

Re:Search

Visual Spaces and Modern Subjectivity in the Big City

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ABSTRACT

King Vidor's *The Crowd* and Harold Lloyd's *Speedy*, both released in 1928 during the late silent film era, explore paradoxical themes of one's individualism and anonymity in modern New York City. Both films convey the changing lifestyles and values of a rapidly urbanizing nation, and highlight the struggle of twentieth century subjects to achieve their individualistic goals within mass society. *The Crowd* provides a naturalist perspective of life in New York City, where its protagonist, Johnny Sims, cannot transcend his circumstances. Conversely, *Speedy* offers an optimistic depiction of the city and all the opportunities it has to offer. In this essay, I examine three types of space that reflect the conflicting themes in both visual texts. These spaces are public, institutional, and domestic. *Public spaces* are open or transitional areas. Open areas can be used for leisure, such as amusement parks, or for movement, such as sidewalks and city streets. Urban sidewalks and streets additionally constitute transitional areas, though closed forms of public transportation, such as buses and street railways, also fall under this category. *Institutional spaces* are enclosed buildings or stationary areas that primarily function for corporate and civic industries. *Domestic spaces* are areas related to one's home, though in *The Crowd* and *Speedy*, these are often the most uninhabited areas. The two films demonstrate domesticity as a cultural ideal that eventually erodes in an urban setting, subsequently dismantling domestic spaces into attenuated areas. The three types of space present the paradoxical conditions that the modern subject must negotiate living in mass society.

KEYWORDS

New York City, Harold Lloyd, King Vidor, silent films, public spaces, institutional spaces, domestic spaces, Paul Strand, Wall Street

King Vidor's *The Crowd* and Harold Lloyd's *Speedy*, both released in 1928 at the end of the silent film era, explore paradoxical themes of individualism and anonymity in New York City. The two visual texts manipulate space and perspective in ways to parallel these conflicting themes while simultaneously demonstrating the protagonists' struggles towards self-transformation. Both films present the modern city, and the urban subject that inhabits it, in terms of three types of space: public, institutional, and domestic. These spaces reinforce the films' dichotomies, examining the changing lifestyles and values of a rapidly urbanizing nation, and highlighting the struggle of twentieth century subjects to achieve their individualistic goals within mass society.

The Crowd's plot demonstrates an ordinary man's desire and struggle to have his voice and ideas heard within the quintessential modern field of advertising. The film's protagonist, Johnny Sims, moves to New York City in the early 1920s and dreams of being an ad man. Stuck in a large and anonymous corporate building, Sims spends most of his time thinking up phrases and jingles that he hopes will be noticed and appreciated by the general public. He maintains his father's view that one day he will be "someone big." Yet his desire to make it big in New York City is challenged throughout the entirety of the film. Ultimately, Sims must come to terms with his own ordinariness and accept that his sense of individualism will inevitably get lost in the crowd.

When Sims leaves for New York City, an intertitle states, "When John was twenty-one he became one of the seven million that believe New York depends on them." Sims' unwavering ambition leads him to believe that his voice and ideas will make a valuable impact in the city. However, his ad pitches are mostly ignored by employers and colleagues and offer no means of differentiation from the other nameless faces in the vastness of New York City. While the film primarily reinforces the naivety of Sims' unattainable goals, it still maintains a degree of optimism that the city can bring some type of personal fulfilment. Sims marries a young woman named Mary and the two seek an idealized American lifestyle. Sims struggles to negotiate between achieving financial stability to support his growing family and pursuing his own

interests in advertising. The film reaches a dramatic turn when Sims comes home to celebrate with his family after winning \$500 for an ad slogan competition. His two young children are playing across the street, and when Sims calls for them to come inside, a car hits and kills his daughter. After her death, Sims falls into a depression, making it hard for him to hold a stable job to support his family. He grows increasingly more depressed and contemplates suicide, though his young son's love and support prevents him from going through with it. The film concludes on an ambiguous, albeit, optimistic note. Sims, Mary, and their son attend a vaudeville comedy show and laugh hysterically. The camera pans out to show that the family is part of a larger audience, ultimately blending in with the crowd.

If *The Crowd* provides a somber account of the modern subject forced to accept an anonymous fate, *Speedy* challenges and embraces the fast-paced lifestyle of the city, where everybody “is in such a hurry that they take Saturday's bath on Friday so they can do Monday's washing on Sunday.” The Harold Lloyd character “Speedy” takes advantage of his anonymity and discovers a sense of liberty in doing what he pleases without being noticed. Speedy's keen sense of self-transformation and improvisation enable him to take on different jobs throughout the film. At the beginning, Speedy works at an ice cream parlor, but seems to spend his time creatively conveying the Yankees score to his coworkers. He ultimately loses his job at the parlor, but easily finds another as a taxi driver. Meanwhile, Speedy is dating a young woman named Jane, whose grandfather, “Pop,” drives the last horse car in the city. City developers seek to buy out Pop's horse car to acquire his track for the new street railway. Pop, however can keep his track as long as he drives the horse car once every 24 hours. Hilarity ensues as the city developers attempt to steal Pop's horse car, and Speedy must save the day by making a frantic run through the route before the deadline. The film concludes with Pop selling his route for a large sum of money, allowing Speedy and Jane to plan to marry.

Throughout the two visual texts, Sims and Speedy interact with three categories of space that define the urban setting. *Public spaces* are open or transitional areas. Open areas can be used for leisure, such as Coney Island, or for movement, such as sidewalks and city streets. Urban

sidewalks and streets additionally constitute transitional areas, though closed forms of public transportation, such as buses and street railways, also fall under this category. *Institutional spaces* are enclosed buildings or stationary areas that primarily function for corporate and civic industries. *The Crowd's* depiction of Sims' advertising office building and the maternity ward where Mary gives birth exemplify institutional spaces. *Domestic spaces* are areas related to one's home, though in *The Crowd* and *Speedy*, these are often the most uninhabited areas. Domestic spaces function as an idealization during the early twentieth century, but in an urban setting, subjects leave their domestic spaces more frequently than they come to them.

The Crowd and *Speedy* both incorporate extensive scenes taking place at Coney Island. During the twentieth century, the amusement park grew to be a socially significant public space that facilitated the intermixing of subjects from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The use of public transportation and city sidewalks enabled a similar mingling of urban dwellers. While both films portray an equal number of public spaces, *The Crowd* depicts more institutional spaces that emphasize Sims' sense of anonymity. The film includes Sims' corporate office building and the maternity ward as vast institutions teeming with the faceless and nameless subjects of New York City. Each film conveys domestic space differently. While *The Crowd* demonstrates a realistic depiction of the claustrophobic quarters in Sims' dingy apartment, *Speedy* presents a comedic approach of domesticity when Speedy and Jane convert the back of a moving truck to a cozy parlor. The two films demonstrate domesticity as a cultural ideal that eventually erodes in an urban setting, subsequently dismantling domestic spaces into attenuated areas. The three types of space present the paradoxical conditions that the modern subject must negotiate living in mass society.

Public Spaces

Both films present visually spectacular sequences that feature Coney Island, the attraction that in the early twentieth century came to epitomize the rapidly urbanizing nation. The amusement park was "readymade for the masses; it glorified speed, motion, and the unfettered human body"

(Immerso, 4). Coney Island presented urban subjects with a public space for leisure. Modern bodies swarmed to the park, walked around the grounds, played games, and enjoyed rides. The amusement park “was designed to appeal neither to the elevated rich nor the degraded poor, but was geared toward the middle-class leisure consumer” (Immerso, 6). Subsequently, a diverse group of people from differing backgrounds and social classes had an occasion to intermix. The park was “a cultural melting pot mingling individuals and races from all segments of society” (Kasson, 95). Public spaces, such as Coney Island, provided New Yorkers with an opportunity for self-transformation — they could be anything or anyone. It “encouraged visitors to shed momentarily their accustomed roles and status” (Kasson, 41). Since the park teemed with the masses, a subject could potentially blend in with everyone else. The lower classes could mix with the elite and vice versa, subsequently creating a liberating experience for the customers.

Amusement parks provided urban subjects with varying degrees of social liberations. In addition to blending in as anything or anyone, they enabled customers to behave in a less than dignified way. Coney Island offered a “relatively ‘loose,’ unregulated social situation which contrasted markedly with the high degree of social attentiveness and decorum demanded in most other public activities” (41). This type of public space encouraged a sense of physical closeness and intimacy. Many of the rides, such as the “Tunnel of Love,” which was featured in *The Crowd*, provided young men and women an opportunity to “enjoy the company of the opposite sex away from familial scrutiny” and to display physical forms of affection (42).

The two films’ depictions of Coney Island reinforce the park’s influence on the “unfettered human body.” In *The Crowd*, Sims and Mary go on a double date with another couple. They go on rides together that foster a sense of intimacy, and provide Sims and Mary with an opportunity to kiss. In *Speedy*, Speedy and Jane go on rides that thrust their bodies together, resulting in constant physical contact. They go down slides that inevitably lift up women’s skirts and spin on wheels that push men and women closer together. The two visual texts effectively demonstrate Coney Island’s influence on customers’ behaviors and attitudes. It

was a public space that offered leisure to the masses, and ultimately reflected the changing lifestyles and values of an urbanizing society.

The two films' depictions of Coney Island, as well as other public spaces such as transportation and sidewalks, permitted Sims and Speedy to develop a sense of self-transformation. They could adopt different roles based on their circumstances. A significant portion of comedic elements throughout *Speedy* stem from his aptitude for self-transformation and improvisation. One sequence that exemplifies Speedy's knack for thinking on the spot occurs when he and Jane take a crowded street railway to Coney Island. The railway, much like the amusement park, merges New Yorkers together from diverse backgrounds. In an attempt to find a seat for Jane, Speedy puts string on a dollar bill, using it as a piece of bait for one of the sitting riders to get up and grab. Speedy's trick successfully works when a man stands up to retrieve the dollar, just in time for Jane to steal his seat and for Speedy to pull the dollar away with his string. Speedy does the trick again, this time obtaining a seat for himself. This sequence highlights Speedy's control over circumstances in an urban setting. Throughout most of the film, Speedy maintains an alarming sense of control over the situations he finds himself in. Compared to Sims' attempts at achieving success in advertising, Speedy easily finds new jobs on a regular basis.

While *Speedy* encourages an optimistic view of self-transformation in an urban setting, *The Crowd* presents a naturalistic approach to its story. Donald Pizer describes a source of tension found within naturalistic texts in his book *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. He states:

“The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance. But he also suggests a compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates which affirms the significance of the individual and of his life. The tension here is that between the naturalist's desire to represent in fiction the new, discomfiting truths which he has

found in the ideas and life of his late nineteenth-century world, and also his desire to find some meaning in experience which reasserts the validity of the human enterprise” (10-11).

Throughout the film, Sims continuously tries and fails to transcend his circumstances. When Sims and Mary take a double-decker bus to Coney Island, he points to a clown working on the street and says to Mary, “The poor sap! And I bet his father thought he would be President.” Sims dreams of being “someone big” in New York City, though his attempts to achieve success within the world of advertising are ultimately thwarted by his predetermined environment and socioeconomic background. Incorporating naturalistic philosophies, *The Crowd* demonstrates Sims’ inability to rise in society due to these fated factors. However, the visual text illustrates Pizer’s tension between naturalistic ideologies and humanistic values. The public spaces within *The Crowd* reinforce Sims’ struggle to achieve his individualistic goals within mass society.

The Crowd takes a dramatically dark turn when Sims’ young daughter is hit by a car while running across the street. The city street, a public space that permits the movement and intermixing of diverse subjects, develops into a scene of spectacle and chaos. A crowd gathers around the young girl’s body as Sims’ and Mary plead for someone to call a doctor. The sequence grows progressively grimmer once the daughter is taken inside and the family hopelessly waits for her to get better. Later that evening, a roar of police sirens pass Sims’ apartment. An unspecified commotion takes place outside, and in a frantic state of mind, Sims runs out to pathetically shush the sirens and police, hoping this would somehow help his dying daughter. A police officer brazenly tells Sims “Get inside! The world can’t stop because your baby’s sick!” The police officer’s insensitive words are even more troubling due to the note of truth in them. Tragically, the officer is right — the city cannot stop with the death of one’s child. In Sims’ moment of extreme loss and suffering, he is forced to move on and return to work. The institutional space of his corporate office explores a greater sense of anonymity within an urban setting.

Institutional Spaces

The Crowd develops a sense of man's anonymity in the midst of New York City's endless stream of stimuli. In 1915, the American photographer Paul Strand developed a similar sense of tension in his iconic photograph *Wall Street*. Strand's photograph is another striking visual text from the early 20th century that effectively examines institutional spaces in an urbanizing society. Strand's manipulation of space and perspective in *Wall Street* parallels Vidor's use of visual imagery in *The Crowd* by creating a paradoxical feeling of confinement and vastness. The two pieces simultaneously convey these conflicting feelings and reinforce an overarching theme of anonymity within the modern city.

Wall Street presents a daunting image of the J.P. Morgan building in New York City. The building's severe lines form elongated rectangles, evoking the appearance of a jail cell and a foreboding sense of entrapment in an urban setting. Strand's photograph highlights the juxtaposition between the building's looming presence and the insignificant bodies of the anonymous city dwellers. The image achieves this paradoxical feeling by contrasting the large scale of the J.P. Morgan building to the small bodies of New York City's pedestrians. The building's lines and angles are clearly defined, creating sharp, rectangular shapes on its outer surface. In her book *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine*, Karen Lucic, a professor of Art and Program in American Culture at Vassar College, notes that the photograph "diminishes the human subject while accentuating the strikingly abstract patterns of the shadows and architecture" (Lucic, 47). These "abstract patterns" resemble the shape of a cage or jail cell because of the long and intimidating lines they form, conveying a sense of the individual's entrapment. Strand's manipulation of perspective cuts off the top of the building, eliminating any presence of the sky. The absence of sky creates a claustrophobic environment that separates the spectator from the outside world. However, the photograph brilliantly establishes a sense of claustrophobia or confinement, as well as a sense of overwhelming vastness. The small bodies in comparison to the building create an intimidating contrast. It appears as though the pedestrians are entrapped in an infinitely immense cage, one in which they cannot escape.

The photograph effectively demonstrates a sense of confinement; however, it additionally “reveals a disturbing sense of anonymity and conformity in the human life of the metropolis” (49). The bodies have no face or name; they are an “anonymous crowd” (Bush, 213). The pedestrians’ backs are facing the camera as they walk off in their own direction, not interacting with each other, yet making up part of the same mass of busy urban dwellers. Each has their own story to tell, but there’s no way of knowing it. A sense of conformity, as well as uniformity arises from the photograph’s lighting. The bodies are dark in comparison to the lightened sidewalk, and few details in their appearances can be made from the picture. Essentially, they all appear the same. They have become a “manipulatable blob of suggestion and imitation” (228).

The Crowd similarly explores the theme of a modern man struggling to achieve his individualistic goals within an urban setting. After moving to New York City, Sims gets a mundane office job where he spends time thinking up ad ideas. Much like Strand’s manipulation of space and perspective in *Wall Street*, Vidor’s choice in camera direction and scale creates an incredible sequence in which viewers are shown the daunting office building. The camera slowly pans upward, emphasizing the immense size of the building’s structure. Visually, the office building in *The Crowd* resembles the cell-like elements of the J.P. Morgan building in *Wall Street*. Both institutional spaces contain severe lines that evoke the image of a cage or jail cell. As the camera moves the viewer’s eye up the side of the building, it finally focuses in on one of the cell-like windows. The camera then enters the interior of the office building and viewers are immediately overwhelmed by the rigid formation of desks and workers. The juxtaposition in size between the J.P. Morgan building and the small, faceless bodies in Strand’s photograph conveys a similar, paradoxical feeling as the inside of Vidor’s office building. Shot from a bird’s-eye view, the interior of the room creates the feeling of being in an infinitely immense cage, similar to the feeling conveyed in *Wall Street*. The room appears to be vast with an endless number of desks formed into perfect rows. However, a sense of confinement develops due to the assembly-line layout of the desks. The formation of the office’s interior parallels its cell-like outer structure. The image of perfectly straight rows of desks and workers triggers the feeling of being

in an assembly-line. The employees are not seen as distinct individuals. Conversely, they form a crowd of faceless and nameless workers. Vidor's visual imagery in this sequence underscores the anonymity and conformity of the modern city worker. Interestingly, however, Sims thinks up ad ideas and explores the realms of his own creativity in this factory-like environment. This reinforces Sims' fervent desire to achieve his individualistic goals, and to break away from the "crowd" that the city creates.



Sims' corporate office in *The Crowd*, 1928



Paul Strand, "Wall Street," 1915.

Vidor examines a maternity ward as another institutional space in a sequence that conveys similar assembly-line elements that further develop the theme of anonymity. When Mary gives birth to their first child, Vidor manipulates the size and perspective of the hospital. “We wanted the hallway to look much longer than it was practical to construct on a studio stage, so we made each successive doorway shorter” (Vidor, 70). After learning that Mary gave birth, Sims rushes to the hospital and searches for his wife and child. We see a long line of other fathers, waiting and searching for their respective wives who had also recently given birth. Like the faceless and nameless workers in Sims’ office, this imagery in the hospital also evokes the feeling of being in an assembly-line. The assembly-line of fathers strips away the intimacy and significance of childbirth. In a moment as meaningful as the birth of one’s child, these fathers are no more than impatient customers waiting in line. Who they are does not matter. What matters is that they will leave the hospital as quickly as they came, making space for another faceless and nameless body.

The recurrence of an assembly-line image could be interpreted as a symbol of anonymity within the modern city. In an assembly-line, each worker mindlessly does their part to ensure that each piece goes in its exact spot. The workers focus on their one task and block out the roles that their coworkers play, and in this way, each worker is anonymous. However, the image of an assembly-line reminds viewers of just how tenuous this structure can be. If one task goes wrong, a domino effect of mistakes will be made. We can see similarities of this domino effect and the tenuous structure of “order” throughout the film. The death of Sims’ daughter affects the order and structure in his personal life. This tragic event sends him into a deep depression, yet the modern city moves on with life. His grieving process is interrupted by the city’s “assembly-line” and need for structure. However, Sims’ depression does not matter in the grand scheme of urban living, which only isolates him more and emphasizes his anonymity. In a time of advanced technology and rapidly changing social norms, Sims was falling behind due to his personal loss. The city didn’t wait for him to catch up or breathe; it was up to himself to move on from the past and look forward.

Strand's *Wall Street* and Vidor's *The Crowd* incite paradoxical feelings about life in the city. In an urban setting, one is constantly surrounded by others, though it feels as if one is always alone. The pedestrians that weave in and out of the city streets do not have a name; they are simply a crowd of people whose stories and lives are unknown. The vast number of people within a city translates into one feeling alone--or confined--in a crowded urban setting. This feeling parallels the images that Strand's photograph and Vidor's film create. The landscape and structure of an urban setting can often instill feelings of vastness and confinement, subsequently perpetuating a feeling of anonymity amongst a crowd.

Domestic Spaces

During the twentieth century, an idealized image of domesticity pervaded the minds of American families, yet *The Crowd* and *Speedy* effectively dismantled it. Sims' small and dingy apartment reflects his low paying job and socioeconomic status. The apartment evokes a sense of claustrophobia due to its small rooms, cramped furniture, and broken utilities. Compared to the "Home Sweet Home" model of domesticity, Sims' apartment generates a sense of stress and entrapment. When Mary's family visits the apartment for Christmas, Sims looks for any excuse to leave. He tells Mary that he needs to run an errand, and ultimately stays at his friend's apartment all night. The visual text demonstrates an urban setting's erosion into domestic space. Sims' failed attempts in advertising means he cannot afford a house, so instead, he must raise his family in a suffocating apartment. The tight quarters subsequently cause fights between Sims and Mary, reinforcing an urban setting's negative effect on domestic space. The privacy of domestic space is questioned when Sims' daughter is hit by a car. When her body is brought upstairs to the family's apartment, a crowd of people follow, intruding on their privacy. Some remain outside the door, though peer inside to get a better view. The crowd makes a spectacle out of the family's tragedy, and encroaches on the one space where Sims and Mary can find solace.

Like Sims' apartment in *The Crowd*, Pop's apartment in *Speedy* reflects his lower socioeconomic background. The apartment is small and evokes a similar sense of claustrophobia.

Small, urban apartments capture the same condensed sensation felt in crowded public spaces. However, unlike public

spaces which are outside and encourage movement, city apartments confine the tenants to restricting rooms. While the institutional spaces in *The Crowd* create a paradoxical feeling of confinement and vastness, the domestic spaces in both films convey only a sense of suffocation. The dismantling of cozy, domestic spaces parallel the changing lifestyles and values of an urbanizing society. The two films suggest that urban dwellers spent more time out of their homes than inside. The city provided stimulating opportunities in public spaces that were more appealing than remaining in one's home. During the twentieth century, modern subjects wanted to take advantage of the opportunities offered in an urban setting. Public spaces for leisure, such as amusement parks, encouraged subjects to spend time outside. Additionally, public transportation allowed subjects to leave their homes and travel farther distances. *The Crowd* and *Speedy* use modern subjects to demonstrate this change, and to reinforce the social and physical liberations of urban public spaces.

In addition to Pop's apartment, *Speedy* demonstrates domesticity with a brilliant gag that takes place in the back of a moving truck. After their outing to Coney Island, Speedy and Jane realize they do not have enough money to get home on public transportation. Through sheer luck and coincidence, Speedy runs into an old friend who drives a moving truck. The friend offers them a ride in the back of the truck, and Speedy and Jane sit amongst another family's furniture. They rearrange the furniture to evoke the sense that they are sitting in a cozy parlor, pretending to snuggle up to a nonexistent fire. They even rock an empty cradle, imagining the children that they will one day have. Speedy finds a little sign that says "Home Sweet Home," and puts it on top of the mantle of the unlit fireplace.

While this scene presents an idealized image of domesticity, viewers must remember that Speedy and Jane are in a moving space, implying that this moment is fleeting. *The Crowd* and *Speedy* reflect similar sentiments of domesticity, though the latter takes a comedic approach.

Both visual texts convey domestic spaces in relation to public spaces. Domestic spaces were once considered a haven, though became tenuous due to the intruding outside forces of an urban setting. It is important to note that the two visual texts do not largely feature domestic spaces, highlighting its loss of significance in an urbanizing society. Much like *The Crowd's* naturalistic approach in demonstrating self-transformation and individualism within New York City, the film provides an equally pessimistic view of domesticity in an urban environment. Conversely, *Speedy* conveys the paradoxical conditions that a modern subject must negotiate within the city with a greater sense of optimism and humor.

The visual texts express conflicting themes of individualism and anonymity through public, institutional, and domestic spaces. These dichotomies reflect modern subjects' changing lifestyles and attitudes within an urbanizing nation. Each space provides subjects with liberating opportunities to adopt new behaviors, take on different roles, and travel farther distances. However, with these liberations come the inevitable challenges of living within mass society. Whether presented through drama or comedy, both *Sims* and *Speedy* attempt to maintain a sense of individualism without getting lost in the crowd of New York City.

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