

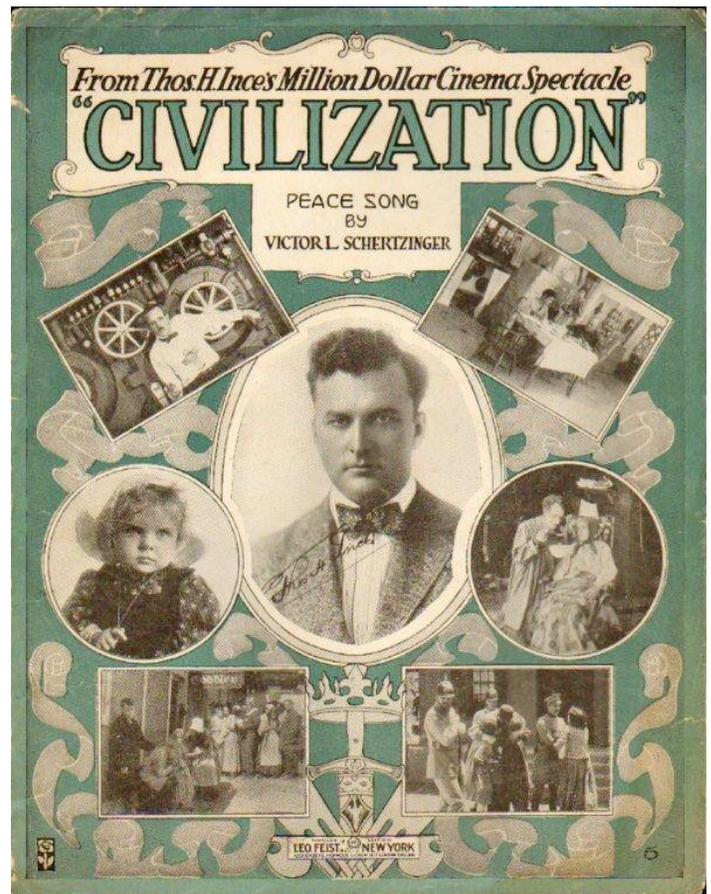
Civilization

By Brian Taves

Echoes of Biblical teachings were prominent in the filmmaking of Thomas H. Ince, as he recognized its resonance with audiences of his time. This was most prominently the case with “Civilization” (initially titled “He Who Returned”), which had a simple but sweeping purpose encapsulated by a one newspaper headline: “Aims Film to Shorten Life of War—Thomas Ince Contends Great Movie Spectacle ‘Civilization’ Is Excellent Peace Argument.” This was a time when the United States struggled to remain neutral and avoid becoming involved in the conflict that had engulfed Europe.

“Civilization” was directed by a team in 1915, and released in April 1916, and even before the public saw it, Ince arranged a viewing by President Wilson and his cabinet, and sent another print to the Pope. Although advertised as a million dollar spectacle, that was closer to its box-office return of \$800,000; “Civilization” actually cost approximately \$100,000. After the opening in Los Angeles in April, lack of anticipated business prompted additional recutting and new scenes shot before the New York premiere. Not only a “Peace Song,” but also a march, both composed by Victor Schertzinger, were issued as accompanying sheet music. For British release (since England was at war), “Civilization” was recut and scenes added to give it a patriotic flavor, and it was retitled “Civilization,” Or “What Every True Britain is Fighting For.” Once the United States joined the war in 1917, Ince would again revise “Civilization” to bring it up to date. The movie was given a formal theatrical reissue at least as late as 1930.

While probably Ince's single most famous film, it violated one of his tenets. “I have learned, too, that there is a certain type of play that the public loudly demands, but never pays to see. In this class may be placed the allegorical, the symbolical, the diabolical, and those pictures which are so obviously moral that they cease to be interesting.” Yet Ince described “Civilization” as an illustrated editorial several years ahead of its time. While achieving lasting recognition, “Civilization” has often been derided in subsequent years for such sentiments as the conclusion by the king portrayed in the film, who concludes, “During my reign it is my command that my subjects enjoy peace and good will.” However, “Civilization” must be considered in the context of the time in which it was made; President Wilson would run for re-election in 1916 on the slogan, “He kept us out of war.”



Sheet music for Victor Schertzinger's "Peace Song" which is featured in the film.

Even as Americans were dismayed at the war's slaughter in Europe, the sinking of the British passenger liner *Lusitania* in 1915, which resulted in the drowning of 100 Americans, nearly goaded the United States into participation. The event signaled the increasingly antagonistic attitude toward Germany for quickly adopting submarine warfare to blockade the Allies. Underwater vessels became a popular motion picture topic, appearing in other Ince productions, and it is crucial in “Civilization,” accurately depicting the German motivation, to sink surface ships carried war supplies, as well the appalling consequences in loss of life.

“Civilization” opens in a mythical European nation, where the king (Herschell Mayall) leads his eager people to war, in the name of conquest, disregarding the pacifists who lament his abandoning Christ's teachings. “Photoplay Magazine” noted, “In the background are the deserted forge, the invalid mother, the tearful children, the shepherdless flocks, swiftly and graphically suggested in such juxtaposition that when the crash and flame of explosions leave the field strewn with bodies” A count (Howard Hickman) is the inventor of a deadly submarine and

is sent into combat, compelling him to leave his fiancée, despite protesting the conflict because of his Christian convictions. Given the order to sink a passenger liner carrying war material, the count complies, but it changes him. When he is rescued he is taken over by the spirit of Christ (George Fisher). The count leads the nation in protest, and the fearful king, a “modern Pilate,” orders him tried. But the count dies before execution, and Christ’s spirit leaves his body to show the king the true cost of war with death and starvation. The king also learns that he is condemned for the misery he has caused. Outside the palace, the crowds pray for an end to fighting, and the king finally acquiesces to peace at any price.

The antagonists seem Teutonic, with spiked helmets and upturned moustaches, yet the capitol building of the country is also a domed structure clearly modeled on the United States Capitol; Ince seems to be indicating that warlike actions may well spring up in America. “Photoplay Magazine” added, “True, it all might happen to us, or to any other nation . . .” In the final sequence, the soldiers return home and reunite with their families. As the intertitle notes, “The blare of the war bugle has died and in its place we hear the note of the shepherd’s horn.”

Ince’s movies relating to World War I clearly reveal the evolution of his own feelings about the conflict, paralleling broad American sentiment. Like “Civilization,” Ince’s very first picture relating to the war, “The Despoiler” (1915), also had a pacifist tone. After seizing an enemy town, a colonel dreams

that the local women, seeking refuge in an abbey, become exploited for sexual and strategic purpose in the conflict, and upon awakening decides to pull back his forces. In “Three of Many” (1916), an Italian wins the hand of a fellow countrywoman over an Austrian friend. However, when war comes they are on opposite sides, and the woman, becoming a nurse in Italy, is captured and nearly raped by the brutalized Austrian. When the Italians retake the town, her husband allows his old friend to escape, and forgiveness prevails. The lack of propaganda and hesitancy to take sides continued in 1917, with “The Zeppelin’s Last Raid,” intended as a companion piece to “Civilization.” The airship’s commander turns against the Kaiser and joins a revolutionary movement, refusing to allow his men to bomb a British town, ultimately sacrificing himself by destroying the Zeppelin. Collectively, these movies represent an effort to articulate reasons to stay out of the conflict, until events demanding an American response gradually made a shift in attitude necessary, culminating in the declaration of war on April 6, 1917.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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