

# The Big Parade (1925)

Not rated. Running time: 151 minutes.

Our content ratings (0-10) Violence: 7. Sex/Nudity: 0.

Language in title cards: 0.

Star rating (0-5) 5 stars.

*Do good; seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans; fight for the rights of widows.*

*Isaiah 1:17*

*Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.*

*James 2:13*

The centennial of World War I, starting in the summer of 2014, is stirring global interest in dozens of books and a handful of feature films about this worldwide conflict that killed nearly 10 million people. Considering the hundreds of American-made movies and TV shows about World War II, you may be surprised that only a relative handful of existing movies explore what once was known as The Great War, 1914 to 1918.

Only a few dozen films were produced about The Great War in the entire silent and early sound eras of cinema. That gap in our movie culture is largely due to the fact that American involvement in World War I lasted only 19 months, from April 1917 until November 11, 1918, when an armistice agreement was signed in a now-famous railroad car in France. By the late 1930s, Hollywood skipped ahead to the second war that was brewing in Europe and Asia. And, by World War I's centennial, there's no living witness left in the U.S. to the horrific fighting in 1917-1918. The last surviving American veteran of World War I, Frank Buckles, died in 2011 at the age of 110.

As Americans reach this centennial, three silent movies are

frequently mentioned in books and documentaries: Two of them are director D.W. Griffith's "[Intolerance](#)" (1916) and the actor Rudolph Valentino's starring role in "[Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#)" (1921), both of which involve supernatural and apocalyptic scenes of trench warfare. The third movie in this trio is writer Laurence Stallings' and director King Vidor's "[The Big Parade](#)" (1925), which stripped away all the ghosts and spiritual special effects of the two earlier blockbusters to give American moviegoers an honest look at Americans fighting in France. After all, the movie is based on Stallings' own tragic wartime experiences.

In 1917, Stallings joined the Marines, was deployed to France, found himself in the thick of the fighting during Germany's last great offensive, and was seriously wounded in the leg in the Battle of Belleau Wood. That's now considered a legendary battle in Marine Corps history after the Marines stood their ground and repelled continuous German assaults day after day. Stallings begged doctors not to amputate his leg, and they agreed to send him home still recovering from the wound. Later, he had to have it amputated.

Stallings came home so sobered by his wartime experiences that "The Big Parade" is a blend of both homespun American romance and heroism—and a chilling tale of war's many horrors.

The newly restored, 151-minute version of "The Big Parade" is as close as Hollywood ever got, in the 1920s, to capturing life and death in the trenches. The movie struck such a chord with American veterans and their families that it became one of the highest-grossing silent films ever made in the U.S. At the time he penned the screenplay for the movie, the wounded Stallings had become one of Hollywood's top writers. He was a celebrated man of letters coast to coast—including membership in New York City's famous Algonquin Round Table of leading intellectuals.

Stallings and Vidor managed to sway audiences with a story

that seemed so honest and so dramatically gripping that moviegoers were willing to accept what amounts to an anti-war conclusion. In the end, war seems to be a futile waste of precious human life. The movie's popularity also stemmed from the starring actor: John Gilbert, who was considered a major heartthrob in the era of silent films. Gilbert plays the rich young James "Jim" Apperson, who finds himself swept up in not just one—but three big parades before the movie is over.

The first big parade winds its way through American city streets when the U.S. finally declares war. Young Apperson is so stirred by this patriotic hooplah that he quickly enlists and very soon is deployed in France. A good hour of the film is a series of adventures among these newly minted American soldiers as they restlessly prepare for war in their French base camp. They brawl with other soldiers; they flirt with French girls. Apperson actually falls in love with a beautiful French girl named Melisande. Stallings wrote a series of scenes for the movie that likely were common experiences for American boys arriving in French villages. One example is a comic scene in which Melisande tries American chewing gum for the first time.

The film's tone shifts dramatically at the mid point, when the second big parade begins. Finally, after a long period of staging behind the lines, the U.S. troops are sent to the front. This moment is written by Stallings as a cataclysm of emotions. As a convoy of troop carriers roars away, poor Melisande is literally left in the dust of the French roadway—and her journey among the countless civilian victims of the conflict begins to unfold. With the sound of mournful drums in the soundtrack, Stallings and Vidor splash across a big black screen: "IT HAD BEGUN! THE BIG PARADE: MEN! GUNS! MEN! GUNS! MEN!"

The second half of the film is a gripping drama of these soldiers, mere mortals, facing the war's ferocious and deadly machinery: Machine guns roar from swooping biplanes; gigantic

cannons blast huge shells; poison gas spreads instant death. One long sequence, as the men march through a dense woods where they know snipers and machine guns are lurking, is as gripping as scenes in HBO's contemporary "Band of Brothers" series set in World War II.

Apperson suffers through the worst of trench warfare and in one climactic scene finds himself severely wounded and lying eye-to-eye with a wounded enemy soldier in a muddy foxhole between the trenches. Finally, he must face what he has learned about the nature of war and his own moral choices. "The Big Parade" was released before the modern era of Oscars, but this sequence shows Oscar-worthy writing, acting and direction in one long, continuous take.

At one point, Apperson even screams to the heavens: "Cheers when we left and when we get back! But who the hell cares—after this?"

Near the end of the film, we see a third parade: the refugees from Melissande's village, which has changed hands repeatedly in the deadly conflict, leaving her centuries-old home in rubble. Men, women and children form a haphazard parade away from the wreckage—immediately recognizable to all of us, today, as vulnerable stream of refugees desperately seeking any safe haven. This was not as common a sight when audiences saw this "third parade" in their hometown theaters in the mid-1920s. This was a decade before our own Dust Bowl turned the "Okies" into a parade of refugees headed toward California. The scene, as shot by Vidor, must have been stunning when originally shown to audiences

For the centennial of World War I, Warner Home Video has released a special, fully restored version available in a DVD format or a deluxe Blu-ray edition bound in a hardback book, which includes a multi-page "story behind the movie" along with the disk. If you have seen silent films only in bad old versions with poorly synched motion, then you may be

anticipating jerky movements and grainy scenes. On the contrary, Warner has brought back “The Big Parade” with gorgeous clarity from start to finish and an improved projection speed so movements seem natural.

The new Warner edition also features the superb musical track created in recent years by Carl Davis, a composer who specializes in re-scoring silent films. The Davis soundtrack works with Vidor’s visuals to bring back the original impact of this nearly century-old drama.

A fascinating way to reflect on the spiritual themes raised in “The Big Parade” is to begin by re-reading the famous Isaiah passage on God’s eternal call to protect widows and orphans. That’s certainly a big theme in this movie.

For even deeper reflection, read through the New Testament letter of James, where Chapter 1 reminds us, again, of the Isaiah call to look after orphans and widows. James Chapter 2 goes on to teach that ultimately mercy triumphs over judgment, a theme Apperson discovers in his foxhole; and James Chapter 3 describes the kind of peace-loving change of heart that transforms Apperson’s entire life as he returns from war a wounded and profoundly shaken man.

Want more terrific reading on these themes? Get a copy of the Rev. Dr. Benjamin Pratt’s [\*Ian Fleming’s Seven Deadlier Sins and 007’s Moral Compass\*](#), which looks at these same themes through the lens of James Bond and the letter of James. In his book, Pratt argues that Fleming deliberately named his fictional spy, James. In viewing “The Big Parade,” one wonders whether Stallings also was dipping into his New Testament when he named his main character James, as well.

**Care to use this film in a**

# **discussion group?**

Look for Edward McNulty's June 2014 issue of Visual Parables for a complete discussion guide to "The Big Parade," which includes questions to spark individual reflections and group discussions—coming Monday June 3.