

The Ince « Method » and Film on the West Coast between 1913 and 1917

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What I am presenting today under this title has to be understood as part of a work in progress, a research program called Cinémarchives, whose end is December 2010, financed by the Agence nationale de la recherche, built in collaboration with the Cinémathèque française and the Institut Jean Vigo, and largely dedicated to the examination of the John A. Allen – Triangle collection preserved by the Cinémathèque française in Paris. One of the goals of this research is to rebuild the history of the Triangle Film Corporation which apparently lived between 1915 (date of its first birth) and 1917-1918 (date of its second or third death, which was not even the last one: we find traces of a still active Triangle at the beginning of the Twenties and still in the Thirties).

One of the paradoxes of film history is that, in spite of numerous and accessible archives, nothing really extended and serious has been written on Triangle, with the exceptions of the work of an amateur historian, but a serious one, Kalton C. Lahue in his *Dreams for Sale* book, back in 1971, and of Janet Staiger seminal work on the producer-unit in 1985. This is not to say that Eileen Bowser, Eduardo Koszarski or Kristin Thompson are not serious historians, but their approach is limited in scope and is not centered on the Triangle system. So, we are still left with the common statement that Triangle was the first attempt of a vertical integration of the film industry (vertical integration meaning from production to exploitation), attempt which failed for unknown (or diverse, which is the same) reasons.

What is interesting in the Triangle case is that none of the common ideas stands when closely examined. For instance, Triangle was not the first attempt of vertical integration for Mutual, its predecessor, was built along the same lines, but it failed too. And Triangle was not a vertical integration for it was not based on the ownership of film theatres (and this point may partly explain the failure of the system). And one of the questions is: what really did Triangle control?

What is known and partly real is that Triangle was formed, under the initiative of Harry E. Aitken, in July 1915 by the co-signature of Ince, Griffith and Mack Sennett to produce films to be distributed under the banner of Triangle (and Triangle was the symbol for the reunion of the three great names).

I said “produce”, not “direct”, for Ince, Griffith and Mack Sennett were not directors anymore when they signed with Aitken. And here begins one of the questions we have to solve as film historians, which is a very well known question as far as sheer history is concerned, that is the question of nominalism¹. What do we mean by Ince, Griffith and Mack Sennett, as long as they are not to be considered as directors? When they signed their contract, they were basically hired as supervisors or producers of a certain type of films: Ince was basically western oriented, Griffith was feature film oriented since the bomb of *Birth of a Nation*, and Mack Sennett was in charge of two reels comedies. And they were united because of the differences between the type of films they had in mind: to Ince the western, to Griffith the modern drama, and to Mack Sennett the burlesque. This is why each of them was in charge of a production unit : Kay Bee for Ince, Fine Arts for Griffith and Keystone for Sennett. But in

¹ My research is, for the time being, largely inspired by the work of the historian Paul Veyne, namely his criticism of nominalism and his distinction between history and what he calls « axiological history » (that is in his writings art history). Of course, film history has belonged, up to 2000, to the realm of axiological history. See Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1971.

turn, these names have to be carefully dealt with, for they are trademarks of other production structures: Kay Bee is a New York Motion Picture Company name, and Fine Arts belongs to Majestic. Kessel and Baumann control NYMP (at least until the end of 1916 when Aitken is forced to buy NYMP) and Aitken controls Majestic and Reliance.

Now we have to name problems: the first one is what do we mean when we say Ince, Griffith and Sennett, and the second one is what Triangle stands for in front of New York Motion Picture or Majestic (and therefore what is the role of Harry E. Aitken in front of Baumann and Kessel, or even in front of the bankers who decided in November 1915 to back up Triangle and Aitken).

But we have to face another problem, linked at the same time to the archives and to the state of the art in terms of film history. In order to know who was in charge of what, we ought to know who was financing the production of the films. But in order to do so, we need study, with an accountant competency, the numerous financial documents to be found in Madison or in New York. Unfortunately, this has never been done, because film studies focus on aesthetics, not on economic problems. So, for the time being, there is no possibility for us to go beyond this point: Harry E. Aitken was not the only man responsible for the financing of the films, and therefore the question of final responsibility has to be suspended.

The only thing we can settle at first sight is that neither Griffith, Ince nor Sennett should be considered as “auteurs”, in the French sense of the term, for they were supervisors or producers or general managers, not directors. For instance, Griffith is not credited for a single Triangle film as a director during his stay at Triangle. He supervised many films, directed for instance by Christy Cabanne, but when he directed, it was not for Triangle but for himself: the only film he is credited for as a director during this period, *Intolerance*, is not a Triangle film but a Wark Production film. This shows clearly that Griffith’s ambition as a director, or as an “auteur” of a new kind of feature film, didn’t fit with the Triangle framework and that he was careful at inscribing this ambition outside Triangle. I will come back to Griffith as an auteur later on.

Besides the *terra incognita* of the financial documents, fortunately, the Triangle archives show clearly a way of working and a line of decisions, from the selection of the literary material down to the sending of a positive and a negative copy of the film to the East Coast, and the documents preserved by the Cinémathèque française bring a clear light of the famous Ince method, which is not specific to Triangle, but it is very likely that the Triangle initiators wanted to marry Griffith’s vision of the future feature film (what we would call today a blockbuster, for *Birth of a Nation* is the first American blockbuster) with Ince’s vision of production. What is Ince’s method? References have been made with Taylorism, or Fordism, that is with the conception of the production of a film as an assembly line, from separate pieces to the final product. And this comparison is largely true, except that the product was not unique (a single model as the famous Ford T), but had various forms (from two to seven reels, from comedy to drama), so the pieces and the product had no pre-defined form.

What had a pre-defined form was what everybody had to do at a certain point, and for me this is where lies the real Ince method: an analysis of the various tasks to be undertaken in order to produce smoothly a film from the original story to the film theatre. It is a rationalization of every necessary step to produce a film. But this asks for more than sheer experience of making a film. It asks for administrative skills, legal competencies, managerial abilities and a good sense of on the one hand logistics and on the other hand of archiving (what has to be preserved for the future in terms of administrative following).

What am I aiming at? Two points. First, Ince is probably not the inventor of the so-called Ince method, for it needed lawyers, administrators, managers and secretaries to build the method

and enforce it. Second, in this system, the auteur is not the director, but the writer of the original story.

If we are to take seriously the assembly-line comparison, then we must recognize that the first steps Ince wanted to secure were the ownership of the literary material. This is why he had a scenario department, and this is why he was very careful in the handling of the literary rights of the material. In fact, his first goal was to have his hands on a capital of novels and scenarios in order first to adapt them into films but also in order to prevent his competitors (and they were many) to have the same capital. And this is why he was careful at keeping the record of every step in acquiring this literary material (coming mostly from popular magazine, and not from high-brow literature) and in registering his rights at the Library of Congress for instance. He made sure that the writer was registered as such (that is as the first owner of the rights), before registering the film and therefore his own rights.

The importance of the novel writer is confirmed by the place of his or her name in the film credits, just after the title, after the name of the main actor or actress, but way ahead of the name of the director, which appears after the name of the revisers and along with the name of the supervisor.

The first one is the insistence on the literary value of the story told, as an attempt to enhance the film spectacle, to give it its “letters de noblesse” and subsequently to its public. This importance given to the author of the literary material might be explained by two factors. respectable image (and we know it was one of the explicit goals of Triangle): it is part of the publicity to put forward the literary origin of the film. The second factor is that the organization of the film production under the “producer-unit” system gives little place to the director, and this in turn has several possible explanations. The first one is the part taken by the producer (for us, Ince) in the writing of the script on the basis of an original novel or scenario. Ince is often credited as co-author (with the head of his scenario department, G. Edgar Sullivan or Spencer) of the script. The second one is the fact that along the producer-unit system, the delegation of power to shoot a film (delegation partly due to the fact that the films were shot outside the studio in the Los Angeles vicinity) was based on a detailed continuity script, describing scene by scene the action, the way of filming and the content of the image (in terms of image quality and setting design). This is confirmed by a paragraph typed in red at the bottom of the first page of every continuity script, indicating that no change can be made while shooting the film without previous authorization of Ince himself. From this point of view, we may consider the continuity script as an order to produce such or such an image or a scene (the term they used then to describe what we would call a frame), or if you prefer as a story-board without a drawing, for it describes precisely frame by frame the content of the film. In this context, the director is just someone on the spot checking that the instructions are properly carried out. But this means also that the producer and the head of the scenario department were the one who had a detailed idea of what the film should look like, or in other words what the product should be for the public.

Of this non-importance of the director in the artistic value of the film, we have other confirmations. One of them is that in some reports, the name of the director is placed in front of the term “produced by”, as if his or her role has been to realize the product, not to direct actors and other professionals. Another one is the fact that in this system, the director was often the main actor: Fatty Arbuckle or Syd Chaplin for the comedies, William S. Hart for the westerns. We even find, for instance, Frank Borzage among the actors-directors, and this fact is probably due to the previous one: the importance of the producer as writer of the continuity script.

This gives us a new perspective: the actor can be the author of the film, at least partly. In the Triangle production, this is probably true for the Douglas Fairbanks films. As you know, Douglas Fairbanks made his first films for Triangle and his very first feature film, *The Lamb*, directed by Christy Cabanne, was one of the three films selected for the New York premiere of the first Triangle programme, in September 1915. Douglas Fairbanks was by then 32, had already an important persona which shows in the films (way of acting, behaving, mimics, and even type of story – we know that Douglas Fairbanks was active in the writing of the films he played in). And this should bring us to reconsider some point of history. Griffith, Ince and Sennett are known as signing simultaneously a contract by the end of July 1915 to form the Triangle. *The Lamb*, with Douglas Fairbanks as a Triangle star, is programmed for the first Triangle program two months later in New York. This means that Douglas Fairbanks must have been hired at the same time, along with Griffith and Ince and Sennett, in order to participate to the building of the Triangle image and trademark. Or, in other words, *The Lamb* is clearly a vehicle for Douglas Fairbanks persona, as translated to the screen.

We are not through with actors as authors yet. Many Triangle films include actresses such as Lilian Gish or Mae Marsh, actresses we know for belonging to the Griffith team of actresses. They appear in fact in films supervised by Griffith but directed by others, Christy Cabanne again or Walter Edwards, or Paul Powell (do we, film historians, credit these directors with the “auteur” quality?). But Lilian Gish and Mae Marsh, by their looks (no make up or a very discreet one, for instance) and by their way of acting (very distinctive as Lilian Gish is concerned) remind us very clearly the way Griffith had them play in his films. And here, it is difficult to say what belongs to the actress and what belongs to the director who selected them and directed them first. So again, the producer-supervisor might be considered as an “auteur” for the Triangle films.

Here we must remember that another attempt to organize film production were made by two ex-employees of the Triangle structure: Griffith and Fairbanks joined forces to create Associate Artists, in which Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin were also partners, that is actors who became for the sake of their financial and artistic control their own production. Here we must remember that another attempt to organize film production were made by two ex-employees of the Triangle structure: Griffith and Fairbanks joined forces to create Associated Artists, in which Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin were also partners, that is actors who became for the sake of their financial and artistic control their own producers.

At the end of this first review, we can reaffirm that in the teens and in the Triangle system, the auteur is the producer. If we are afraid but such an abrupt position, we can put it another way: if we are to find an “auteur” in such films, then we will have to consider that the “auteur” function is distributed between the writer of the novel, the writer or writers of the continuity script, the main actor and the supervisor, for we have no evidence (I insist) that the director had in this context any possibility of giving his own mark to the product.

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