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The Close-up

Alberto Orsi

The cinematographic terminology is so widespread that it’s now on everyone’s lips. Among its numerous brethren, the term ‘close-up’ has, more than the others, the honour of being known by the laymen in the field of cinema. Except that, none of those laymen—who feel their senses pleasurably delighted by the sight of the beautiful relief of a figure trembling with life, palpitating with emotion (a figure which, even though it appears larger than life on the screen, even though it seems to pull itself away in order to come closer to us and to welcome us into the circle of its quivering, even though it widens the contours of reality, still remains within the limits of artistic reality). As I was saying, not one of those inexpert people knows or can imagine to what well-established norms in cinematic art the so-called close-up corresponds.

The terrible thing is that many, if not most of the directors do not know this either.

It is commonly believed that the ‘close-up’, as well as a series of its derivations—the ‘detail shot’, the ‘big detail’, the ‘head shot’, the ‘big head shot’—has no other purpose than to highlight to a greater degree the aesthetic or artistic qualities of an actor or an actress, the elegance and richness of a detail in the scenery, or the enchanting strength of a natural decoration. It is generally thought that the ‘cut’ of a scene, the artistic part of the photograph in scenic terms, has the subjective judgement of the director as its only guideline.

This is a serious and fundamental error.

This is an error that has repercussions not only for the mise-en-scène, but also for the critics. Based on this error, many critics speak simultaneously of the parsimony or the abusive over-use of close-ups, without basing their judgements on any determined law. This happens in such an arbitrary way that criticism cannot be refuted precisely because it lacks a basis—even an erroneous one.

This happens because one does not think or ignores that the ‘close-up’ and its derivations only have to obey one essential and exclusive, objective law.

And what is this law?

In the presentation of the shots, or rather in the film staging, the director must follow the same rule that would guide an invisible spectator as he watches the scene.
Let us suppose that the scene, rather than taking place in a film studio, was taking place in a real setting, and that, from a helpful hole in one of the walls, a curious and indiscreet person could watch the events unfolding. He would always direct his own attention and his own gaze towards that point or those people that attracted him the most. Sometimes, in the most climactic moments, he would concentrate even on one tiny spot in the location or on the specific face of one of the actors, or even on a specific hand, or one particular object. The director must ‘intuit’ the state of mind of the spectator and present to him the frame to which he, in that given moment, would point his attention and his gaze.

As you can see, the whim of the director does not enter into any of this at all. This is only about that insightfulness about psychology which allows him to perfectly put himself in the place of the invisible spectator and completely adhere to [the spectator’s] psychological being.

This is perhaps the most important part of the difficult art of motion pictures. Indeed, the intrinsic goodness of a subject is infinitely less important than the way in which it is ‘staged’ In fact, it is from the *mise-en-scène* that the artistic truth of a subject is measured. That is why one could say that the true author of a subject is not the one who writes it, but the one who ‘staged’ it. That is why the subject should be ‘staged’ by the author of a subject, which is to say that the author should stage it because the staging and the *mise-en-scène* melt into one thing.

To illuminate anything that might remain unclear in spite of my intention of making myself obvious, here is an example.

Let’s imagine a living room bustling with certain characters. Behind the camera, a curious and indiscreet invisible person is watching, who will later, in front of the screen, be the audience.

What does invisible curious and indiscreet person do? He studies the entire scene with a rapid, but analytical gaze. In this instant, the invisible spectator is moved by a multitude of curiosities. His gaze stops on the objects [in the room]—examining the size of the place, the quality and the nature of the furnishings, the doors, the windows, etc.—and on the people—observing their clothing, their comportment, and their gestures. He is aware of all of this in a brief instant.

For this reason, the director must present [the spectator] the entirety of the frame with the so-called ‘master shot’ and leave before his eyes everything that corresponds to the spectator’s needs, not a moment more, not a moment less, keeping in mind the average speed of the perception of the audience. If the action is not essential or especially significant, the duration of the entire scene should only be the equivalent of a few
metres of film: between three and four metres. No more, because the curious invisible and indiscreet person is in a hurry. He is in a hurry to know what all of it is for and he already has sufficient means to recognize the various corners or spots in the room where subsequent scenes will take place.

Let us suppose that at this point a new character enters—a man. The invisible curious man, like all the actors in the scene will turn towards the door through which the newcomer has just entered. Since it is more than certain that the curious man will concentrate all of his own attention on the new character and will not see anything else in the place aside from him, the director would be committing a grave error if he were to insist on continuing to show him things that he is not looking at and does not want to see, or rather, the full scene. He will instead present him the famous 'close-up', or rather a frame in which only the threshold of the door and the new character making his entrance come into play.

Naturally, the figure's dimensions will be much greater than they would be in the 'master shot' and would be enlarged in accordance with how enlarged he would have been if the indiscreet and curious invisible man, urged on by curiosity, had come down from his hiding place, and certain of his own invisibility, had moved closer to the new character in order to leisurely observe him better.

But the newcomer is not standing still: he walks and he resolutely steers himself to the crowd of those present, his gaze seeks out a specific person: a woman.

The curious and indiscreet invisible man, who finds himself in the path of the visitor, will take a few steps back to let him pass by freely, without, however, taking his eyes off him.

The director will do the same. That is, he will move the camera back a bit in order to frame a wider part of the scene, which allows him to show the curious man the new character on his way toward the designated person. But, since the field would be too restricted for a 'close-up', the director will use a pan shot, making the camera carry out the same movements as the gaze of the indiscreet and curious invisible man.

The newcomer (it seems that his intentions are hardly good, and the invisible man is already starting to be suspicious of him) found the person he was looking for and stops threateningly right in front of her. Among all of these people, who is that person?

The curious invisible man asks himself the same question and follows the glances of the new arrival, resting his gaze on the woman, who is the object of his search. In that moment, he doesn't see anything else.
The director, must, therefore, show the woman and nothing else so that the indiscreet invisible man can observe her terrified expression. It is not enough: the curious man is not satisfied with observing her entire person, but stops with singular emotion on her face, taking in the slightest nuances in her feelings. And so, the director must go from the 'close-up', from the so-called detail to the 'big detail' or to the 'head' or to the 'big head'.

Then, the curious man retraces his steps, moves away, and re-embaces the preceding action in its fullness, which, although it is not the entire scene, is a part of the entire scene. That is, it is the part in which the drama is unfolding. The camera must do the same. To pull back and to frame the group of characters in their individual gestures of surprise, worry, fear. If among those present there is someone who shows his emotion in a way that particularly attracts the curious man's attention such that he comes closer to observe it, the director, too, will bring the camera closer and will frame the emotion in a close-up or in a 'big detail'. The size of the shot depends on just how much closer the curious man gets and if he sees a larger or smaller part of that character. Then the curious man returns to the preceding scene and will re-embrace all of the actors in the drama with his gaze.

The camera does the same. It goes back and repeats the preceding frame. Suddenly, the invisible man, astonished, turns his head. What's happening? The camera follows the same movement of the invisible man. It also turns in the same direction and sees—no more and nor less than the curious man—one of the onlookers (perhaps the one that he had just drawn closer to a moment before) place himself between the aggressor and his victim.

Then, the curious man and the camera draw closer. They no longer see the onlookers. They each concentrate their attention on this threesome, and naturally, see them in 'close-up'.

While they follow the scene, their hearts pounding, the invisible man and the camera get the impression of a movement. To better observe, they move in even closer. They see nothing more than a part of the aggressor's body: a hand that thrusts into a pants pocket and pulls out a gun. Here is a 'big detail'. In the swiftness of the gesture, the particulars of the weapon—which is small in size—have equally escaped the attention of the curious man and of the camera. They get even closer and strain their eyes to see: they see a revolver. This 'big detail' is even more 'big detail' than the previous one. The only thing in the shot is the weapon in all its detail at the end of an outstretched arm.

Who is it pointed at?

The curious man and the camera back up a little, following the direction of the weapon and see, in close-up, only her: the woman is the target. They
no longer even see the aggressor, until they turn to him and then, they only see him ferociously and cruelly level the gun and fire it.

Instinctively, they turn to the victim, and in another close-up, they see her fall backwards. At this point the camera would make be making a serious error if it were to frame other people or other things: it would separate itself from the invisible and indiscreet curious man, who is the only arbiter of the ‘frame’.

Only now does the curious man jump backwards and instinctively move away while everyone rushes to the victim. And it is precisely now that the camera will follow him and will pause for a moment, framing the entire opening scene, ending just as it began.

All of this must happen quickly, in shots of at most two, three, four, or five metres each, even in ‘details’ of fifty centimetres, all according to how long the curious and indiscreet invisible man will stop to watch them. The complete scene will not include more than forty or fifty metres of film.

Who is it, then, that should determine ‘mise-en-scène’?

The curious and invisible indiscreet person who [is sitting] in front of the screen will take the grave and anonymous name of ‘the audience’.

The director—that is, the camera—only has to follow him in all of his movements.

The formula could not be any easier.

It all rests on knowing how to see the ‘invisible man’. How many people know how to see him?


Notes

1. [Translator’s note. The fragmentary nature of the translation reflects the author’s own style.]

2. [Translator’s note. The translation cannot convey that ‘l’invisibile’ in these last two sentences refers simultaneously to ‘the invisible’ as well as to ‘the invisible [curious and indiscreet] person’. Throughout the article, the reference has been to different variations of ‘l’invisibile’, ‘curioso’, and ‘indiscreto’.]