated with vice pictures. This connection apparently succeeded and brought about a mixed reaction from critics. Both *NYDM* (1914) and *Variety* (1914) filed reviews for *Dope*. While admitting the picture "is hardly a pleasant film," *NYDM* lavished considerable praise upon the production. In the battle between education and sensationalism, the review clearly judges the movie educational—"The evils, in their every phase, and none of the pleasures are brought out." The reviewer lauds Thanhouser by saying, "this, a serious, morbid and possibly disgusting subject, has been so handled by the material built around it that it not only accomplishes its purpose – namely, the exposition – but it at the same time handles it in a more pleasant form."

The review from *Variety* (1914), which was a relative newcomer to film reviews, is decidedly less enthusiastic and complains, in particular, of scenes of vice. The reviewer admits the film, "illustrat[es] in a legitimate way the menace of drugs," but "just misses being 'education'...and places itself in the 'vice' class." Especially egregious to the critic is the depiction of a mother, driven to prostitution, drinking in the back of a saloon. Parts of the film obviously walk the previously mentioned fine line of showing immoral

behavior for the period, and *Variety* takes the filmmakers to task. The critic does differentiate between *Dope* and other, more sensational films of the period, such as Lubin's *The Drug Terror* (1914), and further acknowledges that, "were it not for the unclean portions or vice sections of the film, Mr. Lieb [the lead actor] would have had a feature he could have made extravagant claims for." The review concludes with a warning to exhibitors: those "who handle vice pictures can use this one; those who make it a rule not to will have to decide whether they will chance it." The advice illustrates the conundrum facing both the producers and exhibitors of drug films at the time—how much realism and detail can be added to an educational picture before it becomes a "vice film?"

Having made its name on more mainstream and high-minded fare, *Dope* seems a risky project for Thanhouser to undertake. It was a risk they would avoid taking again. The company never attempted another project as edgy as *Dope*. With the increased popularity of drug films in the mid-1910s, many studios began writing drugs into scripts as a secondary plot point (Brownlow, 1990, p. 100). Thanhouser chose this alternative, safer option for their next three drug films.

The three-reeler *The Long Arm of the Secret Service* (1915) was a return to the safer opium smuggling crime drama, albeit with a twist. In the story, a young oyster fisher and his former childhood sweetheart are nearly framed by an opium smuggler; however, the sweetheart proves to be an actual agent for the government. Apparently, the idea of a female detective was so inconceivable that a *MPW* reviewer is compelled to admit that, though "long training enables [the critic] to forecast results in detective stories of exceptional intricacy," even he may be thrown off by such an unexpected development

(Harrison, 1915). As might be expected by the strategy of moving drugs away from the forefront, the drug subplot rates little more than a mention in reviews, and no opinion on its presence.

The next two drug films released by Thanhouser used addiction as a comic device, rather than for a pathos-inspiring morality tale. *Una's Useful Uncle* (1915) and *Theodore's Terrible Thirst* (1916) reflect both the studio's love of alliteration in its titles and the then-common motif of using drugs and addicts for comic relief. This humorous filmic harnessing of substance abusers is typified by Keystone's 1916 release *Mystery of the Leaping Fish*, where Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. plays cocaine fiend and detective Coke Enneyday. It seems interesting that Thanhouser chose to feature alcoholics, stock figures with less ideological baggage, in both of their comedies, instead of an illegal drug user. The move foreshadows a shift that would lead to alcohol social problem films in the 1940s and 50s and leave the topic of drug addiction to low budget sensationalists.

In *Una*, a couple are in danger of losing their apple farm to a dishonest lender until their alcoholic uncle lends a hand. At a town dance, the uncle provides samples of his 'Usquebaugh' Apples, which are a hit with the townsfolk. Shortly after the lender buys the farm from the couple to get the apples, the uncle reveals the secret formula for the apples—whiskey (*Reel Life*, 1915). Although important to the plot, the uncle and his addiction are not the focus of the picture, only amusing devices. This throwaway attitude toward addicts is reflected in the *MPW* (1915) review, "Uncle proves useful in spite of his addiction to the bottle." Instead of encouraging some measure of sympathy and reform, like earlier social problem films, comedies like *Una* belittled and ridiculed the plight of the addict.

*Theodore's Terrible Thirst* transfers the role of alcoholic to a father, with the same humorous results. A daughter dies and leaves her riches to her brother and addicted father—provided they both abstain from drinking. The son kidnaps his father and places him on a deserted island. After gaining the inheritance, the son buys the island and lives there happily with his wife and father (*Reel Life, 1916b*). *MPW* (1916) predicted the one-reel comedy would “get a number of smiles.” The two comedies and *The Long Arm* are all examples of an industry trend toward incorporating addiction and addicted characters into a plot, rather than making them the focus.

Although drugs were also being subsumed into other narratives, traditional social problem films and sensationalist accounts of drug use continued to be produced leading up to World War I. In fact, by 1916 Brownlow (1990) claims the market had become glutted with drug films. He reports how a 1916 *Variety* review of *The Devil's Needle* claims, “The drug story has been so often sheeted there is nothing left for it” (p. 100). The film information in Appendix B reflects this peak of drug films in 1916, and a sharp decline over the next two years. Thanouser produced their last two drug melodramas during this period of oversaturation and immediate decline.

The three-reel *The Bubbles in the Glass* (1916) was a return to a more traditional, cautionary morality tale. This temperance picture opens in a posh restaurant, where a young man bids his friends farewell and stays behind to drink champagne. The rich lad plans to kill himself with poison, and sips the alcohol. As he stares into the bubbles, there “appear tragedies of the vineyard and of the wine presses – after that, his own career passes slowly in review” (*Reel Life, 1916a*). Preparing to take the poison, the touch of his fiancée, who has returned to the restaurant, halts him and he is rescued by her love. From

the synopsis, there seems to be no indication of any scenes of vice. The suffering is more internal and linked to the young man's reckless use of his wealth. The picture seems a decidedly low risk entry in the drug film genre, especially after the depictions in *Dope*. It is unclear whether the return of Edwin Thanhouser as studio head a year earlier may have played a role in how these later films dealt with the drug issue. Although he seemed a supporter of limited censorship, I could find no accounts of his opinion on what line should be drawn on such depictions. The fact remains that contemporary accounts obviously viewed *The Bubbles* as much tamer than *Dope*.

During Thanhouser's last year of film production, the company also released their last drug picture, *The Candy Girl* (1917). Judging from reviews, this five-reeler starts as a light-hearted comedic film and abruptly shifts to social problem melodrama. Nell, played by popular Thanhouser regular Gladys Hulette, is a fudgemaker from the country who moves to New York and sets up a candy store. She wins over everyone with her big heart and delicious candy. She eventually meets a rich man and falls in love. After they marry, "she learns too late that her husband is a victim of the drug habit. Her efforts to win him back to manliness and decency, and her final success, finish the story" (*MPW*, 1917). The narrative shift from "sweet girl wins over world" to "battling addiction" seemed sudden for many reviewers. Writing in *MPW*, Edward Weitzel (1917) commented, "The change from the simple motives of the earlier part of the story to the discovery of young Monroe's secret vice is somewhat startling, to say the least." It seems an interesting attempt on behalf of the filmmakers to cover the audience's emotional gamut with the picture.

Although this early attempt to create “dramedy” may have met with mixed results, the mild content of the film was applauded. Reviews emphasized the wholesome nature of *The Candy Girl* and connected it with the appealing star image Hulette was beginning to develop. *NYDM* (1917) assures that, since Hulette is the star, exhibitors will be, “provided with a feature that will be a welcome relief to melodramas and sex films.” *The Morning Telegraph* (Reddy, 1917) also focused on Hulette’s connection with the film, claiming, “Nell introduces no new methods into breaking Jack Monroe of his vicious habit, but then the vehicle needed none to assure the winsome Miss Hulette of success.” Reviewers recommended the film for children and communities, a drastic contrast to the warnings and outrage accorded its contemporary drug films (Brownlow, 1990). Once again, critics rewarded the absence of any potential scenes of vice and the choice to emphasize education over sensationalism—although actual audience reception is harder to judge.

As Thanhouser ceased production in 1917, other film companies drastically cut back the number of social problem pictures they were releasing, including drug films. America’s entry into World War I necessitated tales of unity and positive themes. At the same time, the rise of feature-length films meant studios were producing fewer movies that were more expensive. The increased cost and risk associated with creating social problem films virtually guaranteed they would be phased out (Sloan, 1988). After the war, silent drug films would become divided between bigger-budget, popular stories like *Human Wreckage* (1923) and low-budget exploitation films, such as *The Greatest Menace* (1923) (Starks, 1982).

## Conclusion

Correlating as it does with the rise and fall of the drug film, Thanhouser's history offers a useful case study of how a single studio incorporated this new genre into its repertoire, and then struggled with the controversies of the genre. The studio's early drug films grappled with illustrating the plight of addiction without arousing backlash from society's moral leaders, a precarious balancing act all major film producers were obliged to attempt. The three main critical concerns of education versus sensationalism, the minimizing of vice, and the application of verisimilitude became standard tests applied to drug films, in order to evaluate with they were suitable for public consumption. With the release of 1914's *Dope*, some critics accused the company of crossing the line.

Subsequent productions seem to retreat away from any controversy and to stay firmly in the safe area of providing a morality tale, without depicting the daily lives of addicts.

This case study illustrates the potential pitfalls of the social problem picture, especially when dealing with controversial topics like drug addiction. There is an inherent difficulty in showing an audience something that may outrage them and that they may prefer to remain ignorant about. Moral outrage can just as easily turn towards the messenger as the problem. This delicate balance was an obvious concern for the industry as a whole and for film critics, as the self-styled conscience of the industry. As some filmmakers continued to turn out sensational accounts of drug addiction, the public became more intolerant of the topic itself. True social problem films became riskier to make, until the potential cost outweighed their benefit to the studios. The result has been over twenty years of highly limited accounts of addiction by Hollywood. It's been only

recently, within the last two decades, that American studios became willing to tackle substance abuse, beyond alcohol, in any meaningful way.



**Appendix A**  
**Thanhouser Drug Films (1910-1918)**

Ten Nights in a Bar Room (1910)  
Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1912)  
A Message From Niagara (1912)  
Dope (1914)  
Long Arm of the Secret Service (1915)  
Una's Useful Uncle (1915)  
The Bubbles in the Glass (1916)  
Theodore's Terrible Thirst (1916)  
The Candy Girl (1917)

**Appendix B**  
**American Drug Films by Production Companies Other than Thanhouser**  
**(1910-1918)**

1910

*Dope Trade in Chinatown* (1910) – Eastman

1911

*A Turkish Cigarette* (1911) – Selig Polyscope Company

1912

*For His Son* (1912) – Biograph

*Let No Man Put Asunder* (1912) – Independent Moving Pictures Co. of America

*The Opium Smugglers* (1912) – Selig Polyscope Company

*The Romance of an Old-Maid* (1912) – Independent Moving Pictures Co. of America

1913

*Absinthe* (1913) – Independent Moving Pictures Co. of America

*His Blind Power* (1913) – Lubin

*The Opium Smugglers* (1913) – George Kleine

*Traffic in Souls* (1913) – Independent Moving Pictures Co. of America

1914

*The Derelict* (1914) – Kalem

*The Drug Traffic* (1914) – Eclair

*The Drug Terror* (1914) - Lubin

*The Master Key* (1914) – Universal

*Narcotic Spectre* (1914) – Mutual Film Company

*The Opium Cigarettes* (1914) – Climax

*The Secret Sin* (1915) – Famous Players

1915

*The Accursed Drug* (1915) – Edison

*Bondwomen* (1915) – George Kleine

*Dreamy Dude* (1915) - Essanay

*The Graft* (1915) – Universal

*New Exploits of Elaine* (1915) – Pathe

*The Pipe Dream* (1915) – Essanay

*Poetic Justice of Omar Khan* (1915) – Selig Polyscope Company

*Prohibition* (1915) – Photo Drama Motion Picture Co.

*The Secret Sin* (1915) – Lasky

*The Warning* (1915) – Triumph Films

1916

*The Beggar of Cawnpore* (1916) – Kay-Bee Pictures

*Black Fear* (1916) – Rolfe Photoplays Inc.

*The City* (1916) – F. Ray Comstock Photoplay Company  
*Cosette, The Rise of Susan* (1916) – World Film Production  
*The Crimson Stain Mystery* (1916) – Consolidated Film Company  
*The Devil's Needle* (1916) – Fine Arts Film Company  
*The Dividend* (1916) – Kay-Bee Pictures  
*Drugged Waters* (1916) – Red Feather Photoplays  
*Hop – The Devil's Brew* (1916) – Bluebird Photoplays Inc.  
*The Little Girl Next Door* (1916) – Essanay  
*Madame X* (1916) – Henry W. Savage  
*Morpheus Mike* (1916) - Edison  
*Mystery of the Leaping Fish* (1916) – Keystone  
*Overalls* (1916) – American Film Company  
*The Rummy* (1916) – Fine Arts Film Company  
*The Sign of the Poppy* (1916) – Bluebird Photoplays Inc.

1917

*The Battle Royal* (1917) – Vim Comedy Film Company  
*The Devil's Assistant* (1917) – Mutual Film Corporations  
*Easy Street* (1917) – Lone Star Corporation  
*The Great White Trail* (1917) – Wharton, Inc.

1918

*A Romance of the Underworld* (1918) – Frank A. Keeney  
*Wild Women* (1918) - Universal

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