

THE APPEARANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE STAR SYSTEM IN THE AMERICAN SOCIETY AND ITS SUBSEQUENT IMAGE IN THE ROMANIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract: *The paper aims at clarifying as much as possible the significance of the “star system” concept. It is noteworthy that, in the contemporary media society, generalization of the concept has led to the distortion of its explicative field. Subsequently, I brought to attention the Hollywood entertainment industry that has always been a volatile and unpredictable business. Despite all these facts, the sociology of the star system has known an unprecedented development in our country.*

Key words: *star system, stars, media industry.*

1. Introduction

The name of Hollywood city is related mainly to the cinematographic industry and to the activity of the big studios in which the stars were hired to entertain the public. “An entire network has been organized: «talent scouts», castings, small roles, promotion as a starlet, big roles, recognition as a leading actor, and, at last, the star”, says Gabriel Thoveron [16].

Invented in 1890, the cinema offered to the masses the cheapest form of entertainment and developed as a big industry for the filmmakers. It was assumed that the advanced technology would allow the producers to create “the best motion picture made worldwide” [8].

In this respect, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith [12] wrote: “the movies become vehicles for the presence of their stars”, their image becomes vendible, in order to be transformed in merchandise for consumership.

“Conceived to study motion” [11, p. 7], cinematography presents a world of stars as it was created and submitted to analysis as a modern myth.

The French sociologist Edgar Morin reminds us that the appearance of the star coincides with the appearance of new film heroes “interpreted by anonymous and poor actors”, on this occasion the age of “movie stars” superseding the “star-films” age [11, p. 17].

In the given context, the transition from the silent motion picture and sound motion picture to the contemporary

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motion picture accelerated the evolution and projection of the image on the screen. A remarkable role in the development of new methods which are being used at present is held by the cutting-edge technology.

2. The crystallization of stars in U.S.A.

The most important period for the crystallization of movie stars in the U.S.A. and Europe was between 1913-1914 and up to 1919. Subsequently, the archetypal masculine stars imposed themselves, as Edgar Morin observed.

Prior to 1911, the names of the stars were not revealed to the large public by the producers. Anonymity had become, for certain reasons (boycott and competition with other production companies), a practice which was maintained at Hollywood for quite a long period.

For these multiple reasons, the two companies, *Vitagraph* (founded in 1897 by J. Stuart Blackton, Albert E. Smith and W. T. Rock) and *Biograph* (whose director was “a theatre actor, with a movie experience of only 6 months”, David W. Griffith), didn't reveal for a long time the identity of the main actors and the public knew only the “*Vitagraph* girl” and the “*Biograph* girl”, without knowing that their real names were Florence Lawrence and Florence Turner.

Nevertheless, the stars had to respect the imposed contractual obligations, being satisfied with the fees they earned from their artistic performances. But the *Motion Picture World* magazine was the one that insisted the name of the star be mentioned in the cinematographic productions.

They “asked the producers to write about the film the names of the main actors” [6, p. 97]. The first star who claimed, says Charles Ford [6, p. 97],

that his name be revealed once for all was Florence Turner's partner, Maurice Costello. In short time, the *Vitagraph* company got involved in a thorough initiative meant to introduce both stars like Maurice Costello, Florence Turner, and others. Unlike *Vitagraph*, *Biograph* will not resort to the method, the name of its actors being further undisclosed. Thus, they will establish the star system, the production of stars being considered, in that age, a very valuable and highly exploitable asset.

The assertion made by David W. Griffith triggers a type of historical thinking: “If it is normal for historians to write history, then, for similar reasons and without an answer, it is appropriate for us to tell the historical truth in movies”.

Furthermore, the producer Adolph Zukor considers that “the American cinematographic industry developed due to the star” [5, p. 44], the hierarchy of the stars being established on the basis of what was called star system, which was rigorously controlled.

Meanwhile, *Paramount* Company, run by Adolph Zukor, succeeded in developing new stars in the American cinematography, some of them becoming well-known brands in the artistic world. Among them, the following names can be mentioned: Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Gloria Swanson, Pauline Frederick and Blanche Sweet.

The main purpose of the *Paramount* producer was, according to what he said, to dominate the new industry.

However, Adolph Zukor assigned to himself a part of this accomplishment [6, p. 94-5]: “We built the entire cinematographic industry on the foundation of «the star». This could seem easy, but in reality the star system is a very complex and very fragile edifice, a huge castle, made up of playing cards

(...). It seems to me that the public is interested first in the people seen on the screen, and especially in stars. When I founded my first society I started from this belief: «Famous Players in Famous Plays». I was sure that the public will be anxious to see the theatre celebrities in a motion picture”.

Jean-Pierre Esquenazi (professor at the University “Jean Moulin” from Lyon 3) writes, in his article (*do star system au people: l'extension d'une logique économique*), about the producer Carl Laemmle, who is believed to be the inventor of the star system, in 1911.

In his article [4, p. 37-52], Jean-Pierre Esquenazi defines the “*star system*” as a commercial technique, which consists of “selling certain products, revealing the private personality of certain individuals, who originate in what Hollywood called star system”.

According to the assertion made by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, culture and mass media industry generalized the procedure, its extension transformed all the personality types in “stars”, that is in living and marketable images, thus, competition led to various forms of system alterations, presented, especially, on television.

According to the cinema critic Ángel Comas, the star system is “the designation assigned to a motion picture production system, in which the presence of the stars is an ultimate factor that stimulates consumership, that is the presence of the spectators in cinemas” [2, p. 12].

Ángel Comas also states that this concept [*star system*] was adopted in Europe as well, even if a star “would have had, in general, more artistic features, related to his quality as a performer, than merely commercial attributes, related to his attractive body or personality” [2, p. 12].

Susan Hayward shows that the star system is, generally, “associated with Hollywood, although the French film

industry was the first that saw the utility in promoting its products” [7]. The English sociologist points out: “in the early cinematography, the motion pictures were anonymous productions, involving only the name of the studio (...). The star system” [7] was established in 1919.

The owner of *the Universal Studios Company* (founded in 1912), Carl Laemmle, developed his own strategy of promoting stars, the motion picture business being his main goal. At a certain moment, Carl Laemmle confessed that “besides the economic perspective, the movies seemed to be a simple and rational form of entertainment” [9].

Richard de Cordova speaks about Carl Laemmle, who presented the first star, *Florence Lawrence*” [3, p. 132]. “Although *Florence Lawrence*, known as the « Biograph girl », was the first star called as such in U.S.A.”, Susan Hayward continues, “the first « real » star was Mary Pickford, known as « little Mary » in her movies from that period. She was, in a short time, followed by Charlie Chaplin” [7].

Lucian Pricop proposes a classification of the types of producers, differentiated according to the affiliation, to the nature and to the responsibility criteria within the English and French cinematographic contexts.

There are, according to Lucian Pricop, two categories of producers [13, p. 89-90]: producers *hired as permanent personnel* and *independent producers* (Carl Laemmle is in this category). The *independent producers* are known by diverse designations such as: *executive producer, delegate producer, associate producer, line producer, director-producer, actor-producers* or *scriptwriter-director-producer*.

The producer Carl Laemmle is also mentioned by the Spanish historian, the cinematographic critic Ángel Comas,

who notes [2, p. 13]: “As it is told, Carl Laemmle is believed to be the one who created a story which had a great impact on public opinion: the public was informed through the press about the death in a trolleybus accident of the « Biograph Girl », mentioning her first and last name (a certain Florence Lawrence) and then, after a day, everything was denounced as a huge lie, in a paid advertisement published by the specialized press.

It was for the first time when the name of an actor or actress was revealed in the press and thus becoming known to the larger public and, at the same time, for the first time when the producers answered the request of the spectators eager to know, at last, the physical aspect of an idol together with her name.

The success was surprising even for the company itself and, in fact, the advertisement politics of the studios, helped by *fan magazine*, turned into a social phenomenon which was previously known as a pure commercial idea”.

On the 20th of February 1919, the foundation of *the United Artists Company* was laid, “the only company in the American cinematography founded not by businessmen, but by artists”, as Charles Ford pointed out. Four great artists (Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin and David W. Griffith), took this step in cinematography. The goal of this company was carefully detailed and justified [6, p. 48-9]:

„The main goal of our new organization is to protect the American public. The public was always obliged, when they wanted to see a movie of one

of their favourites, to accept at the same time a film that they didn't like (...). This constituted a clause in the movie location contract. Such a sine qua non condition was unprecedented in any other industry, thus the spectators that wanted to watch the latest work of their preferred director or « star » had to accept seeing five or six parts of another uninteresting movie.

We will not proceed this way; we will make movies that will run in cinemas as a unique program. Our goal is not to earn money, we want to make good movies, with whom we may get into the red, but which will surely delight the large public”.

The United Artists Company produced a series of movies in which the following stars acted: Douglas Fairbanks, Ronald Colman, Elissa Landi, Al. Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Paul Muni, Noch Berry, Claudette Colbert, Charles Laughton, Boris Karloff, Silvia Sidney, Ann Dvorak, Kay Francis, Ben Lyon, Ann Hardy, Paul Roberson, Fay Wray, Ester Taylor etc.

Paul McDonald notices that, at the end of 1920, the economic control of the American motion picture industry focused on five big leader companies, named trusts: Paramount, Warner Bros, the Fox Film Corporation, Radio Keith-Orpheum and M.G.M. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) [10]. Located in Hollywood, these big companies will develop their own system (*star system*), which will transform cinematography into an industry.

Consolidated with the purpose to exploit the production in cinematography, these companies became, subsequently, big financial powers; „les cinq grands” (see Fig. 1).

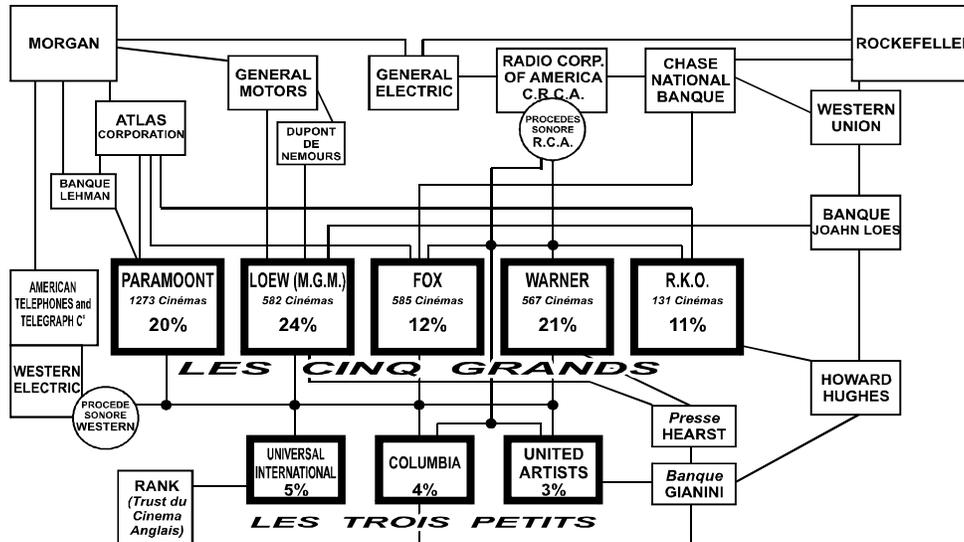


Fig. 1. *Hollywood and the trusts [according to Georges Sadoul, Le cinéma, son art, sa technique, son économie (Paris: La Bibliothèque Française, 1948), p. 39].*

They became known for the strategies they developed in the movie business and also for prestigious adaptations with remarkable distributions and big stars. Besides these companies, which were supported by other industries, too, at Hollywood there were “a lot of small private and independent societies, which make movies for current viewing which « big companies » use as completion movies or movies for « padding »”, as signaled by Charles Ford [6, p. 82].

In historical terms, the appearance and evolution of star system have known unsuspected dimensions. If, at the beginning, the stars appeared in the film industry, today, the notion of star extends to public personalities from politics, music, journalism etc. Besides, it is a current tendency in politics, traditional politic personalities being considered half-stars.

Roger-Gérard Schwartzberg writes, in his work [14], about the existence of three phases of the star system era, which

correspond to three major types of stars and which offer models to both spectators and political leaders. These are presented as follows:

- 1) *The period 1920-1930* (specific to the marmoreal, inaccessible, unique, the idol-myth star);
- 2) *The period 1930-1940* (the imitable model appears, as well as the leader with *charm*);
- 3) *The period 1950-1960* (characterized by the vulgarization of the star, this becoming a pure reflection of the spectator, his duplicate).

The duality *leader* and *star* can be found in the first phase of the star system, as shown by Roger-Gérard Schwartzberg, the political hero being the star of the period 1920-1930, an idol-star with clearly defined attributes (mythical, distant, living emphatically and in luxury). Certainly, the star’s life acquires a less ordinary aspect as well, beyond the limits of human normality.

Using the exact term of Edgar Morin, all “Olympians” take advantage of this duality (stars, champions, but also leaders). Thus, like the star, the leader needs to identify himself by his simplicity, serving as a support for the projection and valorization of the public wishes.

Roger-Gérard Schwartzberg identifies the second phase of the star system in politics: the *model-star* and the *leader with charm*. In the silent movie, the star was distant, considered a god or goddess, namely an idol, but along with the appearance of the sound in movies, the star comes closer to the spectator, becoming a model for the large audience.

Therefore, one can observe the shift from the distant star to the familiar one, mistaken with the *pin-up girl* (an early type of star, characterized by beauty, catwalk skills, but with anonymous status).

Following the *idol-star* and the *model-star*, in the last phase of the star system, the *reflection-star* arises (the political or the movie actor identifies with “us”, that is the common man, becoming an anti-hero, an anti-idol in the sense of his resemblance with everyone).

Many actors fall in this category successfully: Marlon Brando, James Dean, Brigitte Bardot and later, Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino, Jack Nicholson, and Woody Allen, whose performances rank them among the best. Among French actors, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Gérard Depardieu and Patrick Dewaere deserve to be mentioned in this category.

Taking into consideration the three phases of the star system, Roger-Gérard Schwartzberg concludes: “We would naturally say that the reflection-star «demythifies» the star (...), with some revival of the star system, the actors regain their supremacy” [14, p. 144].

3. The Romanian Star System

In the latest years of the media age, the Romanian star system was born and developed, and its effect can be clearly seen in the process of “star transformation” for various social actors, exploited via the TV screen (politicians, entertainers, entertainment moderators etc.).

Quoting the title of the film *Birth of a nation* (directed by David W. Griffith in 1915), considered “the most controversial film of all times” (Will Watson, 2009), the coordinator of the volume *Studies of communication* (2009), Ion Stavre, Ph.D., named his third chapter *Birth of an industry: mass-media from Romania after 1989*.

Ion Stavre starts from some points of reference, “a few newspapers, a television, a public radio, a news agency” [15, p. 24] in order to demonstrate the directions of development of the media industry in Romania.

“To understand how mass-media in Romania works”, Ion Stavre points out, “we must go back to 1989 and watch how the four branches of government were transformed: political power, economic power, coercive power (power of the uniforms, in general) and symbolic power” [15]. It is certain that symbolic power (Media) had a spectacular evolution, being able to unite gradually, jumping over “a historical period covered by the Western press, the era of the great professional freedom” [15, p. 25].

The star system was “an invention equivalent, in the social area, if you like, to what the discovery of the steam engine meant for the technical field” [1], is Ion Barna’s opinion.

4. Conclusions

Practiced in Hollywood, the “institution of the star”, as Charles Ford called it then, can be seen today as an imposing institution that has acquired clearly visible dimensions, the transformation of the ordinary person in a star becoming more or less trivial at present. Moreover, the star remains a specific product of capitalism, appeared due to “profound anthropological needs expressed in the terms of myth and religion” [11, p. 99]. As the sociologist Richard Dyer wrote, the stars are produced by media industries, and the film stars are produced by Hollywood and by other agencies, connected in various ways and in various degrees of influence.

In Richard de Cordova’s view, the appearance of star system can be best seen as an instance of knowledge and analyzed as such on one hand, and, on the other hand, its development has resulted in three significant changes: the discourse in acting, the image of personality and the star.

Nowadays, the meaning of this expression (“star system”) has expanded from the promotion of the star image on the screen, whose life was highly expressed in the past, to the designation of a common behaviour, specific to the individuals in society [4, p. 43].

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