

Acting for the Camera: Dramatic Styles in Thanhouser Studio Films

Media Historiography

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At the end of the nineteenth century, film acting was emerging and finding its place among Western theatrical traditions. Throughout these years, dramatic acting occurred primarily in the legitimate theatre, on the Vaudeville stage, and in the frames of the silent cinema. Many dramatic theatre actors and comic Vaudeville performers crossed over to the medium of silent film and in doing so brought with them a history of theatrical conventions and dramatic acting styles. In *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films*, Roberta Pearson and William Urrichio examine the films of D.W. Griffith that were produced between 1908-1913. From their careful study of Griffith's body of work, the authors conclude that early silent film did in fact bring about significant changes in traditional dramatic performance techniques. These transformations were expressed and physicalized through the actor's use of two distinct acting codes and styles: the realistic "verisimilar" style and its predecessor, the nineteenth-century melodramatic "histrionic" style.

During this transitory period in the history of dramatic acting, the Thanhouser Studio produced and distributed a multitude of films and archived a substantial portion of each film's descriptive narrative and critical reception. The filmic and written evidence that is preserved in the *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1909-1918* is a terrific research tool to use for detecting and analyzing these two dominant acting styles. This paper places its focus on an examination of the written documentation that exists in the Thanhouser CD and the visual evidence found in the surviving films on the Thanhouser Classic VHS Collection. Using these recorded materials, I examine the ways in which dramatic structure and acting style were

described in the literature produced and distributed by the Thanhouser publicists, and characterized in the critical reception and reviews written during the period. I bolster my analysis of the descriptive sources with a qualitative textual analysis of a handful of the full-length films.

The theoretical frameworks and conceptual terms established by Pearson and Urrichio guide my search for written or visual proof that illuminates or identifies a particular acting style in the Thanhouser Studio films. Throughout this investigation, I have two questions in mind:

1) Is there visual and descriptive evidence of “histrionic and verisimilar” acting styles in the Thanhouser Studio Films? 2) If so, are these contrasting acting styles in conflict with each other or have they converged in ways that reveal a co-existing or new hybridized style?

The body of the paper is organized into three main areas. The first section is designed as an introductory review of the conventions that govern dramatic performance in general and theatre and film performance in particular. The second part is devoted to a discussion of the dramatic acting codes and styles identified and described by Pearson and Urrichio. Section three constitutes the analytical portion of this paper and is followed by a summary of my concluding remarks.

What are dramatic conventions?

Dramatic performance has the general function of generating meaning. Within the world of dramatic spectacle, there exists a general system of theories, codes, and conventions that have their own way of adding meaning to the dramatic event. The multitude of conventions that are present govern the entire spectacle in an attempt to create and communicate dramatic fiction. The governing convention of dramatic performance is mimesis. Mimesis is defined as the art of representing through likeness the objects that nature offers to us for observation. Representation of this observable reality, through image and symbol, is the key principle defining mimesis. The

theory of Classical Western mimesis is based on the assumption that literature, philosophy, art, and theatre can provide the world with a system for representing concretely abstract origins of truth and ideal forms. Through these representations, human beings can extract meanings about the world through the production of imitations that define the world.

One form of mimesis that has continued to endure over time is the representation of human action found in the theatre. Within the theatre aesthetic we can find one of history's oldest surviving corporeal expressions of human representation. Any examination of the origins and history of the theatre will reveal the ways that theatre has managed to redefine and re-invent itself in order to continue its existence over time.

Throughout history, theatre scholars have looked at the motives that direct people to develop theatre. According to theatre historian Oscar Brockett, in his book History of the Theatre, "Most answers fall back on theories about the human mind and basic human needs" (6). One such theory, writes Brockett, "set forth by Aristotle in the fourth century B.C., sees humans as naturally imitative -- as taking pleasure in imitating persons, things, and actions and in seeing such imitations" (6). In his introduction to Poetics (335-323 B.C.), Aristotle says that human beings have their first learning experiences through imitation and, as a result, derive pleasure from imitations:

For imitating is innate in men from childhood. Men differ from other animals in that they are the most imitative, and their first learning is produced through imitation. Again, all men delight in imitations. For we delight in contemplating the most exact likeness of things ... For men delight in seeing likenesses because on contemplating them it happens that they are learning and reasoning out what each thing is. (6; ch.4, sec. 1448b)

In the Poetics Aristotle supplies us with a method for understanding theatre as a place where meaning is created and communicated through observable elements. In doing so, he gives

us some words that we can use as a base from which to assess what we see in the theatre. Within Aristotle's explanation of the purpose of drama, he sets down and defines the use of six qualitative elements out of which drama is made. Aristotle writes:

Of necessity, there are six parts these are plot, characters, diction, thought, spectacle, and the making of melody. For two of these parts are the materials in which the agents imitate, one is how they imitate, three are the things that they imitate, and besides these there are no others. (12; ch.6, sec.1450a)

Within the frame of the theatre, these elements have functioned to help the audience to see the performance as a dramatic representation. Over a span of centuries, Aristotle's dramatic elements and his notion of mimesis continue to serve as the dominant criteria used to discuss the nature and the structure of drama and dramatic action. What we are shown through character and spectacle, what we infer from the ideas and emotions communicated by all the characters, and what we interpret from the ordering of incidents and actions in the play, all constitute the complete technical resources that are put to use during a theatre production. From the moment the spectator walks into the theatre, she knows that a series of conventions must be accepted for the experience to be successful. What is asked and required of the theatre audience members is for them to suspend their disbelief in the dramatic elements that are about to unfold on the stage.

Dramatic acting codes

Early silent film came of age during the Modern period in the midst of twentieth-century modernist thought. This period gave birth to significant artistic and social movements that had a great impact at a very formative time in early film history. As a historical term, the Modern period most often is referred to as a period dating from roughly the 1880s through the 1930s. During this time, a broad range of social and artistic movements developed in both Europe and in the United States that inspired new ways of thinking and seeing. Modernist refusal to conform to

earlier modes of perception directed an effort to construct reality actively in new ways.

According to Brockett, in his book The Essential Theatre, this rejection of the longstanding belief that art should represent human behavior and the physical world in a realistic and natural way often is considered the true beginning of the modernist temperament (181).

The Modern period -- which emerged out of the Romantic period -- ushered in a major reform movement in the theatre called Realism. This dominant cultural aesthetic represented a reaction against the melodramatic tradition that was associated with the Romantic era. Realists aimed to strip the theatre of its shallow conventions of melodrama and romanticism and to instead depict truthfully the real world. The domination of Realism during this time, brought about a total shift in dramatic acting styles. In rebellion against the artificial and idealized situations linked to melodrama, Realist playwrights, directors, actors, and theatre practitioners joined forces to place on the stage only those truths that could be verified by observing ordinary life. For the realists, dramatic truth constituted an ordinary story told in simple terms by recognizable characters in real-life situations. To this end, realists set out to depict the world truthfully by portraying a sense of *once upon a time, this is what happened*.

Since the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, the production of a visual culture has dominated the American social sphere. In Silent Film and the Triumph of the American Myth, Paula Cohen claims that photography succeeded as a medium “by establishing itself as a direct conduit to the real, offering the concrete representation of consummated facts” (8). In addition to this, the emergence of moving pictures, writes Cohen “introduced duration to the recorded event,” which eventually served as instigation for the “development of film narrative” (9). The central property of movement, fundamental to film, “added another layer or dimension to photographic realism” that produced for the spectator “the sense that reality was

being not only recorded but also enacted” (9). The intensification of realism that film could convey also “made possible an unprecedented involvement of the viewer with *character*” (9). This new relationship created an intimacy with the spectator that was extremely difficult to achieve through photography or even in the theatre. Within the frames of film’s reality-based aesthetic, the audience was now asked to focus its attentions on the “three elements that became the raw material of film ... the body, the landscape, and the face, moving dynamically in combination” (9).

In the final years of the last century, theatre succeeded in re-inventing and re-establishing itself within the frames of early silent film. During this time, an aesthetic transformation through assimilation occurred when stage actors -- who were experienced in the theatre and in Vaudeville -- transferred the focus of their dramatic talents to the studio camera. An inevitable result of the material changes that occurred in the means of theatrical production was the emergence of a different style of acting that was now governed by new dramatic conventions.

The moving image medium provided dramatic artists with the opportunity to signify the world through the language of the visual arts. In this way, they were able to convey pictorially the subject matter. The new cinematic technology also provided the viewing audiences with an opportunity to watch these “photo-plays” over and over again. For the first time, observers could detect and identify the existence of theatrical conventions and codes that survived the stage and were preserved in the films. The observations made by the viewing public, the theatre and film critics, and the film’s producers, ultimately translated into a vocabulary of definable and describable acting characteristics and styles; a terminology that can be used as a conceptual tool to help identify, interpret, and evaluate films.

Pearson and Urrichio claim that, “In 1908 the [film] producers and their audience derived the frame of reference primarily from their knowledge of theatrical conventions that were associated with the melodrama” (20). In other words, during this time, “Performance style was ‘histrionically’ coded” (20). Within the span of five years, this shared referential frame shifted away from the stylized and theatricalized notions of mimesis to “culturally specific notions about the mimesis of everyday life” (20). In other words: “Performance was ‘verisimilarly’ coded” (20). Convinced of this distinction, Pearson announces that she will “henceforth refer to the old style as the *histrionic code* and the new style as the *verisimilar code*” (20).

Histrionic acting codes

Until the latter half of the nineteenth century, writes Pearson, “most English and American actors in most theatres performed in a self-consciously theatrical fashion, ostentatiously playing a role rather than pretending to be another person” (21). Motivated by a desire to “proudly display their skills,” actors made no attempt to “mask technique in the modern fashion” but instead to present a “virtuoso performance” that had “little resemblance to any off-stage reality” (21). Pearson claims, “The actors remained always aware of the spectators, *playing to the gallery,*” while standing “center stage, facing front, as close to the footlights as possible” (21). They also moved about the stage “in stylized fashion” with conventionalized and standardized gestures and poses guided by choreography developed from “descriptions and illustrations in acting manuals and handbooks” (21). The value of these acting manuals, writes Pearson, lies in the data they provide “about the histrionic code” (21).

After taking a careful look “at the quality of the gestures in the early Biographs,” Pearson defines the histrionic code of acting as one that is “reflexive, referring always to the theatrical event rather than to the outside world” (20) and bearing a close resemblance to “conventional,

stereotyped notions of melodramatic acting” (27). Pearson also identifies a range of “histrionic” acting options that were available to the actor by distinguishing between what she calls “checked and unchecked histrionic codes” (27). For example, “In the unchecked histrionic code, gestures are quickly performed, heavily stressed, and fully extended, the arms being held upward, downward, or outward from the body” (27) while the checked histrionic code is best characterized by “Slower, less stressed, and less extended gestures, the arms remaining closer to the body” (27).

Verisimilar acting codes

“Realism is an aesthetic movement that emerged between 1830 and 1880. It is also a technique to give an objective account of human psychological and social reality” (Pavis 302). The aim of realism is to “render reality closely and with an emphasis on complex circumstances, logical actions, believable characters, and comprehensive contextual detail” (302). Modern realists agreed that the creation of art should always depict a truthful representation of the real world for the purpose of objectively examining that world. At the same time, the realist artist should always maintain an impersonal and non-judgmental relationship to her representation. Realists were not merely content to depict or produce a copy of reality; instead their goal was to provide the spectators with images through which they could understand the social mechanisms of reality.

“By the penultimate decade of the last century,” writes Pearson, “those connected with the theatre realized that the old style of histrionically coded performance had given way to a new style, to verisimilarly coded performance” (27). Pearson writes that during this time “the realists also struggled to dispense with the artificiality of plot and character” and instead “to give their fictional creations a psychological depth and plausible motivation”(31). “The exploration of

psyche became of paramount importance” to the actor in her quest to capture in performance “the ‘God-given complexity of motive which we find in all the human beings we know’” (31).

The actor’s desirable acting objective, claims Pearson, was to present “A plausible representation of actual life and manners and speech, with all the rhetoric and rhetorical conventions abolished, with no aim but the aim of illusion...” (31). “The dramatic realists also rejected unbelievable plots and implausible characters,” writes Pearson and in their efforts to follow the lead of the realist novelists, “the realist dramatists emphasized the ordinary rather than the extraordinary” (31). Their super-objective was “to substitute for one-dimensional stock figures, whose personalities were often signified by their physical attributes, the more complex, multi-dimensional, and psychologized characters being created by the literary realists” (32).

“Verisimilarly coded performances” writes Pearson, “included the little details, the realistic touches that actors referred to as ‘byplay’”(33). In contrast to the histrionic style, a critic of the period defined this new style of “subtle acting” as “a temperamental ability to suggest the stage portrait by delicate hints and nuances rather than by obvious methods”(33). Proponents of the verisimilar code of acting also “held to the realist tenet that there should be some connection between artistic representation and the actual experience of day-to-day life” (35).

According to Pearson, “Verisimilarly coded acting had no standard repertoire of gestures ... the style defined itself by the very abandonment of the conventional gestures of the histrionic code” (37). In addition to this, “Actors no longer portrayed emotions and states of mind by selecting from pre-established repertoire” (37) but instead sought to “substitute an easy ‘naturalness,’ a lack of self-consciousness, for the deliberate theatricality of the histrionic code” (37). Pearson stresses that the fundamental difference between the two acting codes can be

identified by the observation that “proponents of the histrionic code criticized actors for not acting, while those of the verisimilar criticized actors for acting” (36).

Critical Analysis

The Thanhouser Company was the name of an “extraordinarily active and energetic film company, which thrived from 1909 through 1917.”(Bowers, Forward). During this time the Thanhouser studio produced over 1,000 silent films and distributed a significant amount of literature related to the company’s production style and artistic vision. A small number of these films have survived and been restored on VHS and DVD formats. In addition, Thanhouser family members have preserved “an extensive record of documents, photographs, posters and other early motion picture industry materials ...” (Bowers). The majority of these resources are part of a CD collection titled Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1909-1918. Included in this database are contemporary writings, authored by film scholar Q. David Bowers, which serve as a comprehensive narrative explanation of the Thanhouser studio years.

This section is designed to pass along some of the observations I made while conducting a qualitative textual analysis of these sources. The purpose of this study is to identify the existence of a dramatic aesthetic in the Thanhouser films. Since these resource materials exist within the domain of performance history, I decided to employ the concepts and terms associated with Aristotle’s six elements of drama to help me evaluate and articulate what I discover. My main objective is to see if I detect any evidence -- written or filmic -- that points to or illustrates the existence of a particular dramatic acting style present in Thanhouser films. In order to do this I organized the scope of materials that I examined into three main areas: 1) Thanhouser-produced and distributed publicity, such as advertisements, trade articles, and press release synopses; 2)

critical reception, such as newspaper reviews and trade journal articles; 3) and a personal viewing of a handful of Thanhouser films.

I begin with a review of information that sheds light on some aspects of Edwin Thanhouser's artistic vision. In an interview conducted in 1910, Thanhouser highlights his 22 years of experience as manager of The Thanhouser Stock Company. During this time he produced, directed, and performed in hundreds of theatrical plays. According to Thanhouser: "The experience gathered in this way is very helpful, for it has given me a knowledge of one of the most vital necessities for producing good motion pictures, the knowledge and the value of a dramatic situation and its proper staging"(Vol. I, Ch. 2).

In another comment Thanhouser characterizes his preference for film narratives that portray life-like situations and convey stories that are easy for an audience to understand. Thanhouser says, "We do not care to do any pictures that the masses cannot grasp ... They must appeal to the best instincts of all audiences, and must always tell a moral and logical story" (Vol. I, Ch. 2). Thanhouser also communicates his understanding of the aesthetic relationship between film-making and Realism. According to Thanhouser:

I would say first that in realism, moving picture production excels stage production, particularly in a scenic possibility. In this way the realism can be a home to the actor's world. Instead of actors walking through cardboard flats that signify doors, the true-to-life setting, the environment, will create the right ambience, atmosphere for the actors to act in realistic ways. (Vol. I, Ch. 2)

During his tenure in the theatre Thanhouser was surrounded by the element of artificiality that he considered the limiting characteristic of the theatrical stage. He says, "At the theatre the audience accepts painted trees, canvas fences and houses ... it is accepted as a necessary artificiality" (Vol. I, Ch. 2). Thanhouser believed that "in moving pictures we can not only get, but must give real trees, real lakes, real mountains. .. In moving pictures we must be true" (Vol.

I, Ch. 2). The new medium of film provided Thanhouser with a way to create the *mise-en-scène* he now desired. Of special interest to him was the ability to perform dramas on location and within the frame of a natural environment. To Thanhouser, a realistic setting was crucial to his theoretical vision. "From my standpoint," says Thanhouser, "a good moving picture...must be as near photographically perfect as possible. Some of our films already completed partake more or less of the environments in which they were taken" (Vol. I, Ch. 2). As his statement implies, the dramatic *mise-en-scène* was a necessary element of the theatre that Thanhouser was committed to preserving in his films.

The attention Thanhouser gave to realistic and natural settings and his strong commitment to realistic themes and plot structures lead me to presume that he was equally committed to a dramatic acting style that would serve this realistic aesthetic. During Thanhouser's previous career in the theatre, he was most certainly exposed to a histrionic-coded style of acting. In the interview he makes statements that confirm his aesthetic intentions to move away from this 'old' acting style. For example he says, "Dramatic people realize that the theatric artificiality if employed in a moving picture would offend. We don't need to follow suit, and should take every opportunity to depart from the theatric standard" (Vol. I, Ch. 2). It seems apparent to me that Thanhouser would have encouraged his actors to perform in a verisimilar-coded acting style -- a style more suited to this realistic setting -- and to avoid the older, histrionic-coded one.

After reading the interview, I examined several news releases and articles generated by the Thanhouser publicists that announced and described the narrative content of the films. I kept my eyes open for any references to 'histrionic or verisimilitude' acting styles or terminology synonymous with those words. Most of these publications were in the form of advertisements

and were distributed alongside trade articles that described the film's storyline. For example, Bowers notes: "Articles about the films are given ... In many instances, such articles are based upon the manufacturer's ... Typically, the same articles, sometimes slightly paraphrased, appeared in several different trade magazines" (Vol. II).

I did find evidence to suggest that the films were promoted in ways that catered to an 'assumed' public preference for Realism. For example, in the following Thanhouser produced synopses, the descriptions suggest that the studio was interested in promoting human interest stories that addressed modern day concerns. For example, in Get Rich Quick, a drama made in 1911, the advertisement describes the film to be "A new kind of bunco story - Get Rich Quick is the story of a poverty-stricken man and his wife... The human interest in it will enthrall you - hold you captive until the reel works out to its wonderful conclusion" (Vol. II). Another example can be found in the advertisement for The Coffin Ship placed in 1911:

One of the most skillful sea stories that has ever been devised, and it plays up that heart interest element that has been such a feature of the best Thanhouser efforts. You must appeal to the heart and the sympathies to get a picture 'over' best. Here the spectator's heart is drawn instantly to the bonnie bold skipper, his beauteous bride, and, lastly, to the father and his grief. (Vol. II)

The studio also made an effort to showcase the authentic natural environments that were a characteristic backdrop for many Thanhouser films. For example, in 1912 Thanhouser promoted The Cry of the Children as a "child-labor problem feature ... that booking agents were reporting an unusual advance demand for, especially in sections where there are factories" (Vol. II). The press release adds "that a real factory was converted into a film studio to give the film accurate 'local color'" (Vol. II).

My next step involved determining the ways in which the Thanhouser films were perceived and reviewed in their own time. To do this I examined the critical reviews that were

published in newspaper articles and trade journals. According to Bowers, “Articles in this weekly publication were primarily of the paraphrase-the-synopsis type ... and seem little different from advertisements” (Vol. II). Since many of these reviews were “lightly edited” versions of the Thanhouser-produced articles, I had to distinguish between the voice of the Thanhouser publicist and that of the film reviewer.

One other thing I kept in mind during this reading is the fact that these early film commentaries were also critiquing a new form of mediated performance. To do so the writers had to transform a language that was based on theatrical criticism into one that was focused on film criticism. I was particularly interested in the terminology the film critics used to describe their observations. I looked carefully for any words that might point to the reviewer’s recognition of a ‘histrionic’ or ‘verisimilar’ coded performance style in the Thanhouser films. The basic content of these reviews left me with the impression that the optimum dramatic convention for that period of time in silent film was a realistic or a naturalistic style.

In several reviews the authors applaud the achievement of realism and likeness-to-life that is present in the film. One example can be found in the 1914 review of The Center of the Web:

The measure of the success of the average detective story is the degree of its realism. And that is probably why the Thanhouser Company, whose skill in holding a mirror up to nature has rarely been surpassed ... Its realism is so acute that one follows it with no less intensity of interest than one feels in an actual drama of the kind in life. For the time being, indeed, one is almost deceived into the belief that it is a chapter of life one is watching unroll upon the screen. (Vol. II)

I also noticed positive comments from reviewers who determined that the film had conveyed plausible and believable storylines. The review of Daddy’s Double (1910) states: “The acting is good, the theme is coherent and has unity and the photography is perfect. Could anything better

be expected of a subject” (Vol. II)? On the other hand, negative comments usually addressed the films that portrayed unlikely or unrealistic scenes. In another review of The Coffin Ship the reporter writes:

A producer gets hold of a good scenario, or invents a fine idea, then falls down in the working out of it so glaringly that all truth is eliminated from it, and we, the audience, see merely a series of pictures which fail to portray what they are suppose to portray - pictures which make no appeal, arouse no feeling, show no life, because they are obviously pictures, not reality. (Vol. II)

Many of these film critiques reveal a preference for dramas enacted realistically and disapproval for those presented in the old style theatrical way. For example, the acting in a 1914 Thanhouser film is described as “magnificently acted with the restraint and repressed force so invaluable to a work of this description” (Vol. II). In a review from 1912, we learn that “the death of Cigarette is dramatically acted without being overdone” (Vol. II) and in a 1910 review the critic notes: “The acting is fairly good, but still shows room for improvement in the matter of expression” (Vol. II). And years later, in 1916, a critic reviewing King Lear writes: “Frederick Warde himself is surprisingly goodHe had learned something acting before the camera and does not especially smack of the stage. If the film as a whole bears marks of the primitive, it is not dull or ridiculous” (Vol. II). It interested me to notice that the reporter’s comments on the ‘improved acting’ in King Lear were made in 1916. In this observation, the reporter recognizes a progressive move away from the theatricalism of stage acting. Another film critic addresses this issue directly in a commentary written in 1911:

Who can look back on the methods of picture playing three and four years ago, without a shudder? In those days the actors were told to step high in walking or running. Each player called by gesture on high heaven to witness each assertion. Talking, gesticulating, and grimacing at the camera was the constant habit. (Vol. I, Ch. 4)

Acting for the Camera: Dramatic Styles in Thanhouser Studio Films

One fundamental dimension of the silent film is its visual performance. The sensory aspect of dramatic performance that silent films provide is a way to transmit and express a language through facial expressions, gestures, attitudes, and body movements. Silent film performance is all about the actor's body language. The silent film actor concentrates on the communication of purely visual events, making us more in tune with the rhythm and arrangement of the visual characteristics of the film. Because the element of verbal language is removed from the silent film, the actors are placed in the 'unrealistic' situation of having to react/act with each other knowing that their words will not be heard by the audience. The other actors they are acting with can hear them, but the audience the actors are acting for cannot. This certainly poses a challenge for the silent film actor.

In 1910, a local reporter visited the Thanhouser studio and made the following observation that describes clearly the artistic demands put on the silent film actor:

There are difficulties, too, of expressing by gesture and action alone the feeling and meaning of a play or sketch in the production of a film play. There must not be one moment in which interest flags or the meaning is lost. The help of gesture to give full meaning to the spoken word is undoubted, but as a rule it is auxiliary, the words and not the action giving the sense of the play. So it will be readily seen that in a short play or sketch which depends entirely upon action the actor or actress must show great cleverness, and special training is always needed for the playing of a scene in a performance intended for the biograph. (Vol. I, Ch. 2)

From his previous experience in the theatre, Edwin Thanhouser "knew that the stage represented a great pool of talent and, moreover, he had the reputation to attract talent in an era in which many stage players felt that motion pictures were fit only for peep shows and penny arcades" (Vol.I, Ch.2). Thanhouser also believed that "as a rule, the good actor on the stage is a good actor in the studio; it takes him a little while to learn the tricks of moving picture work, and soon he is able to draw on his emotional resources in the uninspiring studio environment" (Vol.I,

Ch.2). In addition to this, Bowers points out that “it is significant to note that the vast majority of leading players associated with Thanhouser during the early years (1909-1912) began their careers on the stage” (Vol. III). And if they were not recruited from the stage says Bowers, “Actors and actresses in the 1909-1910 years were apt to be drawn from the citizenry at large and only a few ... with prior theatre experience” (Vol.I, Ch.2).

The Thanhouser VHS Collection Volumes I and II consist of a total of ten feature films that the Thanhouser Studio made between 1911 and 1914. After multiple viewings of each film, I recorded some observations that indicate to me the existence of histrionic and verisimilar acting styles in the Thanhouser films. I decided to limit the films I examined to the five that address contemporary themes and express sentiments about modern life: Only in the Way (1911), Get Rich Quick (1911), The Coffin Ship (1911), The Cry of the Children (1912), and The Decoy (1914). My purpose in making this choice was to insure that the dramatic action I was watching reflected the actual contemporary time period and not action representing earlier historical periods that depicted “spiritual or supernatural” themes such as The Star of Bethlehem (1912), Cinderella (1911), or Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1912).

The narrative aesthetic that is characteristic of Thanhouser films is to stick to stories about the everyday life of everyday people who are facing modern day hardships. For this reason, the verisimilar style served many of Thanhouser’s scenarios and seemed to be the predominant acting style of the group. This style of acting was employed whenever it was necessary to slow the action, to generate byplay, or to serve the ‘doing of everyday things’. In most instances where the story called for ‘slice-of-life activity’ or multiple frames of continuous ‘byplay’, the Thanhouser actors portrayed these moments by utilizing verisimilar-coded actions.

It seemed to me that the narrative requirements placed on 'like-real life' enactments did not seem to be as demanding as the big moments of intense drama.

From my observation, I noticed that the Thanhouser actors had difficulty conveying deep emotions and internal expressions of conflict without using a histrionic-code of acting. In these cases the actors, out of necessity, resorted to a bigger projection of physical expression that resembles acting that is histrionic in style. In many scenes where this occurred, I think the appropriate acting choice was made. The shift in acting style served as a strong contrast to the verisimilar-coded actions that dominated most of Thanhouser's film. This striking difference in the actor's change of expressive style highlighted the narrative function of the scene and amplified the actor's motivations as the character in the scene. In most instances, the acting codes that the Thanhouser actors chose to employ were dependent upon the circumstances of the plot and the characteristics of the setting that the actors were placed in.

For example, in the 1911 film Only in the Way: "Grandma obviously has come to stay for a long time, and in the parlor the wife becomes very upset upon her mother-in-law's arrival ... after the unwelcome guest had been domiciled with them for some time, she induced her husband to send his mother to a home for the aged" (Vol. II). In this scene the wife shifts abruptly from a verisimilar style that conveys the 'doing of everyday things' (dusting and puttering around) to an emotional display of anger that is conveyed using histrionic-coded actions. I was surprised to notice that even within the confines of this crowded room, filled with people and properties, the actor's histrionic style of posing, posturing, and gesturing seemed appropriate and in sync with the circumstances of the scene. In other words, the actor's choice of acting style served the character's throughline of action dictated by the script.

Another example of shifting acting styles can be found in Get Rich Quick (1911).

According to the film's synopsis: "A young working man, with a steady job, good health and the wife he loves devotedly is thoroughly happy, but the woman is not. She hates her shabby clothes and her narrow surroundings and is constantly hoping and praying that good fortune will knock at their door" (Vol. II). In this film the overall dramatic function of the man's character is to appear calm, decent, reserved, and clearly satisfied with his life. Most of the actor's acting choices resemble a verisimilar-coded style and represent a natural and recognizable depiction of 'everydayness'. However, as soon as he is he is faced with the shame of his crooked deeds, he grabs a pistol, stares at it gripped tightly in his hand, and then points the barrel of the gun against his head. In this one action, the actor shifts directly from a verisimilar-coded style of acting that is characteristic of the 'doing of everyday things' to a histrionic-coded style that is associated with intense moments of life or death.

I began to notice that whenever the plot of the story required expressions of internal emotions and thoughts, a histrionic-code of acting was employed to intensify the level of drama constructed in the scene. A clear example of this exists in the 1911 feature The Coffin Ship. This film focuses on a corrupt character that is placed in circumstances that require the actor to 'act out' long sequences of inner monologues filled with fear, despair, grief, and remorse. According to the film's synopsis: "A wealthy ship owner cared for but two things in life, his gold and his daughter ... He neglected his business, he grew to hate his once beloved gold, and at last, half demented, decided to end his life ... he broke down completely suffering untold agonies worrying over his daughter's plight ... This man's sufferings were mental" (Vol. II).

The actor portraying the father is an older man and demonstrates throughout the film a preference for histrionically-coded actions. It appears to me that this actor's aesthetic choice can

be attributed to the circumstances demanded by the script. In an effort to communicate effectively his intense moments of inner turmoil, anguish, and soliloquy, the actor chose the appropriate acting style to serve the script -- a histrionic-coded one.

Within these films, I also discovered a tendency in the structures of the plots to position female characters in circumstances of high drama that would 'naturally' evoke feelings of grief, doubt, shame, or misery. On the other hand, the male characters were portrayed as reasonable, calm, in control, resolved, or represented as physically active in their comings and goings, in their relationship to the outdoor environment, and in their reactions to the emotions of grief, doubt, shame, and misery.

There is evidence to suggest that Thanhouser actors, like those at Biograph, made use of histrionic and verisimilar coded styles of acting. Many of these actors resorted to the histrionic style -- on a consistent basis and in every film -- whenever it was necessary to express feelings such as anger, fear, grief, or to portray physically the complexities of intangible feelings or internal thoughts. The histrionic style came in handy whenever words would have been the preferred expression. The fact that the actor could not use words to express a situation or action seemed to generate a projection of theatricalized acting. On the other hand, the verisimilitude style was used whenever the script called for the representation of 'the doing of things' or the plot demanded more "byplay." As the years passed, many of the Thanhouser actors did display a more defined synthesis of these acting styles. For example, in 1914 the film narratives were generally less complex, more story-specific, and seemed to exploit the language of the intertitles more descriptively than in earlier films. As a result of this 'improvement' in narrative communication, less language (or the appearance of language) was required to tell a story, enabling a greater shift toward a verisimilar and away from a histrionic style of acting.

Acting for the Camera: Dramatic Styles in Thanhouser Studio Films

In conclusion, dramatic acting is all about human action and humans acting on each other in an attempt to create a significant reality. Live performance, film, television, or written narratives all utilize the story, the character, and the setting to communicate this reality. Through these dramatic elements, we can share images of humanity and express symbols of human action that can be understood collectively. The drama preserved in the Thanhouser archives represents a history of human behavior and a cinematic rendering of the dramatic tradition. As I move to put this paper to bed, I am already thinking of alternate ways to generalize and/or particularize what I discovered from this research project. There are so many directions to take, ideas to expand on, and discoveries to make, but for now, I tip my hat to Edwin Thanhouser's achievements in the film industry and I applaud the contributions his actors made to the silent cinema.

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