

*The Cry of the Children*  
by Ned Thanhouser

On April 30, 1912 Edwin Thanhouser released his social justice tour de force *The Cry of the Children*. The film's topic was ripped from the headlines, as just two months before, 25,000 textile workers had walked off the job at the American Woolen Company in Lawrence, Massachusetts to protest wage reductions, triggering one of the nation's largest and most widely publicized strikes. Most of the workers were immigrants who toiled for low wages in grueling and dangerous conditions, and half of them were young women and children. As histories note, the mortality rate for children working in the mills was 50% by age six, and a third of all adult workers died of injury or disease by the age of 25.<sup>1</sup> Thanhouser's two-reel film was produced in an era when the economic exploitation of working class women and children was common practice, and Thanhouser's production, along with other films (such as Edison's 1912 *Children and Labor*)<sup>2</sup> advanced the national discussion during the Progressive Era that redefined the discourse surrounding child labor.

The title of the film is taken from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1843 social protest poem, *The Cry of the Children*,<sup>3</sup> which contributed to the movement for child labor reform in the coalmines of England. Stanzas from the poem are used as intertitles in the film to create a narrative structure that condemns the rampant exploitation of the working class (little Alice and her family) by the ruling rich (the mill owner and his wife) as they heedlessly pursue maximum profits at the lowest wages. These intertextual references, combined with smart marketing that linked Thanhouser's sentiments with those of President Theodore Roosevelt's condemnation of child labor, positioned the movie as a powerful Progressive Era plea for labor reform in the United States.

Thanhouser's effective use of mise-en-scene created three distinct settings to establish a cinematic discourse for the film. First, scenes were shot in an actual textile factory to illuminate the harsh working conditions in the mill in places like Lawrence, Massachusetts. Historically accurate shots show mill workers engaged in the repetitive and dangerous work that appalled Thanhouser and other Progressives. Second, the

factory workers' home depicts a run-down flat to establish the poverty-stricken life of the working class. Watching the family awake in the morning to a cold breakfast and their despondence as they go to work each day reinforced the hopelessness of the situation forced upon them by the mill owner. And finally, juxtaposed with the workers' hovel, the scenes of the mill owner's wife being pampered by butlers and footmen in her opulent home is painful for the viewer to watch.

The remarkably fluid and well-paced editing of *The Cry of the Children* foreshadowed the future of filmmaking 1920s and beyond. Lap dissolves were used for psychological effect, and subtle camera tilting followed the actors. Thanhouser staged scenes to emphasize depth and fore-to-back movements, and groups are handled well with crowds progressing towards the camera, providing a feeling of depth and motion. Finally, the clever use of double-exposure in the closing scenes introduced a subjective view of the working family that little Alice's death was preferable to her miserable life on earth working at the mill.

These examples, along with his bold choice of subject matter, demonstrates Edwin Thanhouser's role as a pioneer in the world of early cinema. Twice as long as most productions from that period, it reflected Thanhouser's advocacy of films made at "natural length," rather than the standard one-reel format supplied by other producers for commercial reasons. Although some elements of the story are melodramatic, these clichés were expected in that era, and do little to detract from the cinematic skill and social importance of this film itself. There should be no doubt that Thanhouser's *The Cry of the Children* contributed to a new social realism style of filmmaking in the America, and helped mark both the emerging political power of cinema, and the potential for movies to make significant contributions to society.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence\\_textile\\_strike](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_textile_strike), accessed Dec. 20, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0002098/>, accessed Dec. 20, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bartleby.com/246/260.html>, accessed Dec. 20, 2011.