

“What the hell do we get out of this war, anyway?”

## King Vidor’s World War I film *The Big Parade* at 100

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1925 was a notable year for cinema, as it was for art work more generally, an issue we have noted in an appreciation of *The Great Gatsby* and will discuss further in future articles.

The year witnessed the release of—among other films—Sergei Eisenstein’s groundbreaking *Strike* and *The Battleship Potemkin*, *The Gold Rush* by Charlie Chaplin, *Seven Chances* and *Go West* written and directed by Buster Keaton, *Joyless Street* with Greta Garbo and directed by G. W. Pabst, a film adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* directed by Ernst Lubitsch, Erich von Stroheim’s *The Merry Widow*, Jean Renoir’s *The Whirlpool of Fate* and several minor works by John Ford (*Lightnin’, Kentucky Pride, The Fighting Heart, Thank You*), already the director of 50 films!

Another notable work, American director King Vidor’s silent World War I drama *The Big Parade*, was released 100 years ago in November. The movie premiered just a few days before Armistice Day that year, only seven years after the imperialist slaughter had ended. Unlike most previous directors who had tackled this subject, Vidor took a realistic, rather than propagandistic, approach focused on the common soldier.

*The Big Parade* became one of the greatest box office successes of the 1920s and was later preserved in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. Today, as the imperialist powers careen toward a new world war, the film deserves to be considered afresh.

King Vidor was born in Galveston, Texas, in 1894. At that time, the United States was already the world’s leading industrial producer and was poised to become an imperialist power. Vidor’s father was a prosperous lumber importer and mill owner. His grandfather, Károly Vidor, fled Hungary after the failed revolution of 1848 and settled in Galveston. He later fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War.

The catastrophic Galveston hurricane of 1900, which killed thousands of people, was a formative experience for Vidor. At only six years old, he gazed at the wooden buildings the storm had flattened and the dead bodies piled in the streets or floating in Galveston Bay. This trauma seems to have helped orient the future director toward realism and spectacle on a grand scale.

Equally formative was Vidor’s indoctrination into Christian Science by his mother. Christian Science is rooted in the most extreme subjective idealism; its adherents believe that reality is purely spiritual, and the material world an illusion. Sin and illness are “lies” that can be overcome through prayer and understanding God as divine love. American social conditions and the apparently “limitless” scope for capitalist development at the time played a role in the emergence of this voluntarist trend. Pragmatist philosopher William James was interested in Christian Science and what he termed “modern schools of mental therapeutics.” The ability of an individual through will and belief to overcome physical problems suggested to James that “the practical applications of the general

principles of the broadest mental science will tend to prevent disease.”

Religious-philosophical quackery and technological innovation went hand in hand in Vidor’s life and work. Photography and film fascinated him from an early age. He was an amateur photographer as a boy and later worked at a nickelodeon (early movie theater) before becoming a newsreel cameraman. He and a partner founded the Hotex Motion Picture Company in 1914 and moved to Hollywood the following year to find work.

Vidor’s early career took place amid the cataclysm of World War I. The war was fought by rival alliances of imperialist states, each seeking to expand its control of strategic territory and resources at the others’ expense. Waged with new technology such as tanks, machine guns and chemical weapons, the conflict was the deadliest in history to that point. Only the intervention of the working class—in the October 1917 Russian Revolution and a wave of revolutionary struggles throughout Europe—brought the horrific carnage to a halt. The 1914-1918 war was rooted in the structure of world capitalism and marked the opening of the era of imperialism: the epoch of wars and revolutions.

Film executives, unhappy with the realism of Vidor’s early films, like *The Jack Knife Man* (1920), pressured the director to produce movies with broader appeal. Vidor complied by making romances and comedies of manners in the style of Cecil B. DeMille, whom he admired. When his studio went bankrupt in 1922, Vidor hired himself out to top film executives like Louis B. Mayer and Samuel Goldwyn. Though his films of this period were mostly routine, Vidor found themes that he would later develop, such as the vitality of ordinary people and the conflict between the individual and society.

World War I was still a recent memory in the mid-1920s, and economic and political contradictions were already preparing the ground for a new global catastrophe. The US was a rising power experiencing an industrial and financial boom, as well as increasing inequality. Socialist revolutions in Germany and Hungary had been drowned in blood. The *biennio rosso* (“two red years”) had ended in the defeat of the Italian proletariat and the triumph of Mussolini. The Dawes Plan temporarily mitigated a European political crisis by restructuring German reparations to the victors of World War I. The death of Lenin in 1924 was followed by Stalin’s proclamation of the anti-Marxist program of “socialism in one country.”

Against this general backdrop, after making a string of uneven movies, Vidor told MGM producer Irving Thalberg, “If I were to work on something that ... had a chance at long runs ..., I would put much more effort, and love, into its creation,” according to the director’s autobiography *A Tree Is a Tree* (1953). “I wanted it to be the story of a young American who was neither overpatriotic or a pacifist, but who went to war and reacted normally to all the things that happened to him. It

would be the story of the average guy.... He simply goes along for the ride and tries to make the most of each situation as it happens." Thalberg was immediately interested, and *The Big Parade* was born.

At the beginning of the film, we meet Jim Apperson (John Gilbert), the idle son of a wealthy mill owner. Though at first he laughs off the US declaration of war on Germany, he gets caught up in the ensuing wave of public enthusiasm and patriotism. Responding to pressure from his father, his fiancée Justyn (Claire Adams) and his friends, Jim enlists in the army.

Jim is shipped to France and soon finds himself teamed with construction worker "Slim" Jensen (Karl Dane) and bartender "Bull" O'Hara (Tom O'Brien). In the early, lighthearted part of the movie, the three learn the ropes in the army and do a lot of fooling around.

One day, they meet Melisande (Renée Adorée), a French peasant girl. Though they don't speak each other's languages, she and Jim soon fall for each other in a series of affecting scenes. But when Jim gets a letter from Justyn, he becomes dejected. Though heartbroken, Melisande encourages Jim to be faithful to Justyn. Before Jim can act, his unit is ordered to the front. Melisande runs desperately after the truck that carries him off, catches hold of his leg and holds on until she is thrown backward, in tears, into the dusty road.

From this point onward, the movie becomes darker, and the soldiers' surroundings increasingly bleak. The men march along a country road, enter a forest of dead trees and receive orders to cross a barren field, all the while facing machine gun fire and poison gas. Jim, Slim and Bull take cover in a shell hole, share bits of chocolate and try to stay calm. An order to take out a German machine gun nest ultimately breaks up the trio and brings terrible consequences.

Jim is sent home missing half his left leg. His father beams with pride, but Jim is solemn. He greets Justyn, who has been having an affair with his brother, coolly. In private, he confesses his love for Melisande to his mother, who urges him to find her. In the touching final scene, Jim hobbles through a field toward Melisande, and the two embrace.

In its depiction of World War I, *The Big Parade* contrasted sharply with previous films like Rex Ingram's romanticized *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) and the out-and-out propaganda of D. W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World* (1918). Vidor's scenes of warfare are more realistic, if not unsparing. We see many soldiers die after being strafed by an enemy plane or shot by machine gunners. We also see a soldier strapped to a hospital bed, writhing in the throes of what was then called shell shock.

Vidor also gives us a soldier's eye view of the war, all but ignoring the officer caste. His sympathy implicitly lies with the rank and file. Despite including several scenes of large crowds, Vidor mostly keeps the film at a human scale, focusing on the cooperation and conflicts between its main characters.

The film acknowledges the class difference between Jim, on the one hand, and Slim and Bull (and Melisande) on the other, but only insofar as it is evident in their manner. All three soldiers show ability and bravery, and work together as equals. Rather than scorn or suspicion, we see friendship between them. Though Jim is the film's everyman, it was uncommon for wealthy young men like him to fight in the war. The film gives no hint of class conflict.

Of special importance is the film's rejection of nationalism and xenophobia. Jim drags himself into a shell hole to kill the wounded German soldier who has shot him, but when he sees how young and terrified the soldier is, he instead gives him a cigarette — just as he had shared cigarettes and food with Slim and Bull. This scene is a powerful assertion of our common humanity and a repudiation of chauvinist hatred.

Just as valuable, and unusual, is the film's questioning of patriotism and war. In a desperate moment, Jim erupts, "Waiting! Orders! Mud! Blood! Stinking stiffs! What the hell do we get out of this war, anyway?" Vidor implicitly asks who benefits from war, but his own class position and

social outlook prevent him from finding the answer. Capitalism and imperialism go unexamined in the film, and what remains is a petty-bourgeois humanist perspective.

To his credit, Vidor uses certain formal devices adroitly to develop his themes. For example, his decision to follow the soldiers marching through the lifeless forest in a long tracking shot emphasizes the soldiers' endurance and heightens the sense of the danger they face. In this scene, and in scenes of a parade and a hospital ward, a mass of people becomes the subject, underscoring collectivity rather than individuality. And Vidor's alternating between long takes and rapid montage provides a sense of the soldier's experience: long periods of tension or boredom punctuated by bursts of violence and confusion.

Gilbert and Adorée contribute much to the movie. Gilbert's portrayal of Jim is a fine balance: he is neither a hero nor a coward, neither a snob nor a boor, but a man with ordinary human passions and sympathies. He and Adorée provide an affecting depiction of their characters' budding romance and painful separation.

*The Big Parade* won the *Photoplay Magazine* Medal—the most significant American film award before the Oscars—for best film of 1925. Because of the film's critical and commercial success, Vidor quickly supplanted Griffith as the leading "serious" director in Hollywood. He went on to direct significant films such as *The Crowd* (1928), *Hallelujah!* (1929) and *Our Daily Bread* (1934). Like *The Big Parade*, they examine the relationship between the individual and the mass and are grounded in a humanist idealism.

Vidor's limited social critique, his continuing belief in the "better side" of capitalism, bolstered by his intense subjective idealism, prevents *The Big Parade* from developing a deeper criticism of war and patriotism. Nevertheless, the film began a tradition of movies with stronger anti-war messages, such as Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and G. W. Pabst's *Westfront 1918* (1930). This tradition later flowered in excellent films such as Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957).

Vidor remained true to certain feelings about social life in *Stella Dallas* (1937), an intense "mother love" melodrama in which class divisions come to the fore, and *The Citadel* (1938), a medical drama focused on a doctor who becomes seduced by wealth and drifts away from his initial dedication to working class patients. Later, of course, Vidor directed a version of the dreadful novel *The Fountainhead* (1949) by the dreadful Ayn Rand.

Official Hollywood today, for the most part, has bought into the American war drive, through propaganda efforts like *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and others. Such films degrade popular consciousness as the US government presides over genocide in Gaza, plots an invasion of Venezuela and prepares for a cataclysmic war with China. Despite its limitations, *The Big Parade* retains its relevance and artistic significance today.



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