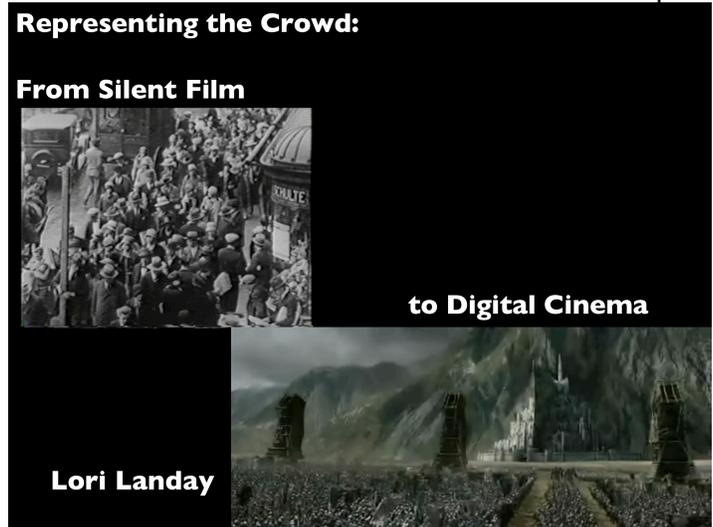


Representing the Crowd:

From Silent Film to Digital Cinema

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Popular culture always acknowledges the crowd, implicitly at least, that it hopes forms its audience. At the same time, American consumer culture privileges individualism. This contradiction has been central from King Vidor's silent masterpiece *The Crowd* to the present. However, now with CGI (computer-generated imagery), the resources it once took to include crowd scenes in a film have shifted from people to data, from matter to digital information. By looking at examples from *The Crowd* (1928), *The Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), this paper argues that the technological changes in representations of the crowd in film reflect and shape transformations in discourses about individualism and mass consumer culture.

In the 1920s, Americans were confronted with their status as part of the crowd of the nascent mass consumer culture, whether they were at amusement parks, in department stores, on the roads, in the cities, or in the movie theaters. At the same time that mass American culture was developing, individualism (or the tragic inability to achieve it) was often a central theme in literature, film, advertising, music, and other popular media. Individualism is always defined as being separate from the crowd, often by being above it or in control of it, sometimes being rejected by it. The narrative paradigms of Classical Hollywood Cinema, which were founded in

the silent era and rose to world-wide prominence in the studio era of the 1930s and 40s, focus on individualism in both content and in visual style; in film after film, the protagonist achieves his or her goals among a backdrop of extras and bit players, who either do nothing heroic or need saving by the hero or heroine.

The popular culture of the 1920s often performed the cultural work of both encouraging participation in the crowd and appeasing its audience's fears about being indistinguishable from the crowd, often by offering the advertised product or by embracing modern styles of dress and mannerisms as the way to either stand out from or fit into the crowd. In these two examples from 20s advertisements, we can see this contradictory impulses expressed.

**COLGATE'S**  
**"HANDY GRIP"**  
**The Refill Shaving Stick**  
*—the waking thought of a million men*

COLGATE'S "Handy Grip" puts convenience and economy into shaving. When your Shaving Stick is worn down to the socket, buy a Colgate "Refill"—for the price of the soap alone. Screwing the "Refill" into the "Handy Grip" is as easy as putting a new blade in a razor. The soap itself is threaded. There is no waste. For extra economy, moisten the bit of soap removed from the "Handy Grip" and press it upon the end of the "Refill." It will stick, giving you a month's extra shaving.

The fragrant, softening lather needs no mussy rubbing in with the fingers. It leaves your face cool and refreshed. We were first to take the rub out of shaving—away back in 1903.

For that luxurious, moist lather that means an easy shave—there's nothing like Colgate's Shaving Stick—and in the "Handy Grip" there's nothing like it for convenience and economy.

*The word "Handy Grip," containing a total size stick of Colgate's Shaving Soap will be used for this. When the stick stick is used up you can buy the Colgate "Refill," threaded in to this Grip. Then you can use the stick "Refill" you buy. There are still there in a Colgate Shaving Stick—handles the easiest you can get from a tube of cream of the same price.*

COLGATE & CO.      Paris, 1928

*She always looks so individual—so herself*  
*Learn the Parisian secret of emphasizing your own style of Beauty—your own true coloring*

*NO matter where you see her, she is the centre of attraction. And it is not because she is unusually beautiful—it is just that she seems to have a style of her own.*

*That is the secret. Simply by accentuating your individuality, your own coloring, you can be distinctive, so that you are not overlooked when in a group.*

*Emphasize your own individuality*

The French woman has learned nature's secret of charm—that one's skin must have tones, perfectly harmonized to be attractive. Knowing, too, how subtly nature has blended the coloring of the skin, the hair, the eyes, she chooses with the utmost care the powder and rouge that blend best with her natural coloring. They must be understated and still bring out the light in her hair and her eyes, making her always a distinct type.

*Study your own coloring*

It is quite natural that the study of skin coloring—of skin textures—has reached its zenith in the century-famed studios of Dorin of Paris—in the heart of France. There, powders and rouges—of exquisite softness and refinement—have been evolved with exact tints for the many types of blondes and brunettes—for the "sulfurine" type (the brown-blondes)—for the Trilin beauty.

These powders and rouges have become so well known by American women—and so much in demand—that they can now be secured in the better drug stores and department stores throughout the states.

There are 10 distinctive rouges and 11 shades of powder, each supplied in 6 sizes from the large boxes size (1 1/2 in.) to the smallest vanity size (1/2 in.). Also a complete line of facial preparations such as eye-brow crayons, lip pencils, etc.

There has been prepared for American women an illustrated booklet, "What Is Your Coloring?" showing exactly which shade of rouge and powder should be used with each type of coloring. Send for it and find your style. Then you will be sure you are using harmonizing lines.

For 25c in stamps or coin, this booklet, together with two miniature sponges (1 1/2 Dorin Powder and Dorin Rouge), will be mailed you. Tell us the color of your eyes, hair, and skin so that we can select the exact shade for you.

Oh for 10c, the booklet and two packages—one of face powder and one of rouge—on order (small powder form) will be sent you. Remember in word description of your coloring.

Address your letter to F. R. ARNOLD & CO., 546 Broadway, 1 West Twenty-second Street, New York.

**DORIN OF PARIS**  
*Poudres Compactes (Lil' Dornes)—Rouges Compactes*

*To be genuine, Dorin Rouges and Poudres made in the U.S.A. must also bear the name F. R. ARNOLD & CO.*

In King Vidor's 1928 silent masterpiece *The Crowd*, the protagonist Johnny Sims imagines he can stand out from the crowd, above it and apart from it, but instead we have scene after scene where he is swallowed up by it. He works in a huge office filled with desks in an insurance company, but he is never able to transcend the crowd.



Even his personal, emotional life is shaped by mass culture; after his first date with Mary, which takes place among the crowds of Coney Island, he proposes to her after seeing an advertisement on the trolley that says, “You furnish the girl; we’ll furnish the home.” Ultimately the only way he can distinguish himself from the crowd is as a clown—literally dressed in a clown suit, juggling on the street, in order to call attention to the advertising sign he wears. Instead of being an advertising man who rises above the crowd by crafting advertisements that manipulate them, he becomes a walking advertisement himself.

The final shot of the film is a curious one. Johnny, Mary and their son are happy, enjoying the comic performance of the slapstick clown and the business man’s antics. The camera cranes up and out, and we move from the intimate moment of our individuals into a sea of rocking, laughing automatons, keening creepily as we fade to black. Just as we were enjoying the individual happiness achieved, perhaps momentarily but hopefully not, by our protagonists, it reminds us of the crowd, reminds us that what feels like individual experience always happens within the context of mass experience.

Technologically, *The Crowd* uses advances in cameras in order to capture the footage of late 1920s Manhattan urban life. In addition to scenes shot in Los Angeles, Vidor shot documentary-style footage of the masses streaming down the sidewalks using hidden cameras on location in the bustling city streets,. Reminiscent of the Lumiere Brothers' *actualities* shot at the beginning of film culture, the real footage provides a powerful context for Johnny Simms' struggles and failures, in part because the real crowd is beyond the scope of what had previously been included in movies.



### **The Crowd (1928)**

As James Sanders writes about Vidor's film in *Celluloid Skylines*:

Seeking to place Sims within the hurly-burly of New York, Vidor hid his camera (and his cameraman, Henry Sharp) in a rubber-tired pushcart stacked high with boxes; the lens, poking through a small hole, was able to photograph Sims walking among the crowds without their knowledge. Though only a few of these shots were used in the final film, they effectively suggest the gradual reduction of Sims's dreams as he confronts the inevitable urban reality of a million other dreams, all vying for greatness. At the same time they catch

the special feeling of the city in this era when crowds of domestic newcomers, seeking success at all costs, re-Americanized and reenergized the place.<sup>1</sup>

In some ways, Vidor's *The Crowd* echoes Fritz Lang's expressionistic film *Metropolis* from a few years earlier. There, too, the crowd is anonymous, engulfing, and dehumanizing, and does in fact become a mob. The genius of Vidor's film, though, is his understanding that yes, millions of other people are doing the same things which may look like mass actions from a certain distance, but literally close-up, those actions have specific personal meanings for the individuals involved. Again and again in the film we move from the crowd, to our protagonists and sometimes back out to the crowd (if not at the end of the scene then in the next scene).

In an essay, "Working the Crowd: Movies and Mass Politics," Michael Tratner critiques theories of film spectatorship based on psychoanalytical psychology because it "treats members of crowds as individuals." For an alternate view of crowds on which to base his crowd response theory, he turns to 1930 Motion Picture Production Code (also known as the Hays Code for the head of the Hollywood Production Code office that wrote and administered the Code), which is an interesting move because the Code is a telling document about public discourse on the effects of movies on "the masses." For example, the Code asserts, "Psychologically, the larger the audience the lower the moral mass resistance to suggestion." Rather than seeing the movie audience as individual spectators who enter into a dreamlike state in the darkened theater (a premise of some theories of spectatorship), the Code imagines the audience as a potential mob.

Tratner argues, "Adapting a term from Louis Althusser, we can say that long shots and in particular crowd shots "interpellate" the large audience directly, creating an image of the kind of crowd that is observing the movie and implying that the crowd should have certain qualities and

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<sup>1</sup>James Sanders, *Celluloid Skylines: New York and the Movies*. New York: Knopf, 2001.

not other qualities. [15] Movies "hail" their audiences as crowds in ways parallel to but distinct from the ways they hail audience members as individuals".<sup>2</sup> The Code and many discourses of collectivism in the twentieth-century are based on the fear that the crowd is a mob, easily swayed by a charismatic leader, unable to assert individualism because individuals are so swept up in the strong feelings of being in the crowd.

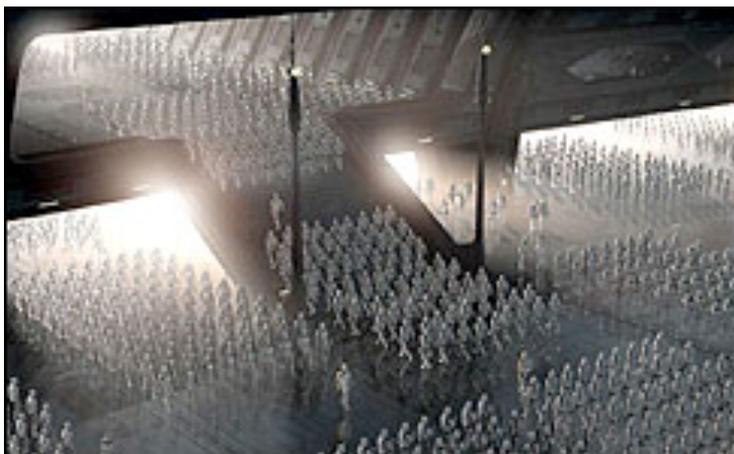
This is what we see dramatized in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Underlying Tratner's argument is the suggestion that Hollywood diverts the fascist and communist dangers of collectivism to capitalism by manipulating the crowd-feeling into individualism; instead of wanting to join with the crowd, the spectator identifies with the star. The individualism so often at the narrative and stylistic center of Classical Hollywood Cinema is always created in contrast with the crowd;; it is this assumption that the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s tried to counter with dialectical montage.

The idea of the dispensible extra—even the idea of an “extra” rather than a “star”—has always been central to the conventions of Classical Hollywood Cinema that films either follow or break. We are amazed at the “cast of thousands” that signals high production values of a cinematic extravaganza; we marvel at the organization and resources necessarily to pull it off. Of course, working as an extra in a crowd scene was not without its risks; in one day of shooting the Exodus scene in DeMille's 1923 *The Ten Commandments*, over 60 extras were injured; DeMille's 1956 remake *Ten Commandments*, appears to have had a safer film shoot for the over 14,000 extras and 15,000 animals it used.

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<sup>2</sup>**Tratner, Michael** *Working the Crowd: Movies and Mass Politics Criticism* - Volume 45, Number 1, Winter 2003, pp. 53-73. Tratner cites Althusser: Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, tran. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 170.

The digital extra is even more dispensable; we may barely care as the bodies of extras pile up in the typical action film, but who cares at all if the Clone Army in the more recent Star Wars trilogy sustains injuries? Or the robots in *I, Robot*?



*Star Wars: Episode II: Attack of the Clones (2002)*

In *The Matrix* trilogy, when Agent Smith reproduces himself, the CGI technology required to show multiple Smiths (each acting differently) is both the means of representation and the subject of it. The *Matrix* films, particularly the first one, dramatize the dangers of simulations that cannot be distinguished from reality and, by extension, offer a critique of the media culture which so shapes our perceptions that we cannot see it for the construction that it is.

This is just one example of the many levels of reflexivity in *The Matrix* films, which both condemn the false world inside the matrix as enslavement at the same time that they celebrate the cool powers and possibilities of the matrix. The “desert of the real” is gray and dangerous, with bad clothes and food, and plodding progress against the enemy; inside the matrix, the laws of physics and terms of reality are malleable for the anomalous people who recognize the illusion for what it is. They are supermen and women who do not have to follow the rules, much like the agents who can bend reality to their will. There is one perspective inside the matrix—that this is

all there is of reality—and another, represented by the characters on the ship watching the encoded action. But *The Matrix* films fall victim to the dichotomy they set up, because the aesthetic of the film is so seductive. In the same way that it is more pleasurable to imagine oneself as the hero and not the extra, who would rather watch the code from the gritty ship instead of flying in the matrix, bending time and ignoring gravity?



In the *The Matrix Reloaded*, Agent Smith is no longer an agent of the matrix; his interaction with Neo has liberated him and he vies with Neo for control of the matrix. He is no longer an individual; as critic Thomas Zimmer writes:

Agent Smith is a crowd, a growing mass; he has what Walter Benjamin might have called *massenweise* - a mass-like quality, not only in that he is no longer taking place in and as a unique being, here and now, nor simply as a mere collection of individual copies - but as a critical mass. As such, the notion of his original purpose is lost (his aura, in Benjamin's terms, is diminished through reproduction).<sup>3</sup>

Of course what we see dramatized here in this clip is that Neo's individualism is so strong he can resist "the inevitable"; despite the postmodern and Buddhist trappings of the Matrix, good old

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<sup>3</sup> "Virus to Virus: *The Matrix Reloaded*, Thomas Zimmer, *Film Comment* online exclusive <http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/online/reviewmatrix.htm>

American individualism and Classical Hollywood Cinema style prevail. What I find interesting about Smith, or the Smith collective, is that as Neo's nemesis, he represents the connection between aura-diminishment and viral triumph. So much science fiction revolves around the question of whether we can control technology, or will it control us? Somehow Neo the individual triumphs, and so does individualism over the crowd.



And so we move from Agent Smith, seemingly infinite in his self-replication, to a different kind of agent, the intelligent models in the simulation program used to generate the armies in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In a way, the agents used as members of the crowd in *Lord of the Rings* are very close to what agents were in *The Matrix*: autonomous individuals with intelligence to respond to stimuli.

In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, new technology was used to create crowd scenes of unprecedented scale, such as the 100,000 computer generated soldiers in the prologue battle in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Of course, computer-generated crowds had become standard practice in the arsenal of Hollywood special effects, but the premiere New Zealand special effects house, WETA Limited, created computer-generated soldiers that were intelligent models, or agents, responding to objects and other soldiers in a virtual environment. The program software developer Stephen Regelous came up with is called “Massive,” for MultipleAgent

Simulations System in Virtual Environment. The agents had a network of more than 7000 logic nodes that allowed for autonomous rather than assigned responses to environmental stimuli through simulated senses of vision, sound, and touch. Regelous explains: "By simulating the way individuals react to their environment and each other," explained Regelous, "we got realistic crowd behavior for free. That was more interesting to me than the traditional particle-animation approach of applying forces and fixed animation cycles to little points moving through space. Massive is moving towards creating virtual or artificial ecologies that can evolve and develop on their own."<sup>4</sup> [http://lstdis.cs.uga.edu/~cthomas/courses/anim/slides/lotr\\_prologue\\_battle.html](http://lstdis.cs.uga.edu/~cthomas/courses/anim/slides/lotr_prologue_battle.html)

The technical director in charge of the simulations could override the agents' behaviors, but because of the thousands of agents making choices among more than 200 actions 24 times per second, there were many variables that made the experience of working on the battle scenes very different from filming traditional crowd scenes with a 'cast of thousands,' digitally reproducing some parts of a crowd (like in *Gladiator*), or working with either hand or digital animation. Director Peter Jackson recalled, "We literally didn't know what these guys were going to do" . . . . "I still get a chuckle when I think about one of the first tests, where we had about 2000 foreground guys desperately trying to kill each other; but in the background, about fifty of them had thought the better of it and had turned around to flee the battle! I thought, 'Those are the smart guys.' It was extraordinarily spooky."

The final step, after running the simulations and then rendering (which took over a week for the prologue battle in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, was to composite the Massive elements into miniature, matte, live-action, or virtual backgrounds. One of the visual effects supervisors for WETA, John Nugent, explained, "We might have a row of live-action warriors four layers

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<sup>4</sup> [http://lstdis.cs.uga.edu/~cthomas/courses/anim/slides/lotr\\_prologue\\_battle.html](http://lstdis.cs.uga.edu/~cthomas/courses/anim/slides/lotr_prologue_battle.html)

deep, shot on bluescreen, and behind them, on into infinity, would be the agents, who looked no different from the costumed performers. We put them together with all the normal layers of atmosphere, such as smoke from the battle. We also rendered shadow passes that we could integrate with the ground and the live-action performers."



The example of the Massive-created crowds give new meanings to the central question of new media theorist Lev Manovich's essay "What Is Digital Cinema?" Manovich concludes:

Live action footage is now only raw material to be manipulated by hand: animated, combined with 3-D computer generated scenes and painted over. The final images are constructed manually from different elements; and all the elements are either created entirely from scratch or modified by hand.

We can finally answer the question "what is digital cinema?" Digital cinema is a particular case of animation which uses live action footage as one of its many elements.<sup>5</sup>

I've dwelt on the details of this newest crowd scene technology because unlike what has come before it, whether live action, analog animation, or digital animation, a human is not making individual decisions for the actions of the members of the crowd. In many ways, it is the

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<sup>5</sup> Lev Manovich, "What Is Digital Cinema?" <http://www.manovich.net/TEXT/digital-cinema.html>

opposite of the image of the crowd that filmmakers from Lang and Vidor to contemporary directors have tried to achieve, that of the crowd as conformity not individuality. Ironically, the agents in a Massive crowd might be more individualistic than extras in a live action crowd; certainly a group of extras would not decide to run away instead of following the orders of the director. Massive agents are “really” in the world of the movie, perhaps more like a game player than an actor. And just as the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* is about individualism—that a single heroic person, no matter how small, does have agency and can change the world—the backdrop of the massive crowd is rife with individualism as well.

Hyper-individualized crowds like the ones in *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrate a power of digital cinema that takes it beyond the scope of Manovich’s discussion and into the realm of simulacra and to the brink of artificial intelligence—the very development that threatens human freedom in *The Matrix* and other science fiction.

Moreover, in an era of watching movies at home on television, cable, or dvd, on laptops or even on tiny iPod screens, alone or with others who are not strangers, representations of the crowd no longer extend the movie audience in the same way as in the studio era when the only way to watch a film was in a public theater, surrounded by a crowd of strangers. At a time when the boundaries between reality and artifice, nature and technology, and human and machine are increasingly blurred, there is a parallel shift from live action crowd scenes of extras that prompt wonder at the scale of the production to digitally-created crowds that literally take us into a new world bordering on the virtual and artificial intelligence. It is hard to say what effect this change in viewing practices might have on digital spectatorship, but my tentative conclusion is that as the lines between movie-watching and game playing become more permeable, the spectator

becomes less a member of the crowd and more of a protagonist or agent, believing they are ever further distanced from the crowd, enacting the cultural fantasy of individualism and agency.

NOTE: The presentation which included this paper featured clips from the films playing while I spoke; the still images here provide some illustration, but of course can't show the amazing effects created by Massive and other digital technologies.