

MIT Student  
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Film Notes: *The Crowd*

The director of *The Crowd* is King Vidor. The film is not set in a specific year, but rather follows the life of a man named John Sims who was born on July 4, 1900. The film was released in 1928. After John turns 21 years old, he moves to New York City and establishes his life there. The film appeared to be shot on location as well as on sound stages for the interior scenes.

Five adjectives or phrases that describe the sense of the city portrayed on the film: aesthetically balanced with lots of towering skyscrapers and harshly outlined rectangle motif, anonymous, imposing and impersonal (balanced with a very personal narrative arc), dream-like (the two main characters' first date at the fair), but also nightmare-inducing (the terror of the Individual being swallowed up by the city).

I suppose the Sims' house and the furniture arrangement was a result of their less-than-ideal financial situation, but I thought the fold-up bed and sliding kitchen cabinets were memorable touches in the production design. It gave a sense of the family's frugality but also fit the main character's whimsical personality. The space-consciousness with which the Sims' lived their life was in direct contrast to the romanticized and grand way the director portrayed downtown NYC.

It was nice to finally see a non-urban environment portrayed on film (the romantic Niagara Falls hike, the beach excursion with the whole family). However, the naturalism scenes jarred with the almost science fiction-level spookiness with which Vidor panned *up* the skyscraper before the camera "phased" through a window and into John Sims' office to show the drudgery and anonymity of his work.

One remarkable scene was the montage where Vidor showed crowds of people and cars navigating through the streets. I remember the illusion caused by the double exposure where it looked like people were walking *through* the traffic until the camera drifted slightly to the right and it revealed that the people were merely reflected by the pane of a streetlamp. It really encapsulated Vidor's sense of individuals intersecting and interacting only on a superficial level, unconsciously forming anonymous crowds that ebbed and flowed through the concrete structures of the city. In John Sims, Vidor suggests that each individual within the crowd has his or her own story to tell and has their own emotional inner life that does not typically manifest in the public spaces of the city (that is, unless an extreme tragic accident occurs, like your young daughter getting run over by a truck when you were trying to give her a present that was bought with a \$500 raise).

Questions I would like to discuss in class: Do you think Vidor's point about "the crowd" would have been more effective if he had focused on multiple individuals trying to get by in the city, instead of just telling the story of John Sims? Is it important that we started the film in 1900 to witness John Sims' birth before jumping to a brief childhood scene and then immediately skipping to when he turned 21? I thought Sims' father's insistence that he "be somebody" only gave him illusions of grandeur that made him selfish and delusional, and obviously made his wife unhappy. Though I suppose this really drives home the idea that John Sims is an artistic soul who really shouldn't be wasting his life away at a desk job where he doesn't seek any fulfillment. At least his wife's eventual acceptance of his way of life ends the film on a positive note.

I thought the scenes that were explicitly focused on The City itself that Vidor filmed looked very similar to the ones in *Berlin*. Both directors reinforced the idea of the unnaturalness of urban dwelling, and the way people unconsciously adapt their personalities into mindless obedience in response to greater and more intricately organized way of life.

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