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The Thanhouser Studio and the Department Store: One Studio's Look at the Changing Dynamics of Women in the Public Sphere

"World exhibitions were places of pilgrimage to the fetishistic commodity".
-Walter Benjamin (*Aracades Project,* 1927-1940)[1]

I. Introduction

Between 1927 and 1940 Walter Benjamin worked on the enormous and fragmentary body of critical analysis on emerging modernity, the *Arcades Project.* Benjamin believed that modernity was ushering in a sort of dream world where the phantasmagoria of false consciousness was threatening to bring about a "reenchantment" of the social order. The commodity was at the root of this rejuvenation of mythic power and worked to create a sense of confusion, much like an incoherent dream.[2] Benjamin had hoped that a collective "awakening" would take place and shock the individual into a revolutionary class consciousness.

Benjamin was writing about a Parisian consumer culture that had started blossoming well before 1927. In fact, between 1850 and the outbreak of World War I, France was for the first time steadily increasing its purchasing power; and France, even more so than the U.S., would serve as an example of the nature and predicaments of modern consumerism.[3] Paris proved to be the "modern city", at least for Benjamin; but, great changes were also being made in America where consumerism and mass culture were forcing many of the same changes on the American public. Benjamin's ideas

[1] http://www.jahsonic.com/ParisArcades.html
[2] Susan Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989.
[3] Rosalind H. Williams. *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France.* London: University of California Press, 1982.

regarding myth, reenchantment and rejuvenation grew out of an early Parisian context that paralleled the American experience of modernity and the culture of consumption.

By the late 1890s, America was progressively becoming known as a land of new possibilities. Dreams and fantasies were at the heart of this newly burgeoning culture; which, at the close of the nineteenth century, had the power to change the older patterns of social behaviors. Mass consumerism was in fact "awakening" the collective to Benjamin's social revolution, and women were greatly affected by this renewal of life in a previously stagnated environment. Women were bored and ready to enter a public world that had been closed off to them. The commodity, consumer culture, shopping, fashion, advertisement; and most of all, the department store, were the necessary tools to get her into the public sphere.

As the stereotype goes, nineteenth-century middle-class women were seen to be: dependent, emotional, religious and sexually "pure". They were to tend to the domestic sphere, bear, and raise children. Men, however, were to be: independent, productive, rational and individualistic. By the early 1900s, these stereotypes were beginning to weaken because of the changing work force. Men were finding more factory jobs, corporate positions, and bureaucratic opportunities. This left the service industry open to the woman who dared to venture outside of her home. Unlike any other service institution, it was the department store that would be the "arena" where many of the debates about consumption and women's place in consumer culture would be played out.

Women's movement into the department store parallels women's entrance into cinema as well. The two clearly connect on the basis that they are both public places (it can be argued that the department store was an extension of the domestic sphere, but I

want to deal with the department store as a purely public space) where great changes had to be introduced in order to "let" women partake in their offerings. Both the cinema and the department store underwent great structural changes to invite and entice women into the public sphere. The picture palaces as well as the department stores took on an air of glamour and beauty, which created a sense of a mythical fantasy world where women were permitted to "desire" openly in public without great consequences. Given the close relationship that these two institutions have in how they maneuvered women's entrance into the urban public space, I propose that if we look at the representation of the department store in the cinema of the time, we will see how the film texts speak to society's anxieties regarding women in these new urban spaces.

Therefore, I want to lay this essay out in two parts. In the first part, I want to look at some of the dialectical debates and propose certain anxieties that I see arising out of the paradoxical arguments surrounding women's introduction into the public sphere. To do this, I will look at both early newspaper articles highlighting the major themes, and the available contemporary literature on the department store and women. In the second part, I want to investigate how one particular studio, The Thanhouser Studio during the years 1909-1918, represents the tensions surrounding the emergence of the department store, and women's role in it. I chose these dates because 1) they are the productive years of the Thanhouser Studio and 2) because they represent a transitional moment in history for the changing paradigm of women's roles. My purpose in this essay is to go beyond the available literature that lays out the debates. After surveying various sources, I found that certain themes continuously rise to the surface. What concerns me are the underlying subtexts that these themes are clearly responding to, i.e. the social anxieties

that are never fully brought to the surface. Analyzing the film texts along with the literature will help me to uncover how the Thanhouser Studio contributed to and engaged in the representation of both the department store and the women's place in it.

II. The Debates: Class, Gender, and Secularization

The introduction of the department store and women's place in it is not such an easily constructed topic. At the heart of the matter there is a sprawling web of contradictory messages that hinge on both the liberating effects and the challenges that the department store placed on class, gender, and secularization; three issues that were coming to the forefront because of the new consumer culture during the early turn of the century. I propose that once all of the minor issues and debates are laid out, they fit into one of the above anxieties facing America at this transitional point in history.

One of the repeating themes that appear in the literature on the department store is the idea of the department store as a didactic institution. Much of the scholarship on this issue focuses on the "benevolent" manager who believes that training could help educate the young women who work in the department store. I question the notion of the "benevolence" and suggest that fear of losing one's position of power in the social hierarchy is what caused managers to institute a training program instead of changing their hiring practices. Owners and managers alike "believed" that both the "kindness" of the store environment and the guidance of a training program could repair any damages suffered by an unfortunate home life or misguided school experience.[4] The president of Lord & Taylor, Samuel Reyburn, suggested that the overall experience of a young lady

[4] Benson, Susan Porter. *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

working in the department store would have an impact on her entire behavior and attitude because she could not help but be influenced by the experienced head of her department.[5]

Embedded in Reyburn's suggestion is the issue of class. What he, and other managers were really concerned about was how the working class salesgirl would interact with the middle-class and wealthy female shoppers. There was a fear of losing customers because of an untidy saleswoman. Women shopping in the department store were not merely there to buy, but to be seen.[6] Therefore maintaining the social status still functioned within the department store. Speaking to an obvious working class woman and getting fashion advice from her would be considered "improper". The managers feared that in such a climate, they would loose their buyers and the free advertisement they had from their best customers. In a 1912 article from the *Chicago Daily Tribune,* the manager of the largest department store stated this very concern for the public:

> For on a cheerful sales person depends our regular trade- the best kind of advertising for a store. Cheerfulness is not alone a beaming countenance. It is the reflection of health, enthusiasm, courtesy, and kindness. And no one appreciates these qualities in the girl more than the customer. And because of the confidence this quality begets, bigger and better sales result (E4).

Clearly, framing the argument from the "benevolent" manager's point of view takes negative publicity away from the department store. It makes the store itself seem to be a charitable institution that is working for the good of society, rather than for mere profit. The fact is though, that most of the attention went to remolding the people hired to work in the store, not for their own benefit; but rather, for the benefit of the company.

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[5] Samuel Reyburn. "Training for Selling". *Convention Proceedings, Fourth Annual Convention.* New York, 1927 (102).
[6] Mulvey, Kate. *Decades of Beauty: The Changing Image of Women, 1890's to 1990's.* London: Hamlyn, 1998.

Instead of reforming their own hiring practices to include more independent middle-class and wealthy women who could easily connect with the shopper, the "higher ups" took on working-class women who were easily manipulated. The all-male managers feared that too much education of the female workers would threaten their own positions as owners and managers. However, to cover up this subtle prejudice towards hiring from other classes, the managers and owners of the stores suggested that a middle-class or wealthy woman who was ready to leave all of her comforts of the home was crazy; not ambitious like the working class woman. For example, a writer for the *New York Times* in 1916 states about a rich girl who takes a job as a bundle wrapper:

> A young woman at Mount Holyoke wants to give up a comfortable life and go to work in a department store to learn the business, and because of the sacrifices she is going to make to accomplish her purpose I am compelled to say I think she is crazy (19).

Contrasting the "benevolence" of the mangers and the reluctance to let middle-class women and wealthy women into the industry illustrates a paradox about the way the woman was conceived in the public space. For the working class woman who was seen as non-threatening, her presence in the public sphere was more acceptable if she learned how to imitate the middle and upper class attitudes; but, she had to show restraint too and always remember that she was *just* working class. Women from the other two classes, who would have easily made the transition, were excluded from the industry because men feared that they would threaten their place in the companies. Clearly the contradiction here lies in the terms of class; but, given the explosive nature of such a debate, gender becomes the vehicle for discussing it. The department store meant buying power; and, while the old outward signs of class differentiation (money, education, taste and

behavior) were gradually dissolving and a leveling process taking place,[7] the issue of women in the department store was used to cover up one of the real concerns of mass consumer culture—the breakdown of class boundaries.

The second (and most obvious) theme that repeats in the discourse on the department store and women is the issue of gender. After traditionally having been divided by strict boundaries of behavior, the idea of women in the department store was beginning to challenge the gender boundaries that had originally upheld the social fabric of society. The store itself was the only public space where men truly felt like "fish out of water". In this "Adamless Eden,"[8] women were gaining a strong hold that threatened men. If women could take over one public space, what was holding them back from taking a second and then any other? Yet, it was not only the fear that women would physically take over the department store. The concept of masculinity was also intimidated by the economic power women were given (which sometimes resulted in economic ruin for a husband); and, a new sense of financial independence for working women meant that women had control over when, or whether or not to marry[9].

Men subtly retaliated by proclaiming the city to be an unsafe environment for women. Their rationale was that women would have to pass through unsavory neighborhoods to get to the department store, and this could be a risk to them. In addition, men suggested that too many women in the public sphere meant the neglect of

[7]Charles B. McCann. *Women and Department Store Newspaper Advertising.* Social Research, inc., 1975
[8] Edward A. Filene, a Boston store owner coined this term to describe the store as a purely female territory, where store owners had to create an atmosphere for the female shoppers, essentially conceding some semblance of power to the female shopper. In *Counter Cultures.*
[9] William Leach. "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925". *The Journal of American History* 71.2 (1984): 319-342.

the home.[10] These were two of the many reasons used to justify society's disapproval of women as consumers. An article in *The Ladies Home Journal* from 1907 illustrates both of these points. The woman speaker in the article says the following about having to go to the city to shop:

> Going to the city requires of me the utmost exercise of courage. I try to fortify myself of the trip, arming myself against the depression that invariably settles upon me at sight of the high buildings, the dingy approaches to the big railway station where one see men black with car-grease and smoke, women in squalid houses, and listless children in the shadow of the brewery… The Department Store with its army of bondwomen represents the decline of the home (38).

This article serves to reinforce the stereotype of the dangerous street and the distraction of the domestic sphere caused by the department store experience. Much like the trade journals role in cinema, *The Ladies Home Journal* was meant to be a forum for laying out the "dos and don'ts" for society's women. It is intriguing how this particular writer's language borders on terminology used for talking about battle. She says that she must have "courage" to go to the city, she must "fortify" herself by "arming" against the sights of the city; and then, she describes the scene of destruction: "dingy railway", "black car-grease and smoke", "squalid houses and listless children". Her language itself masculinizes the process of entering the city thereby emphasizing the separation between city and country; and, male and female spaces.

Perhaps this description would be more foreboding if it were not for the women doing charity work in the less salubrious neighborhoods where the sights were far more disturbing than those in *The Ladies Home Journal.* Large numbers of women entered neighborhoods (often alone) that men would never dream of going near, all in the name of humanity. They disseminated information about disease, social disorder, morality,

[10] Nava, Mica. "Modernity's Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store". *The Shopping Experience.* Ed. Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell. *London: Sage, 1997.*

hygiene, and housing. These women had to "look" because they were forced to observe and classify the relationships of the less fortunate people of the cities. This essentially entitled them to the indulgence of urban spectatorship which was not very different from the position that Benjamin's *flaneur* maintained. [11]

When it became clear that men's "concerns" were merely a cover up for their true anxieties about the changing boundaries of gender, new tactics were invented to pacify the unstable psychology of men and to give them peace of mind. For instance, politics was one the areas where men feared the "invasion" of women. The department store supported the Suffrage movement and encouraged women to participate in the movement, albeit for financial reasons such as free advertising.[12] To counter men's apprehension, the *New York Times* printed an article in 1912 titled "Hats, Not Politics, Interest the Women". The newspaper interviewed women in attendance at a Chicago Committeemen contest about their participation in the event. The women's remarks all show that they cared little about the committee's issues and more about the shopping. One woman stated, "I am satisfied to visit the department stores and look at pretty gowns and hats without bothering with politics" (3). A second attendee, along the same lines, remarked, "I enjoy the shop windows here more than I will the convention" (3). While re-emphasizing the stereotype that women love to shop, both of these statements clearly are meant to show that women use the department store specifically for shopping and that their presence within the department store has no connection to them getting into politics.

[11] Mica Nava. Page 62.
[12] William Leach in "Transformations in Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925 talks about the role of the suffragist and the department store in more detail.

These examples show how the breaking down of gender boundaries has to be negotiated. What seems most interesting to me is that each illustrates an attempt to make men feel comfortable with women in the public sphere. Clearly, the problem does not stem from women's inability to assimilate to the urban space, but rather men's inability to accept her position there.

The third and final theme that repeats in the discourse on the department store and women is the issue of secularization. In the 1880s there was a major concern about Christian welfare and women's role in supporting those institutions that advocated for welfare for the less fortunate of the cities. Women performed the majority of the charity work and soon, shopping fell into competition with reform work. Maintaining women's attention in charity became even more difficult by the turn of the century as shopping became an almost full time business for women.[13] Women clearly were beginning to gain an economic power in society, and were starting to position themselves within a public framework that asked them to be "desiring" individuals. This also meant a weakening of sensual control and a new sense of individualism founded on commodity consumption. Consumer service therefore caused many women to believe that they ought to be treated as individuals, and to be served rather that to do the serving for others, i.e. the welfare institutions.

The loosening of these boundaries lead to public outcry by many religious advocates who claimed that the department store was a ruinous, evil institution; and, those women working within the institution were immoral and "loose". In a December 1911 issue of *McClures's Magazine*, Jane Addams gives her take on the status of women

[13] William Leach in, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925, discusses how diaries of some city youth and women reflect a growing interest in shopping over Christian reform.

working within the department store in an article titled, “A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil”:

> The fifth volume of the report of “Women and Child Wage-Earners in the United States” finds the result of a careful inquiry in ‘the relation of wages to the moral condition of department-store women’. In connection with this, the investigators secured ‘the personal histories of one hundred immoral women,’ of whom ten were or had been employed in a department-store. They found that, while only one of the ten had been directly inducted to leave the store for a disreputable life, six of them said that ‘it was easier to earn money that way’ (232).

As one can see, both the institution and the worker are connected to the religious sentiment of “immorality”, i.e. sin. Here Addams obviously takes the stance that the institution is the corrupter that makes women act “waywardly”. And yet, the contradiction lies in the last line, “it was easier to earn money that way”. Easier than what? There is an inherent fear in the independent woman who can live life outside of the Church and the welfare given from the Church. Literally, the Church was afraid of loosing its power as an institution and saw it unraveling in front of its eyes by women’s movement into the public sphere and away from their charity work.

Another popular issue that called the morals of the independent woman into question was the act of shoplifting. Women became associated with kleptomania and were considered sick and diseased. Kleptomania also suggested an unconscious relationship to sexuality. Therefore the department store came under further attack as an institutional force that was pushing women to openly display desire in public, thereby rupturing sensual boundaries as well. For this reason, the department store is often described in the most elaborate detail, which reinforces the seductiveness of the institution. New decorating technologies offered by color, light and glass helped to

create these new environments.[14] In addition, each and every woman, regardless of whether they bought anything, were invited to browse the items on display and to take part in the fantasy created by the exotic themes which were meant to lure the people into stores and to add glamour to all the treasures found inside. [15] One minute a shopper was in a New York shop, the next, she was figuratively transported to Ancient Egypt by the fantasy that the displays offered.

The association between kleptomania, the department store, women, disease, sexuality, immorality and the Church, only reinforced society's fears about secularization. The Church itself was loosing control over the people and consumerism was substituting religious fervor. The concerns about the department store and women were merely meant to rationalize the traditional behavior patterns associated with moral piety. [16] At the heart of the matter, the problem was not the department store and women, but rather a changing relationship to consumption that society at large would have to learn to negotiate. [17]

III. Thanhouser's Representation of the Debates in Cinematic Form

In the remaining pages of this essay I want to investigate how the Thanhouser Studio represented the department store in their films between 1909 and 1918. In fact, the first Thanhouser film which directly mentions the department store appears in 1910; the last appears in 1915. After 1915, I found no other films which referenced department stores directly. Of the nine films I found between these years, seven were classified as

[14] William Leach gives an excellent description of how new technologies advanced the interior and exterior of department stores in such a way as to create unbelievable spectacle.
[15] Rosalind Williams. *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
[16] Abelson, Elaine. *When Ladies Go A-thieving.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
[17] Rosalind William talks about consumerism as a secular shift that fosters civilization. Society has to learn to "behave" within the new context. In the case of the department store, women were blamed because they could easily be considered immoral for having strayed away from the Church.

drama, one as comedy-drama and the remainder as a comedy. The two having comedic elements both have male protagonists either working in a department store or using the department store's amenities. In my researching of the department store and Thanhouser, I selected only films that specifically refer to the department store. I did not want to branch out into the other areas related to the department store such as fashion, beauty and body shape. These areas all share a common link; however, I wanted to focus on the department store as its own entity and to see how the above debates on class, gender and secularization play out in the cinematic form at the turn of the century. Given the difficulty finding and viewing the films, I will reconstruct the narratives from synopsis and critical reviews during the years in question in order to illustrate how the Thanhouser Studios resolved the tensions surrounding the discourse of the department store and women.

Following the same format from above, I want to first look at the Thanhouser films I see that deal mainly with the issues of class. Out of the nine films that have the department store as their focus, four are particularly concerned with class conflict. The earliest one being, *Her Battle for Existence* (1910). This film is classified as a drama, and obviously has a female protagonist (title gives that away). The synopsis of the story tells us that the film is about Susan Dale, the daughter of a wealthy man who takes his life after an unlucky deal. Before her father died, however, Susan was proposed to by two men. She had decided on a fellow named Will; however, after Susan's father dies and Susan is left destitute, Will runs off to Europe to avoid her. Susan is forced to get work. She tries the department store but is eventually fired for sitting down on the job after a spell of exhaustion hits her. After a try at a few other failures (factory worker and

maid), Susan is on the verge of suicide when the second bow, Jim, returns to save and marry her. The department store is noted here as an institution of labor, but neither its size, nor the scale of its beauty is mentioned.

From the synopsis alone we can deduce that Susan is meant to serve as an example of what befalls wealthy women who try to enter the work force. Thanhouser's representation of the upper classes as partaking in the public sphere clearly reveals this transgression to be disastrous. Any woman of the middle-class or wealthy class would surely see themselves in the Susan Dale character and rethink whether or not they were fit for working life. In this particular film, Thanhouser resolves the issue of class by showing that wealthy women are not suitable for work outside the home. The pretense of health is used to cover up the issue of class; therefore, the film does not directly come out and say that working is not for wealthy women. Nevertheless, the subtle hint to fatigue suffered by Susan suggests that she cannot handle the arduous work. Nothing in the narrative tells us that she is sick prior to this experience; thus, we can only assume that her previous life of luxury has not prepared her for the work that working class women do. Of course, in the end, Susan is saved by her prince charming "and all ends happily to the peal of wedding chimes".[18] Traditional patriarchy undoubtedly wins out and re-situates the middle-class and wealthy women outside of the public sphere.

Two reviews from the time are interesting in the way they reveal this contradiction between class and women in the public. The first review from *The Moving Picture World,* April 30, 1910 reads: "Perhaps the chief good this picture will accomplish is to show the difficulties which beset an inexperienced girl who undertakes a battle for existence alone". The second review from the same source on May 7, 1910 reads: "A

[18] *The Moving Picture World,* April 16, 1910.

romantic story representing too vividly for comfort what might befall any girl left alone without some occupation sufficient to insure her a support". These two reviews show that the attitude of the time was ambivalent as well about the paradox of women in public. The first review highlights the difficulties of an "inexperienced girl" who tries to be too independent. She fails because she cannot exist alone, i.e. without the help of either a father or a husband. The second review implies that the girl simply fails because she lacks the experience to work. It seems to suggest that had Susan had the experience, she could have survived without Jim's intervention. Just looking at the film text, the message seems clear—a hierarchy exists and certain women should not be permitted as workers in a public, urban environment. In spite of Thanhouser's clear message, the viewing audience obviously still felt ambiguously about the representation in the film.

Another representation of class conflict occurs is in the film *The Head of the Ribbon Counter* (1913). This film is classified as a comedy-drama and changes the dynamic by introducing a male protagonist who is employed by a department store. Again, the reviews say little about the department store itself; but rather, use it as a place where class conflict occurs. In this case the issue of class is treated humorously. Clarence is one of the most popular clerks of the ribbon counter. The employees love him, his boss highly regards him, and the female shoppers adore him. One day, one of the store's best customers, a wealthy, cranky woman finally pushes Clarence to his boiling point and he becomes involved in an argument with her. The woman goes to the boss and demands that Clarence be discharged. The boss does not want to get rid of Clarence so he decides to disguise him. The cranky woman does not recognize him on her next visit; but, somehow engages him in another argument, and again wants him

fired. This time a second customer takes Clarence's side. The boss does not want to lose either customer's business and in the end, decides to disguise Clarence once again in order to keep him on the payroll.

This is a fascinating piece about class because it shows that the department store contributes to and maintains the problem of the wealthy customers who choose the department store as their personal arena for expressing class prerogatives. In the shear preposterousness of the cinematic representation, Thanhouser, keeping in tune with the trade journals of the time[19] uses this film as a didactic device which criticizes the practice of the department stores to compensate for the fickle customer. Comedy works well in this case because there is no real dramatization of a social ill. Yet, the tone is ironic because the boss must scramble around to bend over backwards for the wealthy woman, thereby rewarding her for her shameful behavior. Only a comedic representation could delicately expose the imbalance going on between the classes in this dialectical struggle to make the customer happy at all costs and to retain good employees.

The City Mouse (1913) was the next film released with a class theme. This film fits in nicely with *The Head of the Ribbon Counter* because it also depicts the disparity between the consumer classes; but, this time Thanhouser returns to the use of the drama to show the extent of isolation and unhappiness suffered by the person who becomes so tied to materialistic items. In this case the daughter of the highest ranking family from a small village goes to the city and returns with lavish clothes, jewelry and other objects of interest. The local paper covers the event telling about her great popularity in the village and all the gifts showered on her by the villagers. Her visit is short and she leaves behind

[19] Susan Porter Benson in *Counter Cultures* remarks on the harsh criticism of the trade journals regarding wealthy women's behavior towards the sales ladies.

some broken hearts. The newspaper says that she returns to "her position of great importance" (*The Moving Picture World,* January 11, 1913). As it turns out, her position is that of a saleswoman in a department store. Upon returning to the store, all of her clothes have to be returned to their owners, friends who helped her dress for the occasion.

This film points out "the difference between the village pond and the city ocean" (*The Morning Telegraph,* January 19, 1913). Thanhouser's film re-creates the great divide that exists between the classes. The young lady could momentarily dress the part of a socialite; but, in the end, all the riches in the department store could never make her something she can never be—a part of the wealthy class.

What these three films highlight is the contradictions that exist in the turn of the century debates about women in the department store. The Thanhouser representations speak to the constructions surrounding class and the fears that the loosening of class boundaries could jeopardize the middle-class and wealthy peoples' positions of power. All three of these films illustrate that Thanhouser was aware of the paradoxes present in the discourse on women, class and the department store. They also all three resolve the conflict by negotiating the terms of the different classes in a way that maintains the separation between the classes. In the Thanhouser films, boundaries are preserved and few transgressions are given to the working classes. These films therefore extinguish any fears that the working class might rise up and gain power by working in the department store.

Moving onto the area of gender, we see again that Thanhouser produces films that are meant to quiet society's fears about women in the department store by reinforcing the strict boundaries between the sexes. In both of the films that I found that focused on the

topic of gender, the male character somehow tries to interact with the world of the department store and fails to negotiate the space. The women, on the other hand, are both independent women who manipulate the public sphere in a way that seems very organic and comfortable. Neither film advocates for a complete transgression on the part of the women; but rather, they both open up a space for women to participate in the changes taking place at the turn of the century. More than anything, the films both suggest that the department store is a place for women that men simply need not be part of.

The first film, *The Saleslady* (1912) is about a hard working woman (Nora), who does not really want to work; but because of her family's financial needs, must find work in the department store. One day a young man from the country comes to work at the store. Nora feels sorry for the young man and helps advise him on how to get ahead (she has a crush on him which is why she helps him). Their boss, who likes to reward talent, proposes a contest offering a cash reward and a promotion to whoever comes up with the best way to decorate the spring display. Nora gives the young man her idea and he wins, much to everyone's surprise. Once the man gets the promotion, he ceases to speak to Nora and starts moving in on the boss' daughter, a wealthy young lady. Nora's sister decides to get even by exposing the truth that her sister actually came up with the spring display. When this news comes to light, the young man is not fired, rather, he is re-appointed to the wrapping-room while Nora is given the position as floorwalker.

This film reinforces the idea that the female worker is better suited for work in the department store. The young man keeps his job "behind the scenes", but Nora is put on the floor where others can see her and interact with her. The importance of the female as spectacle comes to the forefront in this Thanhouser film. The department store hinges on

women as buyers, sellers and advertisers in a way that men cannot. The fantasy offered to women via the department store, and grand spectacle found there, could only be understood and negotiated by women as a place for them to enjoy themselves and as a welcoming place to shop[20] in the non-threatening presence of other women. Although men are excluded from this fantasy world, the Thanhouser film makes a point of representing the woman as kind and fair. She is never seen as a castrating figure but rather a nurturing maternal one. She in no way is menacing and there seems little alarm over her inhabiting this urban space.

In addition, one can tell from the reviews that this film is definitely made for a female audience. In fact, one reviewer states, "The women should go into spasm over this novel film" (Trent).[21] This is also the only film out of the nine that the reviewers make a point of describing the department store in terms of glamour and fantasy. For instance, *The Morning Telegraph* describes the set noting the:

> …excellence of this reproduction of a typical large shop, and of the thousands who work in these big modern markets. As instances might be recalled the realism of the general floor scene with the variety of counters and departments and the contrasts in types of customers and employees. The display of the living models and the promenade of fashions is novel in the extreme and the scene is lavish. …a promenade of living models where customers can look on luxuriously at a play (May 12, 1912).

The size and scale of the department store come alive in this review. We can see that the Thanhouser Studio took the time (and money) to build a set that would come close to reflecting the beauty of the department store. Clearly, the realistic representation of the store is meant to attract female viewers who would already be familiar with the splendor of the store.

[20] Mica Nava in "Modernity's Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store".
[21] Gordon Trent. *The Morning Telegraph*, April 14, 1912.

The second film regarding gender is *Checking Charlie's Child* (1915). This film is a comedy and seems to be a minor film. The synopsis is short and the premise is that Charlie must care for his son while his wife goes to a social event with some friends. Charlie has to work and cannot take the child with him. He has an office boy check the child in at a department store's child care services. When the attendant goes back for the boy, he finds he has lost his ticket and the store will not give him the child. The office aid swaps a child and returns him to Charlie who does not even realize that it is not his boy. Charlie is charged with kidnapping and his wife has to bale him out. The office boy finds the baby and calls the station where Charlie is being held. Out of fear about how Charlie will respond, the boy places the call and then hands the phone to the baby. When the baby "coos" into the receiver, he is recognized by his parents. All is well at the end and everyone is reunited.

This simple narrative makes evident the separation between genders. The representation of the wife is positive, i.e. she is not reprimanded for having a little fun with her pals. However, the husband and office boy are made fun of for not understanding how the department store child care works. The message here is clear. Women perform better in some spaces. There is a clear association between women, the domestic and the department store. Women easily maneuver within the department store because it is like familiar terrain. They are surrounded by items that they use daily. Men, on the other hand, are more suited to the work place; which in this film, clearly shows is not a place for children.

Both of the films reinforce the boundaries between the sexes. The department store is meant to be a space for women, at the exclusion of men. But, Thanhouser clearly

sheds a positive light on such a space. This type of urban space poses no threat to men's power. Sure, women are in the public, but they are contained within the department store.

For the final debate on secularization I want to join the discussion of two films that deal with the problem of shoplifting. As you will recall, shoplifting became associated with the feminine and described as a female disease. In two films by Thanhouser, we see a woman wrongly accused for shoplifting; and, a man disguised as a woman who indeed is shoplifting. Here we get a more gender neutral concern about shoplifting which makes the problem less of an immoral one (i.e. a sin) and more of a social problem that can befall both men and women.

In *Mother* (1910), a woman is accused of shoplifting in a department store and her only hope is a shop girl who attempts to clear her name and is fired for transgressing her superiors. In the second film, *The Shoplifter* (1915) two sisters work in a department store. One, Meg, has fallen under the influence of a shady man (Strubel) who forces her to help him steal from the department store. Meanwhile, Meta, the second sister, has to prove her innocence when items are stolen from her department. She traces the crime back to Strubel and devises a plan to catch him. When he is exposed, Meta convinces the manager to pardon her sister and promises to help her be honest.

Neither film gives a lavish description of the department store; but rather, the department store again serves as the backdrop for discussing modernity's affect on society. Both films bring into question human behavior as a sign of the modern times and consumerism's place in society. The Church is not implicated in the films, which shows a pure break between consumer society and religion. Thanhouser undoubtedly

sees the place that secularization has in the modern society and emphasizes the need to address the growing social problems in terms of changing attitudes. Both films suggest that shoplifting is not a gendered issue, but rather a product of a modernizing society. Thanhouser does not give a direct solution to the problem but does breakdown the gender boundaries that truly hinder any progress in deducing a resolution for this modern concern.

V. Conclusion

Going back to Benjamin's idea of a collective "awakening" and a class consciousness, we see that the department store was clearly a site where such a stirring began to take hold at the turn of the century in America. The department store itself was less of a scandal then the fact that women could more easily negotiate the space than men. Proprietors quickly became aware of the advantages of having a nearly all-female set of buyers, as well as employees; and, preceded to present women with objects of desire that were virtually impossible to turn down. Although the overarching question about women and the department store hinges on the issue of women in the public, we see that many of the contradictory debates surrounding the discourse on the department store stem from a collective concern about mass consumerism and modernity in general. Consumption in the new modern context raised issues in gender, class, and secularization that needed an arena to play out in. This arena became the department store.

Looking at the Thanhouser Studio's films gives us a comprehensible representation of how one studio chose to cinematically address the debates. We can see from the reconstructed narratives and reviews that the Thanhouser films reflect an opening up of attitudes towards women workers from the working-class. Middle-class

and wealthy women are excluded and even shown to fail if they attempt to transgress the boundaries of classicism. Interestingly, Thanhouser never sheds an ugly light on the working-class female workers. In each film, they are shown to be honest, hard-working, and clever. When men try to enter their world, they inevitably fail and are shown to be thieves, lazy and absent-minded. This is not to say that all men are inherently bad workers; but, that the department store was a non-threatening place for women workers. This further enforces the boundaries between genders and helps to pacify men's anxieties about women in the workplace. Lastly, Thanhouser addresses the issue of secularization by negotiating the new space through humanitarian terms. He ruptures the stereotype of the female shoplifter and shows how the problem is a universal one in a modernizing society. Without a doubt, the Thanhouser films give us an excellent example of how one studio engaged in, and negotiated the debates on women in the public sphere through a spectacle of cinematic images.

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