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Lloyd Lonergan and the Development of Film Scripts at the Thanhouser Studio

Edwin Thanhouser was ahead of his time in his understanding of the necessity of a detailed film script, and he may have differed from his contemporaries in his belief that a good, wholesome, logical story was the most important qualification of a good film. “[Films] must appeal to the best instincts, and must always tell a moral and logical story,” he told *The Moving Picture News* in 1910 (CD, Chapter 2: Into the Film Industry, Edwin Thanhouser Interviewed). Thanhouser came from a theater background and had appeared in or directed over a hundred plays by the time he founded the Thanhouser Company. He respected film as much as he did theater, and he did not see why the process for making a film should be any different from the process for putting on a successful stage production. Thus, from his entrance into the industry in 1909, Thanhouser shunned the industry-wide practice at the time of letting the director completely control the plot and direction of his films. In the time of the single-reel films, many directors just jotted down notes for a plot idea on a napkin and let the story develop as they shot the scenes. But Thanhouser knew that the detailed preparation of a script would lead to a higher quality production, and he employed the practice of using a scenario to ensure story logic and continuity from his very first picture. This paper will examine Edwin Thanhouser’s approach to the creation of a comprehensible and logical plot in the silent film era and the Thanhouser studio’s process for obtaining scenarios and how it compared to other studios at the time.

A scenario was more in depth than a synopsis in that it detailed shots scene by scene. A synopsis was simply a description of a story idea, and it averaged about two paragraphs in length. A scenario, which laid out scenes in chronological order, was typically a few pages in length. A 1903 scenario of "The Great Train Robbery" found in an Edison catalogue is approximately four pages and 950 words (http://www.geocities.com/classicmoviescripts). The description paragraphs do not read much differently from paragraphs detailing action in today's scripts. The format for scene headings and descriptions appears to be similar to the modern format, but it is hard to tell if this is a recreation for the purposes of the catalogue (or for the website on which it appears) or if it is an exact replica. The study of silent film scripts lends itself to dispute because so few remnants from the era have survived. An overwhelming majority of the actual films have been lost, and of all the thousands of scenarios written during this time, only a few have been found in catalogues (Pearson, 1992). According to Ned Thanhouser, no scenarios exist from the Thanhouser studio. It is up for debate when the use of scenarios over synopses became the norm, but the scenario seems to have been the standard between the end of the Vaudeville era and the emergence of sound in the mid-1920s.

In a 1910 interview, Edwin Thanhouser noted his appreciation of a good, logical story. He claimed to have several scenarios on hand and invited more scenarios, or at least ideas that he could craft into written scenarios, from the public. It was not common in the early years of the film industry for many people involved in the film production to have a hand in crafting the story from its earliest incarnation. Actresses and actors often got involved in the development of the story, working with the scenario writer or director

to make changes while the film was in production. In a 1986 interview, Muriel Ostrich, a Thanhouser player, said that she and other actresses frequently brainstormed story ideas and served as unofficial advisors to Lloyd Lonergan, Thanhouser's most prolific scriptwriter (CD, Biographies; Lonergan, Lloyd).

However, it was also common for people completely outside the film industry to submit scenarios to studios. Studios were desperate to churn out reel after reel to keep up with the public's insatiable appetite for motion pictures, and they often found themselves short of good ideas, especially before the creation of scenario writing departments. Before the emergence of writing departments and the continuity script as standard practice, studios invited the public to submit scenarios, often advertising their need for good story ideas in the trade papers. Thanhouser's policy on public submissions wavered over the years. Shortly after the 1910 interview in which he invited scenarios from the public, the Thanhouser studio became the first studio to officially announce it was no longer accepting scripts from outsiders. Meanwhile, other studios were following the trend of popular magazines and using contests to encourage submissions. The Thanhouser studio did not employ this method of acquisition until 1914 when Charles Hite was running the studio and Lloyd Lonergan had briefly departed to work for Universal in the absence of his friend Edwin Thanhouser. During this time, the studio ran an ad for a photoplay contest offering the person who wrote "the best play" $10,000 (CD, Chapter 7: 1914, Thanhouser publicity)! The contest was run in conjunction with *The Globe*, which planned to print a novelized version of the winning manuscript. The piece called for a manuscript no less than 1,000 words and with the following qualities:

> The suggestion is made that the manuscripts include a series of climaxes, each of which should be adaptable for two-reel purposes, yet carrying the

> thread of the plot which is to run throughout the story, and winding up with a big dramatic climax (CD, Chapter 7: 1914, Thanhouser Publicity).

It seems that the Thanhouser studio operated on a need-based policy when it came to accepting material from outsiders. It is also clear from this ad that the studio was seeking continuity scripts for multiple-reel purposes by 1914. Despite the plea to the public for help, this kind of detailed request was a far cry from just years before when most studios would look at anything, and Thanhouser was asking the public for any idea he could craft into a scenario.

It was not unusual at the time for movie fans to get involved in scenario writing. According to Kathryn H. Fuller, author of *At The Picture Show*, tens of thousands of amateur writers from various socio-economic classes and regions joined in the silent film scenario writing craze (1996, 126-127). Because the average synopsis was only a few paragraphs in length and plots were formulaic and easily imitated from popular motion pictures and magazine short stories, many fans found scenario writing to be a quick and easy way to not only make a few bucks but to also become personally involved in the motion picture mania sweeping the country at the time. The studio offered anywhere from five to fifty dollars for a scenario. Fuller notes that very few of these 1500 or so amateur writers ever became professional scenario writers or even wrote more than one or two scripts (126).

Thanhouser did not need to depend on amateur scenarists, fans or freelance writers to compose scripts because of his relationship with Lloyd Lonergan, the studio's chief writer and likely the most prolific scenario writer of the silent film era. With the exception of a few consecutive months in 1914, Lonergan was an employee of the Thanhouser corporation from the beginning in 1909 to the studio's final years in 1917,

and over that time he became famous for his ability to churn out countless scenarios. Lonergan had been an editor at Hearst for fifteen years before entering the motion picture business at the request of his brother-in-law Edwin Thanhouser. Lonergan was married to Molly Homan, a sister of Thanhouser's wife, Gertrude, with whom he often collaborated on scripts. Lonergan considered Gertrude to be a talented editor, and her husband credited her for this talent as well. Lonergan's exact title or series of titles is up for debate. In one article in the CD he was referred to as "production chief," in another as "chief of the scenario department," and as "Director of Production in another. It is likely that his title and roles changed as the studio management changed hands. He briefly ran the studio in 1914 after Charles Hite's death, and at that time his scenarios were thought to decline in quality because he had too many other responsibilities. In any case, he was arguably the most important Thanhouser player of all. Lonergan was attached in some way to every scenario written for the studio at least up until 1912. He had advisors and even co-writers on many scripts, but there is no evidence of a Thanhouser script in those first few years that Lonergan did not at least have a hand in writing. Because nearly everything he wrote was ultimately produced, one reviewer referred to his ".980 batting average," while another referred to his "hit ratio of .999" (CD, Biographies; Lonergan, Lloyd). With numbers like that, Lonergan would undoubtedly be a God-like figure in the Hollywood we know today, but, according to reviews, he was simply a cheerful, publicity-shy scenario writer who started off as a newspaperman like so many of his contemporaries.

Reviewers in the trades commended Lonergan for his continually fresh material, an admirable feat for someone turning out two to three scenarios a week. In a 1914 article in *Moving Picture World*, a reviewer said the following about Lonergan:

> He makes [stories] as different as possible and gives to the Thanhouser releases a diversity that is lacking in some companies where the scores of writers are done over into the same mold by an editing editor. He has the trick… of seeing a plot theme in the commonest happening of life….He found early that he could write each week better stories than he could buy once a month, and so, instead of wading through a mass of stories, he advertises that he is not reading outside contributions and devotes part of the time he saves by giving directors just what they want (CD, Biographies; Lonergan, Lloyd).

Lonergan claimed that he typically worked on more than one script at a time, often jotting off a comedy on a break from working on a dramatic script. Lonergan seemed to feel this talent came naturally to him, and Thanhouser evidently agreed, trusting Lonergan with the overwhelming majority of scripts produced by the studio as well as some post-production responsibilities. Lonergan did not just come up with numerous ideas and translate them into detailed written scenarios, he often cut the final films as well. He served as Director of Production for as time, meaning he was the chief of all directors, all of whom conferred with him daily. It is certainly hard to imagine any director in today's Hollywood system conferring daily with a scriptwriter once production has begun or such a blurred division of labor in a studio. Even at the time, Lonergan's position at Thanhouser was an unusual one, and his power and longevity as a Thanhouser employee does provide evidence of Thanhouser's appreciation for a good, logical story over any other aspect of production.

Lonergan decided viewing submissions from amateur scenarists was a waste of time before other studios began ignoring them in order to avoid copyright disputes. In an

interview with *Moving Picture World*, he spoke somewhat condescendingly about the freelance scenario writers who had once flooded the studio with submissions. "Some of their scripts were so funny that I made notes of them, but not for screen presentation," he said (CD, Chapter 2: Into the Film Industry, Scenarios). His main complaint was of unrealistic stories or stories that would require an intangible budget. As is common in today's Hollywood, financial feasibility of storylines was generally the first concern of a studio in the silent film era as well. Therefore, it follows that a writer working as an employee of a studio would craft a script with budget in mind from the beginning. As an insider, Lonergan knew what Thanhouser wanted, and he delivered. He is believed to have written well over a 1,000 scenarios in his professional career as a script writer. Thanhouser clearly admired Lonergan – he even named a son after him – and the admiration was mutual.

It is evident from the few interviews he granted that Lonergan considered Thanhouser a mentor of sorts. In a 1917 article entitled "How I Came to Write Continuity" he claimed to *The Moving Picture World*, "Everybody knows what continuity is these days, but Edwin Thanhouser is the man who invented it" (CD, Chapter 2: Into the Film Industry, Scenarios). Lonergan claims that under Thanhouser's guidance, he came to write continuity and see it put on screen at a time when other companies were letting directors control the entire process from outline to final product design. While Thanhouser was ahead of his time in his insistence on the use of a script, Lonergan's claim that Thanhouser invented continuity is aggrandized if one examines information about common script writing practices at the time Thanhouser entered the industry.

For Bordwell, the continuity script is a characteristic of classical Hollywood style, thus he gives its evolution into standard practice due consideration. In *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Bordwell discusses a 1909 trade paper article that set out the format of a standard script which included a call for a 200 word or less synopsis of the story and then the scenario, "a shot by shot account of the action" in the script to insure "that the standard of continuous action would be met within the footage requirement" (Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson, 1985, p. 126). So perhaps it was not for the sake of quality as it was for Thanhouser, but it is clear that other studios were interested in continuity scripts at least for economic reasons around the same time or even before Thanhouser was entering the moving picture business. Bordwell does note that a scenario was not a requirement at this time and that many directors still followed the outline approach. In fact, Bordwell names 1914 as the year in which a continuity script became a standard of the classical Hollywood style.

Bordwell claims three factors influenced the emergence of the continuity script as common practice in the film industry: the development of the central producer system, which replaced the director system around 1914 and would continue to dominate until the early 1930s; the standardization of the multiple-reel film between 1911 and 1916; and the simultaneous movement toward the classical Hollywood style (Bordwell et al., 1985). Bordwell marks 1908 as the definitive end of primitive cinema; from this time until 1928, the classical style came to dominate the industry. The shift to the classical style marks the move toward narrative filmmaking with an emphasis on a logical story and continuous action. The shift also marks the conclusion of the Vaudeville era and the favoring of a logical storyline with respect to realistic temporal and spatial relations over

a plot consisting of loosely connected comedy gags. These changes as well as changes in the mode of production necessitated the move toward a continuity script as standard Hollywood practice.

The producer system, under which the final product was controlled by a manager and a carefully prepared continuity script, represented a shift toward scientific management in the film industry. Prior to the producer system, the director controlled everything. He found a scenario, sometimes among ones the company had stored up from freelance writers, or he created one, perhaps just jotting the idea down on an envelope and letting it more or less develop itself in production. This haphazard process led to overlarge budgets and unnecessary staff, problems that were corrected by the assembly-line management style of the central producer system. A written script meant a more efficient production for several reasons. With a detailed scenario, directors could shoot scenes out of chronological order and have en editor splice the footage together in the correct order at a later date. This cut labor costs as well as the costs of location and set rentals. Producers realized it was cheaper to pay a few employees to prepare detailed scripts and prohibit continuity problems early in the game rather than at a later stage when a whole crew of workers had to work it out on the set or by the exhaustive process of examining retakes (Bordwell et al). As Thanhouser had from the beginning, by about 1912 most producers realized they could ensure continuity by having a detailed script from the start, and this became increasingly important as the representation of continuous time and space became a standard trait of classical Hollywood cinema.

The multiple-reel film came about for reasons related to improving the stylistic quality of film and for economic reasons. One way to ensure a film was a hit with

audiences was to adapt a novel or play that had experienced prior success in similar markets. However, attempts to fit plots from acclaimed stories and plays into single-reel films often resulted in a poor quality product, one that appeared to have been cut off suddenly or to be missing key plotlines. The move toward adaptations of well known works was the key catalyst in the lengthening of films to two-reels. Adaptations were popular for several reasons. For one, they were easier to advertise, especially in the case of plays in which the actor or actress who had made the play a success also appeared in the film version. Also, in 1911, the Supreme Court upheld the decision that motion pictures were subject to copyright laws. For filmmakers, this meant that they had to acquire rights to the narratives to be filmed, thus they figured if they had to pay for rights, they might as well pay for stories they knew would appeal to audiences (Bordwell et al.).

Before the change in copyright law in 1911, it was not uncommon for many studios to adapt the same work for screen. For instance, multiple studios, including Thanhouser, adapted “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” the influential novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Of course it would be unthinkable, not to mention impossible, today for both DreamWorks and Sony to buy the rights to the same work. After the change in copyright law in 1911, news of the latest acquisitions began appearing in trade papers. In March 1911, Selig singed a contract with Street &Smith for exclusive rights to all stories appearing in their various publications (Bordwell et al.). Edison, Vitagraph and others followed suit in 1912, and soon nearly every studio was signing contracts with magazine publishers for “exclusive rights” to short fiction pieces in their magazines (Bordwell, et al., 132). Some studios, like Famous Players, signed with playwrights to secure film rights to all their productions (Bordwell et. al.) By about 1914-1915 this kind of

exchange was par for the course, and by 1918 most studios even had acquisitions departments in place (Bordwell et al.).

In order to enhance the quality of films and attract the more high brow consumers of literary works, by 1910 film producers were adapting plays, short fiction and novels for the screen and turning entirely away from vaudeville type skits for influence. The adaptation trend was both a cause and result of the move to the multiple-reel film and changes in copyright laws. Before the change to the multiple-reel film, it was common to have freelance writers and industry outsiders, or amateur scenarists, flooding the studios with submissions. Bordwell surmises that "about one in a hundred" of these scripts were actually accepted, and he marks the heyday of the amateur scenarist as a brief one – from about 1907 to 1914 (166). After 1914, the continuity script was standard practice, and with the exception of a few eccentric directors like Griffith, a detailed script was considered a requirement prior to starting production on a film. Scenario staffs became common with the rise of narrative filmmaking and the move to the classical style. Scenario staffs were firmly in place in most studios by 1912, when copyright laws and the shift to multiple-reel films made the unprofessional writer seem like a nuisance and an unnecessary risk to studios. Scenario staffs could quickly crank out adaptations, which were less risky and more attractive to consumers, both of which meant bigger profits for studios.

Thanhouser got into the adaptation game at least around the same time as the other studios if not a little before. Lonergan wrote many successful adaptations including the film versions of Eliot's famous work *Silas Mariner* and Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, which he wrote with Gertrude Thanhouser in 1910. Both of these Lonergan

adaptations were highly praised and helped to put the studio on the map (CD, Chapter 3: 1910, Shakespeare on the Screen). In addition to adaptations being popular among studio management for economic reasons, adaptations were popular among silent film audiences because they were easier to follow than original storylines. Before the advent of radio, film and television, reading and theater were two key forms of entertainment for Americans; therefore, unlike today, the average consumer was familiar with Shakespearian plots. While these films may look like low-budget films with subtitles to a modern audience, to the early 20th century audience, a filmed version of a classic Shakespeare play was relatively easy to comprehend because the plot was already ingrained in viewers' heads. It is easy to understand why, when trying to write a scenario that audiences would appreciate, so many writers turned to the works of the Bard and other well-known writers of the period. Adaptations of famous works appealed to studio managers and writers because they had proven, built-in audience appeal. However, the fact that studios also adapted less popular and even unseen works suggests they also favored adaptations because they were simply quicker and easier given the demand they were under to crank out new films week to week. Because so many studio writers came from journalism backgrounds, it was also common for writers to adapt their own short stories and articles for the screen.

Interviews contained within the biographies of other Thanhouser script writers offer an informative look into the backgrounds and practices of other Thanhouser scenario writers as well as a look at how a scenario writer went about his or her craft. Roy McCardell wrote and edited scenarios for Thanhouser in the spring of 1914. McCardell's philosophy is worth mentioning because he claims to be the first person to

ever write a scenario for the screen. Bordwell confirms this, mentioning that McCardell wrote the first film scenario for Biograph in 1897 (Bordwell et al.). McCardell was also a frequent writer on the subject of motion pictures. Like many scenario writers, he came from a varied writing background and many of his film scenarios were actually adapted from his own stories, plays and newspaper articles. His personal account of how he came to write scenarios reflects Lonergan's account of the early processes as well as Bordwell's. McCardell says that before scenarios became popular, most film reels evolved out of actor-director conferences and were acted out scene by scene (CD, Biographies; McCardell, Roy). In McCardell's account, the idea for a written scenario by an author was the brainchild of an ambitious manufacturer who realized it would facilitate production and improve the photoplay (CD, Biographies; McCardell, Roy). McCardell says he was sought out because he was a "special writer" and chosen among several well known authors at the time (CD, Biographies; McCardell, Roy). He claims to have made a good living at scenario writing but to be one of the few who did. He won several scenario writing contests, one which awarded him $10,000 just for an idea (CD, Biographies; McCardell, Roy)! This is interesting considering screenwriting contests today offer prizes ranging anywhere from approximately $3,000 to $30,000 for a script averaging about 120 pages.

Agnes Christine Johnston wrote scenarios for Biograph and Vitagraph before becoming a scenario writer and staff member of the Thanhouser corporation in 1916. Interestingly, there seem to have been more female screenwriters in the early film years than there are today or at least a more even ratio of female to male writers. Agnes was one of Thanhouser's most prolific scenario writers. Like most scenario writers in her

day, she also wrote popular magazine articles and adapted some of her previous stories into film scenarios for the Thanhouser studio. Agnes shared her thoughts about writing scenarios with *Moving Picture World* in 1917. The interview illuminates how a writer might draw upon everyday life to come up with original scenarios rather than simply adapting story ideas from previously written material. Agnes found comedies to be "truer to life, simpler" and preferred writing them to drama (CD, Biographies; Johnston, Agnes Christine). She notes that she was at her best when she wrote stories inspired by everyday life and outlined plots based on her own experiences, none of which were heavy, but simply average, human experiences. Agnes wrote of the importance of provoking audience emotions and building up to the comedy climax:

> There is nothing that I enjoy better than teasing my audience along this way, working up an exciting incidence that threatens death and destruction to my fair heroine and then ending with a simple comedy twist that saves the day. … Aside from the fact that people want light entertainment more than ever, because there is so much darkness in the world, it is the element that humor has in all its successes (CD, Biographies; Johnston, Agnes Christine).

When Agnes refers to the darkness in the world, she is of course talking about the war, and it is easy to imagine (or find in any entertainment magazine) a current popular screenwriter, actor or producer expressing an almost identical sentiment about the post-911 world and the power of movies to make people forget their troubles. Agnes understood her role in the motion picture industry as well as any writer today despite the fact that her profession was relatively new in the industry when she gave this interview. Agnes Johnston also understood that the audience must be able to relate to something in the picture at the same time they must be able to lose themselves in it as a means of escape (CD, Biographies, Johnston, Agnes Christine). "A character in a story, play or

picture must be true to life and therefore must cause us to smile once in awhile," she said (CD, Biographies, Johnston, Agnes Christine). Like screenwriters today, scenario writers for the Thanhouser corporation were inspired by a variety of sources: every day life and people they knew, previously published stories and plays and of course, other films.

While Lonergan, Thanhouser and other Thanhouser writers were proud of the studio's early use of detailed, carefully prepared films scripts, D.W. Griffith was equally proud of his lack of dependence on a written script, a fact which just serves to prove that in the film industry, as in any industry, there are always exceptions. According to Roberta Pearson, when Griffith arrived at Biograph in 1908, there was already a working story department in place that was made up of two men: Lee Dougherty and in-house writer Stanley Taylor (1992, 84-85). It is up for debate whether "story ideas" selected by Dougherty and Griffith were ever turned into written scripts, but according to Taylor, Dougherty always sat in with Griffith on story conferences, and the two men would go over scenes one at a time (Pearson). However, Griffith and those who worked for him maintain he never used a written script on set. Gunning believes Griffith probably used a written script but just never let his actors or crew see it, and that his denial was just another dimension of his staunch self-promotion, contributing to his legend as a great director and autonomous artist (Pearson). Gunning maintains that the logistical complexity of certain Biograph films would have required some form of a written shooting script to establish continuity (Pearson). In fact, evidence exists that there were indeed detailed written scripts at Biograph both before and during Griffith's tenure. Patrick Loughney discovered five pre-1908 Biograph scripts in the Library of Congress that he believes pre-date production, especially given that scenes appear in the script

which do not appear in the films (Pearson). At the least, both men have concluded written scripts appeared pre-1908 at Biograph. This further diffuses the Lonergan claim and Thanhouser "invented continuity" and proves that there is still room for additional research on this subject as scholars have thus far been unable to pinpoint a definitive timeline for the appearance of the written script and more specifically the continuity script.

It is evident that before Thanhouser even entered the moving picture industry, many directors and producers had realized that a written shot by shot scenario, rather than ideas for scenes jotted down on a napkin or merely floating around in a director's head, meant a more efficient, cheaper production. While Thanhouser's reasons for calling for continuity in scripts may have been more artistically driven and pure than most producers' in the eyes of Lloyd Lonergan, it is a reach to claim he invented continuity. Trade paper articles from the time, documented evidence of detailed scenarios prior to 1908, interviews with industry insiders and several other sources all provide evidence that the concept of a continuity script was around before Edwin Thanhouser entered the picture. However, reviews of Thanhouser films as well as interviews with Thanhouser and his employees indeed suggest that Thanhouser was a man who genuinely believed in the power of the story to inspire and transform and in the ability of the scenario writer to accomplish this task. Thanhouser viewed story, in the form of a written, detailed scenario, as the most important element in the filmmaking process, and he stood by his early promise of moral, wholesome stories that would nonetheless inspire and entertain. Thanhouser's attitude and belief system is refreshing, if not nostalgic, in today's Hollywood in which writers are often considered the bottom of the food chain in an

industry that favors those on screen over those behind the screen, box office clout over true talent and mass marketing over morals.

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