Vidor, King

King Vidor

King Vidor (February 8, 1894 – November 1, 1982) was an American director, screenwriter, and producer that is recognized as one of early Hollywood’s most celebrated artists. His major films include *The Big Parade* (1925), *The Crowd* (1928), *Duel in the Sun* (1925) and the *Fountainhead* (1949). His career was one of excellence and longevity that earned him five academy award nominations for best director along the way. He is even entered in Guinness Book of World Records for having the longest career as a film director.

**Early Life and Career**

Vidor grew up in Galveston Texas, the son of a wealthy lumber manufacturer. His father always expected that King would follow his footsteps into the lumber industry but at a young age he developed a keen interest in the art of movie making. Vidor's father was always encouraging about in his involvement the film industry and even helped build King's first studio.[1] As a boy Vidor spent much of his time at the movies, not just as a patron, but actually maintaining a job as a projectionist at the town’s Nickelodeon. He would often watch movies with the sole purpose of counting the number of cuts, he was amazed with how many of them there were.[2]

He experimented with photography and amateur filmmaking on his own for years and then obtained a position as a representative for Mutual Weekly.[5] His job was to film events that would later be used to create one of Mutual Weekly's newsreels, which went by the nickname "Weeklies." They were paying 60 cents a foot for footage of the largest march of massed troops in history taking place in Houston.[4] The only problem was that Vidor didn't own a film camera. He quickly contacted a variety of camera equipment dealers trying to find someone who owned a camera. Vidor found that one was owned by the chauffeur of one of Houston's most prominent of families. The man was John Boggs and he and Vidor became partners as the Texas representatives for Mutual Weekly.[5] It was there that Vidor got his first experience with a real film camera.

His work with newsreels inspired him to move to Houston in 1914 where he quit filming for Mutual Weekly and set up The Hotex Motion Picture Company, his own local weekly newsreel that worked in conjunction with the local paper.[6] It was while in Houston at this time that he met and married his first wife Florence. She had a large ambition to get into motion pictures as an actress, which endeared Vidor to her immediately. They lived in Houston for only eight months before deciding to move on to Hollywood in 1915[7].
On to Hollywood

Florence enjoyed early success as an actress with the Vitagraph company in Santa Monica. She was earning $5 a week there and when the company moved to Hollywood she and Vidor moved with them.\[8\] Vidor first took a job as an extra trying to gain experience being on a motion picture stage. He wrote 52 motion-picture scenarios before finally selling his first script to the Vitagraph company.\[9\] The film was called When It Rains it Pours and earned him 30 dollars.\[10\] When the Vitagraph Film Company quickly outgrew their hundred-foot lot and moved into Hollywood, Vidor and Florence moved with them. Florence also received a raise and was now earning $15 a week.\[11\] In 1918 Vidor landed a job with Universal as a screenwriter and director, producing ten short reels for the company. He was initially hired as a prop man but worked his way into becoming a writer in their shorts department for 40 dollars a week.\[12\]

A Young King Vidor Filming On Set

Impressed with his work at Universal, Samuel Goldwyn gave Vidor the reins to direct his first feature length film The Turn in the Road (1919).\[13\] He made the film with financial backing from the Brentwood Film Corporation. This company was formed with the support of several doctors that financed early projects Vidor worked on as a camerassssssssman. These doctors were all members of the Brentwood Country Club, where they golfed, so their company was entitled the Brentwood Film Corporation.\[14\] The film was extremely successful, running 11 weeks on Broadway. Vidor received offers from every major film company to direct feature films. His next three films: Better Times (1919), The Other Half(1919) and Poor Relations (1919), were all films starring his wife (Florence Vidor) but also actress ZaSu Pitts. Vidor had discover Pitts on a Los Angeles streetcar and decided to write his next projects around her as a character\[15\].
After a year with the Brentwood film corporation and receiving offers from every major studio, Vidor chose to work for the New York company First National Exhibitors. They were a firm more known for financing theatre chains but Vidor felt that they would give him the most artistic freedom. He signed a contract to make four to six features with them.\[16\] Jack-Knife Man (1920) was the first film he made for First National. It was taken from a book by Ellis Parker Butler of the same name. He was given a $75,000 budget but Vidor only spent $62,000 and sent the excess money back. First National was incensed, they wanted Vidor to make grander pictures with big movie stars and felt that spending under budget sacrificed achieving their goals. This incident even caused First National to pass on picking up Vidor's contract option.\[17\]

The film The Family Honor (1920) was made shortly after and starred his wife Florence. Florence Vidor had actually become quite a reputable film star and went on in her career to star in several Cecil B. DeMille and Thomas Ince pictures after divorcing King in 1925. After Family Honor was made Florence and King signed with Associated Producers who wrote a contract for King to direct four pictures starring his wife Florence. At this time however Vidor had started to build his own studio on Santa Monic Boulevard. He called the it Vidor Village and filmed Sky Pilot (1921) there, which he later sold to First National Exhibitors. After making Sky Pilot, Vidor had just about lost all of his funds.\[18\] He tried to keep his studio running by working on outside projects such as The Woman of Bronze (1923) and Peg o' My Heart (1922) for MGM. Eventually, Vidor was forced into closing his own studio and moved to Ince's studio were he produced the four Florence Vidor films and directed three of them.\[19\]

**The Big Parade**
In 1925 Vidor directed *The Big Parade*. (1925), an MGM film and a vehicle for their star John Gilbert. It was a war epic of a grand scale focusing on the new movement about honesty in war. It included 4000 United States Army soldiers as extras. It opened at the Astor Theatre on Broadway and was an incredible triumph. A titan financially, it is reported to be the highest grossing silent film of all time with a box office of 22 million dollars. However, after the film was initially released Vidor was required to cut 800 feet of the 12,800 film so that theatres would have time to show another feature in the same night. Vidor did the editing himself at home, he would work after dinner every night and eventually cut the film down to exactly 800 feet. *The Big Parade* made actor John Gilbert a screen star and gave MGM a reputation as one of America’s most prominent studios. It was also during casting interviews for *The Big Parade* that Vidor discovered film star Karl Dane, who was working as a carpenter at the time. Despite the success of the film, Vidor lost a fortune because he had been swindled out of his percentage of *The Big Parade* by MGM. He was filming *La Boheme* (1926) while his lawyer was bribed to sell his percentage back to MGM for a massive bonus. Vidor claims that he had 25% interest in the picture which would have been a significant amount of money.

*The Crowd*
Vidor was now given more creative control than ever and used it to create one of the silent era’s most poetic and socially aware films *The Crowd* (1928). It focused on the tragedies of the ordinary and working class in light of modern urbanization and humanity.\(^{[24]}\) Vidor cast James Murray as the star of the film after noticing him as an extra and chasing him down on a bus on Washington Boulevard, in Culver City.\(^{[25]}\) He also cast his wife at the time, Eleanor Boardman, in the other lead role. MGM was very liberal with their restrictions on Vidor and gave him a budget of $500,000 to make it.\(^{[26]}\) The film at one point had seven possible endings that were filmed and given to the studio to choose from before the release. Although extremely depressing, the film received high praise from critics and solidified Vidor as not only a commercial success but also a masterful artist. The film garnered Vidor his first Academy Award nomination for Best Director as well. Vittorio DeSica has even been quoted as stating that *The Crowd* was the inspiration for *The Bicycle Thief* (1948).\(^{[27]}\)

**Sound and Social Issue Films, 1929-1935**

Vidor moved almost seamlessly into the sound era, unlike many other directors. His first sound film was *Hallelujah* (1929), which gained significant notability for having the first ever all African-American cast. The inspiration for the film came from a woman who had lived with Vidor's family in Texas for years.\(^{[28]}\) After her death, Vidor had wished to make a film that would be dedicated to her and African-American culture. He was so earnest about making the picture that to finance the film's $350,000 budget Vidor put up his own $100,000 salary.\(^{[29]}\) He found the cast by going to African-American Baptist churches and night clubs and listening to the singers.\(^{[30]}\) That's how he found the lead Nina Mae McKinney. Daniel L. Haynes was the understudy for the lead in *Show Boat* (1936) and Victoria Spivey had made a couple of records.\(^{[31]}\) MGM had no portable sound equipment at the time so when Vidor shot on location in Tennessee or Arkansas he would film the scenes silent. Later, the sound was be added back in postproduction, which caused problems because getting the sound and visual to synchronize was not a perfect science.\(^{[32]}\) The film was a critical success but oddly a much better box-office reception in the south than the north. Vidor believes that this was due to the southern's better understanding of African American culture.\(^{[33]}\) He followed *Hallelujah* with three successful commentary films. *Street Scene* (1931) based on a play about lower class New York life, *Our Daily Bread* (1934), about a farmer’s co-operative also written by Vidor, and *The Wedding Night* (1935), with Gary Cooper, that focused on the clash of American and immigrant cultures. In 1939 he even became involved in directing the black and white scenes in *The Wizard of Oz*.

**Later Work**
Vidor’s next big hit would not come until the 40’s when he left Metro and directed Gregory Peck in the David O. Selznick western *Duel in the Sun* (1947). Originally Vidor had been contacted by Selznick to direct *Tom Sawyer* but he needed a vacation and turned down the offer. He later was asked to make *Duel in the Sun* in which Selznick was heavily invested. The film was made with the hopes of surpassing *Gone with the Wind* as a box office hit. Selznick was so involved in the production that he became its screenwriter. He would do such frequent script rewrites that it put the film behind schedule and infuriated Vidor. Furthermore Vidor had to deal with Selznick’s obsession of the film’s lead actress, Jennifer Jones. Vidor became so aggravated with the behavior of Selznick that he actually quit the film with a day of shooting left to go. This was the first and only movie Vidor ever walked away from. Reviews of the film were generally poor and the graphically implied rape scene was frowned upon. Despite this however the film was giant success, although it did not come close to *Gone With The Wind*. *Variety* reported that it was one of the ten biggest box office-grossing films of 1947.

Vidor's last big pictures were *The Fountainhead* (1949), adapted from the political novel by Ayn Rand, and the spectacle film *War and Peace* (1956). The latter was not a personal project for Vidor, like *The Fountainhead*. It had been brought to him by an agent. The film was a studio blockbuster as an epic cinematic representation of Tolstoy's masterpiece. For the battle scenes the Italian army was employed. To properly direct the huge brigade of soldiers in an effective manner he broke them off into regiments and had multiple orchestrates communicating his orders. The movie starred Audrey Hepburn and Henry Fonda, although Vidor originally had wanted Peter Ustinov to play the lead role. The film was ultimately successful but did not receive the critical response that the studios hoped it would.

*Solomon and Sheba* (1959) was the film that most believe destroyed King Vidor's career. The production was a grueling and tragic one as the film's star Tyrone Power died half way through it. After filming a sword fight, Power collapsed and died of a heart attack. With no time to lose, they reshoot all of Power's scenes and re-cast Yul Brenner as the lead. The film did earn back its costs but Vidor was extremely unhappy with its results in an artistic sense. The reviews were terrible, and at age 65 after the arduous *Solomon and Sheba* and *War and Peace*, Vidor had become exhausted with the chaotic and hectic filmmaking process. He was offered other chances to direct, but it appeared that Vidor had all together lost his interest in commercial directing.

Vidor, who had affiliated with leftist groups and made films on progressive topics in the 1930s, gravitated toward the right in his later life. He was a founding member of the anti-communist Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals in 1944. It was an American organization of politically conservative movie workers who wanted to defend the film industry against what they saw as Communist infiltration. It served as a facilitator of supporters within the film industry that were willing to testify publicly against possible Communists. Ayn Rand wrote pamphlets that the organization distributed. Some members included Gary Cooper, Walt Disney, John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, and Clark Gable.

It was films like *War and Peace* and *The Big Parade* that solidified Vidor has a director of epics. When asked if he would rather "direct a battle scene with 6,000 soldiers or a love scene with two important stars," he answered without hesitation, "the battle scene."

His career was one of the
most impressive in cinematic history, spanning from 1913-1980. He retained his reputation as one of Hollywood’s founding directors and received an honorary Oscar in 1979. He died in California in 1982.

Personal Life

Marriages
Elizabeth Hill Vidor (1937 - 1 November 1982) (his death)
Eleanor Boardman (8 September 1926 - 11 April 1933) (divorced) 2 children
Florence Vidor (1915 - 1924) (divorced) 1 child

References


Vidor, King (1952). *A Tree is a Tree* Harcourt, Brace and Company- Library of Congress Card Number: 53-9221

External Links
http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0896542/. IMDB.com King Vidor


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