



## The Crowd

**Brian Wilson**

To cite this article: Brian Wilson (2010) The Crowd, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 27:5, 364-365, DOI: [10.1080/10509208.2010.494542](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2010.494542)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2010.494542>



Published online: 04 Oct 2010.



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opens with fireworks and a Ferris wheel as Otto Heller's camera tracks through the crowd at a carnival. As is so often the case, carnival can be read as offering either a disruption of, or a liberation from, life's quotidian realities. In this case, and the motif is developed with wit and realist detail, it will certainly portend both, epitomised in, but not confined to the person of Camilia who both opens a sensual door in Mallinson's life and almost shuts a moral one.

Comfort had won a bravura performance from Robert Newton in his version of A.J. Cronin's melodramatic bestseller, *Hatter's Castle* (1941). In *Temptation Harbour*, he restrains Newton's characteristically flamboyant persona in the interests of carrying the dramatic weight of a story of an ordinary man faced with extraordinary temptation. It is a major achievement for director and star. To be able to see this extraordinary film on DVD would be a fitting testament to Comfort's work as a director, as well as a welcome addition to the current slate of classic British films now available on DVD, but there are many more that need similar resurrection. Let's hope they get it.

Brian McFarlane is Adjunct Associate Professor at Monash University, Melbourne. He has written widely on adaptation and on British film and is the author of *Lance Comfort* (Manchester University Press, 1999) and is editor, compiler and chief author of *The Encyclopaedia of British Film* (Methuen, London, 2003[4th edition, 2010])

## *The Crowd*

BRIAN WILSON

*The Crowd* (1928) is not only King Vidor's masterpiece, but also one the greatest achievements of American silent film. Made following the success of *The Big Parade* (1925), it represented Vidor's attempts to utilize his directorial freedom to engage in a more personal type of project. *The Crowd* differed from its Hollywood counterparts in its grim depiction of American life and its lack of a happy ending. But although it lacked escapist tendencies, it offered relevant insight into the era from which it emerged.

Just a year before the stock market crash of 1929 signaled America's entry into the Great Depression, *The Crowd* featured a much darker interpretation of the American dream than that reflected in most films of the period. John Sim's (James Murray) plans for personal success ("My Dad says *I'm goin'* to be somebody big!) reflect the country's blind idealism during the Roaring Twenties. Vidor follows John from his birth on July 4, 1900 and through the major events of his life: moving to the city, getting married, becoming a father. But Vidor also reveals the weakness of the dream that his character pursues. Throughout the film John is continually plagued by crisis, both by his own ineptitude and by forces beyond his control. The enthusiasm and aspirations that he possesses at the beginning of the film ultimately end in his inability to maintain a career, the death of his daughter, and the potential failure of his marriage.

Vidor uses the crowd as both a literal and figurative device. John aspires to seek independence and to make a name for himself, but his actions are always located to some degree within the confines of the crowd. The crowd is also consistently associated with the moments of tragedy that occur throughout the film. We see this from the very beginning of the film, during the scene in which twelve-year old Johnny must walk through a crowd of friends and neighbors to reach his dying father. When John's daughter is hit by a truck while

running across the street, he can barely carry her body back home due to the enormous number of people gathered to watch the event. John finally ends up playing to the crowd as a street clown, an occurrence which sharply contrasts his earlier hostility toward such a lowly position and which is made all the more poignant by an intertitle reading, “the crowd laughs with you always. . .but it will cry with you for only a day.” Vidor ends the film by showing John and his family as being permanently and unavoidably part of the crowd, as the camera tracks across a sea of laughing moviegoers in a dark theater.

While the film’s style largely reflects the realism of its narrative, Vidor also injects bits of highly stylized *mise-en-scène* and camerawork in a manner that reveals his influence from German Expressionist directors such as Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau. When Johnny is forced to confront the death of his father, we see him emerge from the crowd gathered at the bottom of the stairs and move slowly up toward the camera. Vidor uses sharp diagonal lines and shadows within the frame to accentuate the emotional tone of the scene. A later scene introducing John’s workplace uses an overhead tracking shot to move across a sea of identical desks before arriving at the one in which he sits working on a slogan for a newspaper contest. The scene’s use of movement, as well as the geometric form of its subjects, resembles aspects of Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) in its industrial tone.

Despite the fact that *The Crowd* has yet to receive a proper DVD release, it is not an altogether forgotten film. Over the years it has maintained a positive critical reputation, and a strong following among film enthusiasts. It remains both a relevant work of American silent cinema and the product of a director at the height of his career. Along with other important twentieth-century films such as *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström), *The Dawn Patrol* (Howard Hawks, 1930), and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942), it deserves to be made available to a wider audience.

Brian Wilson is a graduate student in Mass Communication and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. His work has appeared in a number of journals, including *Cineaction*, *Film International*, and *Senses of Cinema*.

## *The Prowler*

CHRISTOPHER WEEDMAN

Joseph Losey’s *The Prowler* (1951) is arguably the director’s most caustic film from his brief, five-picture stint in Hollywood before being blacklisted. Produced by Sam Spiegel and John Huston’s Horizon Pictures during the surge of Hollywood independent filmmaking following the Paramount antitrust decision of 1948, this neglected film noir was likely envisioned by the independent company as a modest crime melodrama to help recover its financial losses from Huston’s Cuban revolutionary drama *We Were Strangers* (1949). The ardently left-wing Losey, however, rarely made an innocuous film. Instead of delivering a routine crime melodrama, Losey and his screenwriters Hugo Butler and the uncredited blacklistee Dalton Trumbo, who spent the year prior to the film’s release in federal prison for not cooperating with HUAC’s investigations into Communism in Hollywood, used this conventional genre framework to deliver a subversive attack on the barrenness of the “American Dream” with its blind allegiance to materialism and traditional marital roles during the postwar economic and baby booms occurring in the United States in the early 1950s.