

Entrepreneurship and Management in Early American and French Cinemas. Comparative Study

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Abstract: *The article is a research on the question of why American film entrepreneurship had a much higher success rate than even the birthplace of cinema, France. The financial investment and the production work, regardless under what name and to what extent was done, gave birth on the one hand to the star system, the studio system and the box office, while the country that gave us the forerunner of the documentary film – Lumière, and the first fictional director of the film world – Méliès, remained, for a while, behind. The industry had to deliver a salable product – the film, a product that, in turn, had to develop a prosperous industry under the seal of a judicious relationship between profitability and profit. The paper aims to present why alliances made in the US (between major producers, with major American industries, with major banks of the time) led – in economic terms – to much more than what happened in France, a country whose film industry seemed, less than thirty years after its birth, already worn out. The results of the undertaken documentation and research are presented in this article.*

Keywords: *French cinema, American cinema, entrepreneurship, management, film industry, first cinema production companies, Nickleodeon, studio system, star system, box office, film d'auteur.*

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Entrepreneurship, according to all financial glossaries – the sum of all known definitions, is a process that consists in identifying and pursuing business opportunities, in order to capitalize on them.

Starting from the idea that an entrepreneur runs a business, he or she, according to the market economy, is an economic agent with an active, innovative and visionary behavior that deliberately accepts financial risks in order to develop new projects. Joseph Schumpeter, considered by some to be a genius in economics in the twentieth century, believed that in entrepreneurship the notion of behavior means initiative, organization and reorganization of socio-economic mechanisms and acceptance of risk and failure.

Management – from the Latin *Magnum agere/to lead by hand* – is the art of achieving something with others according to the definition given by Marry Follet. That is why *management* is the organizational function that ensures the efficient development of activities and that aims to achieve the maximum level of results through the optimal use of resources. The resources that a manager has at his disposal are time, talent, financial resources and human resources.

If the *product* is the material good resulting from a work process – all objects and goods obtained in the production process and its administration involve development tactics and strategies that lead to increased *demand* for the respective product during its life cycle, and if the *industry* is a branch of national production and of the national economy which comprises all enterprises engaged in the production of work tools, the extraction of raw materials, materials and fuels and the further processing of resulted products, then *entrepreneurship*, *management*, *product*, *industry* are the quintessential terms to apply at the time of the birth of cinema, but also soon after, in the first years of the existence of film production, both in the USA and in other European countries.

The subject of this article is to relate these terms in American cinema to, say, the forefront of European cinema, France. Of course, France did not represent all of Europe, but in those years, at the end of the 19th century, it represented the technical and cultural space that gave cinema to the world. Therefore, we aim to explain how initially a simple product subject to marketing – film – came to America as the ultimate product of entertainment – *box office film*, while, on the other side, in France, it developed, of course with exceptions, another line – *the art film*, a product not subject to commercial rigors, to that recipe imposed across the ocean. The article will try to make readers understand how an industry just born – cinema – determined two totally different types of financial reactions which, each in its own way, determined a different cinema state, influencing through commercial and artistic criteria the perception area of the cinema art. The reader is encouraged to understand how the American cinema of 1895-1927 led, through a formidable entrepreneurial commitment, to what was later called the *Golden Years of Hollywood – 1927-1947* (according to other sources until the late '50s) while at the same time in Europe, more precisely in France, the managerial (not entrepreneurial) construction of the film (up to the limits of the appearance of sound) led to a certain crisis of the cinema product – as a relationship between supply

and demand –, crisis solved only in the 50s, with the appearance of the *New French Wave*. I will try to explain why American entrepreneurship had a much higher success rate than even the country that gave birth to the cinema, France. The reader will hopefully understand to what extent the financial investment and the production work itself, no matter what it would be called and to what extent it was done, gave birth to the *star system*, *studio system* and *box office* while the country that gave us the forerunner of the documentary film – Lumière, and the first fictional director of the film world – Méliès, was left, for a while, many steps behind. Because an industry, namely the film industry had to deliver the salable product – the film, product, which, in turn, had to develop a prosperous industry under the seal of a judicious relationship between profitability and profit.

After finishing the paper, readers should be able to understand why the alliances made in the USA (alliances between big producers, alliances with the big American industries, alliances with the important banks of the time) led – in economic terms – to something greater than what happened in France, the country whose cinematography seemed, less than thirty years after its birth, already tired. Tired to the limit of what *a surplus of value* means, be it *absolute* or *relative*.

First, let's talk about the French film industry. Without trying to draw a history of the beginnings of French film, let's emphasize from the beginning the importance of the four big names to which French cinema (and not only) must be grateful: the Lumière Brothers, George Méliès, Gaumont and Pathé. From the beginning, we must emphasize that all of them are born in France. (it will be later discussed, how, paradoxically, another film company – less budgeted and with less commercial visibility – *Film d'Art*, will influence, from a certain point of view, the French cinema in the '20s -'40s much more than the first four names listed).

Louis Lumière is the first, the one who animates photography using a device (for filming and for projection) called cinema. This invention was the materialization of a dream: that, after photography was invented somewhere in the 30s and 40s of the nineteenth century (by the French Joseph Nicéphore Niepce and Louis Daguerre), the movement of the image should be the next step. Therefore, cinema simply appeared not only as a technical invention, but also as a curiosity. In fact, the Lumière brothers owned a company that dealt exclusively with technical research projects. The *cinema* was such an invention (among other inventions). Through this invention, the world was discovered through motion. Consequently, shortly after this was done, Louis Lumière developed a network of operators who went all over the world to film... images so that they could later be projected in front of an increasingly large audience, more and more curious, more and more numerous... Obviously Lumière understood the nature of his discovery. What he did not understand was its phenomenon. When Méliès asked Antoine Lumière to sell him the patent for the cinema, the industrialist is said to have told him: "The invention is not for sale. To you it will be a ruin. The cinema can be exploited for some time as a scientific curiosity. But other than that, it has no future." (Legrand, 1992, p. 45).

Méliès is a magician, and in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century the number of theaters in which illusionism, magic, and conjuring were practiced, in relation to the number of cinemas, was in favor of the former. The *Robert-Houdin* Theater was one of the theaters of this kind in Paris. Here the master presented his complicated numbers of illusionism. The appearance of the film determined him to turn towards cinema to diversify and intensify his magic numbers. He soon started making movies. In 1897 he moved to Montreuil, a property he already owned, and built over an existing barn a film studio made entirely of glass and oriented so that it had more light. Here he will give life to his film dream worlds, from which the *A Trip to the Moon* (*Le voyage dans la lune*) made in 1902 stands out. Here, in Montreuil, he made all his films that later helped him to be regarded as the first film director in the history of cinema.



Méliès Montreuil Studio

(@https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_Méliès_filmography#/media/File:Melies's_Montreuil_studio.jpg, see also John Frazer, *Artificially Arranged Scenes: The Films of Georges Méliès* [Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1979], p. 42)

Like the Lumière brothers, **Leon Gaumont** was also an inventor. Passionate about photography, he sold cameras, but starting 1895 he goes in the film business. He made his first productions in the company of Alice Guy-Blache – considered by some historians to be the world's first female director (and later the studio's production director until 1907) and began to exploit them. The same year, he founded the *Gaumont Film Company*, which became responsible for a large part of the films made in France, together with the Pathé company. Note that this company is the oldest film company in the world born before other studios such as: *Pathé* (1896), *Nordisk Film* (Sweden, 1896), *Paramount* (USA, 1912),

Universal (USA, 1912) etc. In 1906 the company had a capital of 2,500,000 francs, money that is invested in the production of photo and video cameras and projectors. Profit is reinvested in film production. We should also add that, in order to better distribute his films, Gaumont builds Palace Clichy – a huge projection hall that could accommodate 4,000 spectators. Also, between 1905-1914 the Cite Elge studios were built in the town of La Villette, considered at that time the largest film studios in the world. *Gaumont's* three directors – Alice Guy, Louis Feuillade and Leonce Perret – all emigrated to America after 1914.

The *Pathè Freres* (Pathè Brothers) company was founded a year after Gaumont, 1907, by the four brothers – Charles, Emile, Theophile and Jacques Pathè. As early as 1894, Charles Pathè opened a gramophone store and set up a phonograph factory near Paris. Following its success, he also expanded into the film business, selling mainly film equipment. In 1902 he acquired the Lumière brothers' patents and built a small studio for his own films. In the first years after 1900, they opened 200 cinemas in France and later expanded to Europe, the USA, Australia and Japan. Note that in 1910, the first Pathè film made in America appeared: *The Girl from Montana*. One thing is clear: perhaps more than film productions, *Pathè* also dominated the European camera and projector market in those years. And from there, the movie market...

ECLAIRE is the name of the *youngest* French production company of the time. It appeared in 1907 under the leadership of Charles Jourjon. It will soon open branches in London, Madrid, Barcelona. The devastating fire in some of its studios in New-Jersey will cause major damage. It will last on the market for a while, but far below the revenues of Gaumont or Pathè.

Le Film d'Art is a company or, rather, a production company founded by a significant number of artists of the French Comedy – authors, actors, but also directors, meant to give – at first to French cinema, and then to the universal cinema – a certain aesthetic and cultural dignity separating it from the fairgrounds, an orientation that appeared immediately from the dawn of cinema. This type of cinema will undoubtedly remain a branch of theatre since most films were *transpositions* of plays on the cinema screen. Of course, the appeal made to writers such as Corneille, Racine, Moliere and the great actors of the time, the coherent stories, in a much superior cut, the theatrical language of the actors etc. led the film to cinematic elaborations far removed from the schemes of the past, far beyond fairground entertainment. Thus, through the infusion of literary substance, a cerebral, cultural and emotional cinema was born. Art film was born through management.

It was this type of cinema that aroused the enthusiasm of the American Griffith or the Danish Dreyer. But this very orientation will betray the French cinema from the point of view of a certain *box office*. The French film will move away from an audience that was poorer, but bigger, in favor of a much more spiritualized one, but certainly less numerous.

Let's see now what the situation was in the United States. In 1894, a year before the appearance of Lumière's cinema, Edison Studios was born, a production company

belonging to the inventor and entrepreneur – perhaps truly the first entrepreneur in the film industry – Thomas Edison. It later became the Edison Manufacturing Company. It will disappear in 1918, leaving behind over 1200 short films and 54 feature films. Note that Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is made here – *Biograph Company* is born in 1895, becoming an active company until 1916. It was the first American company (founded by the Scottish emigrant William Kennedy Dickson, the inventor of the 35 mm film) which produced and broadcasted films (over 3000 short films and 12 feature films). It was later the *production house* of David Wark Griffith, Mary Pickford, Lilian Gish, and 14 years later, in 1909 - the *Independent Moving Pictures Company* (IMP) was born with Carl Laemmle as president.

Adolph Zukor, in partnership with the Frohman brothers, famous theatre agents, founded the *Famous Player Film Company* in 1912.

In the same year, *Universal Studios* was founded by the German Carl Laemmle and Pat Powers, but also *Paramount Pictures*, founded in Los Angeles by Adolph Zukor, William Wadsworth and Jesse L. Lasky.

The year 1912 adds two more entrepreneurial events: *Universal Manufacturing Corporation* is born from *Mutual Film Corporation* and a few smaller companies. And also at that time, *Mutual Film Corporation* (consisting of several businessmen led by Harry E. Aitken) is born, which will later be absorbed (1918) by *Film Booking Offices* which in turn will become *RKO Pictures*. Let's just remember that the famous *Keystone* movies will be born here, and Charlie Chaplin will also produce one of the most wonderful comic series here.



Warner Bros. First National Studios (©www.alamy.com)

Four years later, *Zukor's Famous Players Film Company* and *Jesse L. Lasky Features Play Company* formed the *Famous Players-Lasky Corporation*, a company that survived the American industry until 1933.

In 1917, *First National Exhibitor's Circuit Inc.* was born, consisting of several companies that owned cinemas, which will soon become the largest chain of cinemas. The company was reincorporated two years later into *Associated First National Theaters Inc* and *Associated First National Pictures Inc.*, becoming a major studio in the Hollywood film industry. In 1928 the control of this company passed under the leadership of Warner Bros.

The Warner brothers (Jack, Harry, Albert, Sam – Jewish Poles) created in 1918 the *Warner Bros.* studio, the third largest American studio after *Paramount Pictures* and *Universal Studios*, both born, as we have seen, in 1912.

A year later, in 1919, the *United Artists Corporation* was born, made up of the legendary David Wark Griffith, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin. In 1920, Louis B. Mayer forms *L.B. Mayer Production Inc.* with a capital of 5 million dollars.

Between 1922 and the dawn of the arrival of film sound, several entrepreneurial events took place. Thus, big companies such as Fox, Paramount, United Artists, Goldwin, First National create the *Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association* which will be led by tycoon Will H. Hays. The purpose of this vast merger was to promote the interest of the film industry and to raise the moral, professional and aesthetic standards of cinema. In 1927, after breaking away from *Famous Players Lasky*, Cecille B. De Mille became head of the *Producers Distributing Corporation* alongside Jeremiah Milbank. A year later, RKO Radio Pictures formed the *Keith-Albee-Orpheum Corporation* and *Film Booking Offices of America* and was chaired by Belarusian emigrant David Sarnoff. Studios that were famous for their series of musical films (starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire), for the hosted films starring Robert Mitchum and Cary Grant, for *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *It's a wonderful life* (1946), later noir films, etc.

We were talking above about the fact that on the French territory the whole pleiad of producers, directors, but also actors, were largely French citizens and only tangentially we could talk about collaborations with film professionals from other countries. It was the French who went to other cinemas. And this starting with Lumière's operators and ending, for the period we are referring to, with the Pathè brothers (culminating with the company's first film made in America, *The Girl from Montana*). The next ones are Ferdinand Zecca, Max Linder and a whole host of directors belonging mainly to Film d'Art - Maurice Tourneur, Leonce Perret and Emile Chautard who will form a true French colony in Hollywood spreading the healthy principles of the aesthetics of the *art film* company. Instead, we will not find major names in American cinema present in France, of course outside of film marketing.

The American cinema was born through the overwhelming contribution of immigrants from all over the world. Without immigrants – producers, directors, actors, but also consumers, American cinema would not have looked like it does today. The village

around which the great Hollywood will be born, located south of Los Angeles, already had, in 1900, according to stories, a post office, a newspaper, a hotel and two shops.

Here is another story: It is said that an entrepreneur named H.J. Whitley was on his honeymoon, around 1886. On one of the hills in the area he saw an Indian carrying wood with a cart. More or less as a joke he asked him what he was doing. The man is said to have answered, *I holly-wood*, with the meaning of *hauling wood*. As a revelation, Whitley decided that the area he wanted to buy should be called Hollywood, *holly* representing England, and *wood* being the treasure of Scotland.

Warner brothers, Albert Zukor, Louis B. Mayer, William Fox, Lewis Selznick and many other producers or artists, let's not forget Chaplin and, why not, the formidable jazzman Al Jolson, character of the first sound film *The Jazz Singer* (1927), came to the United States from Europe. Most came with the wave of immigrants from 1900 from Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Hungary. Of course, as the years passed this wave was joined by other European producers or filmmakers who were expelled with the outbreak of the First World War. Here, with the birth of cinema, with the growing popularity of film – at that time only the *Biograph* company (1895) was dominant on the market and was extremely popular throughout the American territory – more and more people were interested in cinema. Making movies was becoming a business. A business that demanded entrepreneurial scope. All these names we are talking about, and many others, have done pioneering work, an entrepreneurship with a certain visionary value.

Through vision, courage, openness, intuition, work and, of course, dollars, many dollars, they invented (only entrepreneurs invent!) a product called film spectacle. A product that people seemed to need more and more. Of course, each company, among those listed (and many others not named here), had its own path, rise and development given by the circumstances of the time. Apart from *Biograph* and Edison's company, all the other major companies were born after 1910, after their presence in a single region led to the official birth of Hollywood. In fact, in 1910, the town of Los Angeles annexed Hollywood, encouraging and allowing the establishment of large companies and huge investments in the film industry. As a curiosity, in 1921, more than 80% of the film industry was located in L.A. It is said that L.A. was one of the few American cities that did not violently feel the economic crisis of the 1930s because of the film industry and the huge financial resources that came from it. The mild climate, extremely clear and long-lasting light, the city's opportunities (banks, booming oil industry, prosperous businesses, massive real estate investments, the numerous railroad junctions that connected this region with the rest of America) turned the place into a true El Dorado that many wanted to reach as soon as they passed the gates of Ellis Island, an island that since 1892 became a symbol of American immigration and the starting point of what became *the American dream*.

European filmmakers turned to America both because of the security and freedom that Europe did not provide, and because of the rigors of the American production system, laws and professional rigors that America had developed before Europe.

It's time to take the first entrepreneurial steps in the history of cinema. Let's remember nickelodeons. Historian Georges Sadoul argues in his history of cinema:

In 1905, in Pittsburg, the capital of the Pennsylvania mining district, Harry P. Davis and John P. Harris, event organizers and property agents, rented a shop in a popular neighbourhood to present the film *The Great Train Robbery*. Soon, assaulted by the working public, this hall will have to give permanent performances, from 8 in the morning until 12 at night, each session lasting about half an hour. This Pittsburgh shack had a cinema-like importance comparable to that of the golden nugget found in 1847 by Johann Sutter near San Francisco. It signaled the chase after – not after gold, but after... nickel. For nickel is in America the name given to the five-cent piece, the modest price of entry into the new theatres. When, after the success in Pittsburg, these enterprises multiplied, they were called Nickel Odeons. The single price of admission to the film had been set at a very low rate, but the proceeds were immediately enormous, for a very small capital investment. Nickelodeons recruited their clientele from the neediest sections of society, especially among immigrants who at that time landed in the United States at a rate of over one million per year. These crowds did not know English. Most came from Central Europe. The theatre was of no interest to them. (Sadoul, 1961, p. 23)

Of course, we also find out that Johann Sutter was a German immigrant, and the two innovators of the nickelodeons were also European immigrants. Pittsburg, the city on the East coast of the United States, proved to be the second largest gateway for the less privileged to America, becoming, through the level of those that remained in the various services offered, one of the most cosmopolitan places in the world. A real linguistic Babylon. Most of them did not know English, and in the fairs of the city you could hear all the languages of the Earth. Silent, nickel-priced film screenings spoke their language. The visual, devoid of the spoken sound, spread universal stories in front of them: adultery, love, betrayal, friendship, sadness, joy etc. They all understood these stories regardless of nation, ethnicity or race. These nickelodeons offered immigrants salvation by integrating them into a unique system of existence. We can say that, at least until around 1927, the year of the appearance of sound, the silence in movies was in fact the universal language of American cinema. And hence its rescue for a long time. The French cinema belonged to the French. The German one, to the Germans. And the Italian, to the Italians. The American cinema belonged to the world. This explains its formidable development, far superior (up to a certain date) to European cinema. Those who saw these films, and there were many, with an enterprising, heroic, visionary spirit, intuited that this world of film was, as I said before, a business. They immediately found out about the West Coast with that Hollywood El Dorado and went there. Sadoul is right: the pursuit of gold actually meant the pursuit of cinema. And tens of thousands went, some even on foot, to the sunny coasts of California, America's last stronghold, beyond which there was nothing left. Maybe just the Pacific...

Charlie Chaplin talks about a meeting with the fabulous character of Scottish origin, Sir Thomas Johnstone Lipton, the creator of the Lipton tea brand. Chaplin will tell him:

“Lipton, you came to America and you succeeded... so did I. I got here for the first time on a cattle ship. And then I said to myself: Next time I will come with my own yacht!” (Chaplin, 1973, p. 454) – typical entrepreneurial thinking!

We were saying that the beginnings of American and French cinema contained those germs of development on different tendencies. We also mentioned that at the time the foundations are being laid for the entry of American cinema on the classic line, that of the Golden Age of Hollywood, but at the same time, we can see the successive crises of French cinema after the 1930s, crises partially solved in the 1950s. the years of setting up what was called the *film d'auteur* – the *New French Wave*. However, from this moment on, the two cinemas went one alongside each other, influencing each other. We say this because at that moment the visionary meeting between the two titans of the universal film, Francois Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock takes place. The consequences will be huge.

Before moving on, let's say, from what we previously observed, that the pioneers of American film are entrepreneurs (they practically took it from scratch by planting the cinema on a no man's land called Hollywood), while, interestingly, French cinema was never under the seal of entrepreneurship but only under that of management. If we research the development of French cinema infrastructure, we notice, from concrete examples called *Lumière*, *Méliès*, *Gaumont*, *Pathè* etc., that it has risen on something pre-existing, on something that requires organization, planning, profitability, aspects belonging to management. Let's give two examples: Méliès' cinema was born in a theatre. Access towards film was a managerial upgrade. Chaplin's cinema (also a man of the theatre) was born on sets built on location or improvised locations and was therefore born from nothing but his instinct as a brilliant entrepreneur (see his confessions from the book *My Life in Pictures* or Lilian Gish's observations from *The movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me*). And the examples can go on.

Nickelodeon, a huge entrepreneurial phenomenon, eventually led to the birth of what was later called *studio system* and *star system*. While French theatre influenced the philosophy of French film (with all that meant: from actors to repertoire) pushing it, to a large extent, even before *film d'auteur*, towards a kind of intellectualism and culturalism from which, fortunately, it has yet to detach from.

Thomas Harper Ince lived only 44 years and was not only the pioneer of American film but, perhaps, as a silent film producer, director, screenwriter and actor, he was the first filmmaker in the true sense of the word. Being responsible for over 800 western films, he simply invented what we call movie production and, moreover, initiated the *assembly line* process by strongly emphasizing the huge role of the production process, as it is known today, even inventing trades without which a film would have been impossible to make, from drafting estimates to casting, organizing the production department, the departments that build the film – set design, cinematography, post-production. He was the first, and even before the birth of Hollywood, he set up film sets in Pasadena, he was the one who thought

of film as a product with everything that meant the laws of its sale. In this sense, he greatly influenced David Wark Griffith, with whom he collaborated for a short time.

Of course, Ince's work was later known and taken over by all the great moguls in Hollywood. It is said that Ince also printed textbooks in this regard, as well as the first surrogate cutouts. With a thorough preparation you could easily reach the end of a film, with low costs and high productivity. Basically, Ince placed cinema, from the first years, on a professional level.

As we have seen, the arrival of businessmen such as the future creators of large film production companies led to the expected recovery in American cinema. Through Ince and then through Griffith we came to the answer the question of how to make a film. Before that, they had to answer another much more burning question: how to build a company, especially since all these immigrants had no knowledge of cinema when they left Europe. Everything was built from scratch – perhaps the maximum definition of what is called entrepreneurship.

Here is how the conclusion of this research can be briefly structured:

- Entrepreneurship results of Hollywood producers: *star system*, *studio system* and *box office*.
- The result of the management of the French producers: *the art film*.

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