

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE FACE OF MAN

The basis and possibility of an art of the film is that everyone and everything looks what it is

EVERY ART ALWAYS deals with human beings, it is a human manifestation and presents human beings. To paraphrase Marx: 'The root of all art is man'. When the film close-up strips the veil of our imperceptiveness and insensitivity from the hidden little things and shows us the face of objects, it still shows us man, for what makes objects expressive are the human expressions projected on to them. The objects only reflect our own selves, and this is what distinguished art from scientific knowledge (although even the latter is to a great extent subjectively determined). When we see the face of things, we do what the ancients did in creating *gods* in man's image and breathing a human soul into them. The close-ups of the film are the creative instruments of this mighty visual anthropomorphism.

What was more important, however, than the discovery of the physiognomy of things, was the discovery of the human face. Facial expression is the most subjective manifestation of man, more subjective even than speech, for vocabulary and grammar are subject to more or less universally valid rules and conventions, while the play of features, as has already been said, is a manifestation not governed by objective canons, even though it is largely a matter of imitation. This most subjective and individual of human manifestations is rendered objective in the close-up.

#### A NEW DIMENSION

If the close-up lifts some object or some part of an object out of its surroundings, we nevertheless perceive it as existing in space; we do not for an instant forget that the hand, say,

which is shown by the close-up, belongs to some human being. It is precisely this connection which lends meaning to its every movement. But when Griffith's genius and daring first projected gigantic 'severed heads' on to the cinema screen, he not only brought the human face closer to us in space, he also transposed it from space into another dimension. We do not mean, of course, the cinema screen and the patches of light and shadow moving across it, which being visible things, can be conceived only in space; we mean the expression on the face as revealed by the close-up. We have said that the isolated hand would lose its meaning, its expression, if we did not know and imagine its connection with some human being. The facial expression on a face is complete and comprehensible in itself and therefore we need not think of it as existing in space and time. Even if we had just seen the same face in the middle of a crowd and the close-up merely separated it from the others, we would still feel that we have suddenly been left alone with this one face to the exclusion of the rest of the world. Even if we have just seen the owner of the face in a long shot, when we look into the eyes in a close-up, we no longer think of that wide space, because the expression and significance of the face has no relation to space and no connection with it. Facing an isolated face takes us out of space, our consciousness of space is cut out and we find ourselves in another dimension: that of physiognomy. The fact that the features of the face can be seen side by side, i.e. in space—that the eyes are at the top, the ears at the sides and the mouth lower down—loses all reference to space when we see, not a figure of flesh and bone, but an expression, or in other words when we see emotions, moods, intentions and thoughts, things which although our eyes can see them, are not in space. For feelings, emotions, moods, intentions, thoughts are not themselves things pertaining to space, even if they are rendered visible by means which are.

#### MELODY AND PHYSIOGNOMY

We will be helped in understanding this peculiar dimension by Henri Bergson's analysis of time and duration. A melody,

said Bergson, is composed of single notes which follow each other in sequence, i.e. in time. Nevertheless a melody has no dimension in time, because the first note is made an element of the melody only because it refers to the next note and because it stands in a definite relation to all other notes down to the last. Hence the last note, which may not be played for some time, is yet already present in the first note as a melody-creating element. And the last note completes the melody only because we hear the first note along with it. The notes sound one after the other in a time-sequence, hence they have a real duration, but the coherent line of melody has no dimension in time; the relation of the notes to each other is not a phenomenon occurring in time. The melody is not born gradually in the course of time but is already in existence as a complete entity as soon as the first note is played. How else would we know that a melody is begun? The single notes have duration in time, but their relation to each other, which gives meaning to the individual sounds, is outside time. A logical deduction also has its sequence, but premise and conclusion do not follow one another in time. The process of thinking as a psychological process may have duration; but the logical forms, like melodies, do not belong to the dimension of time.

Now facial expression, physiognomy, has a relation to space similar to the relation of melody to time. The single features, of course, appear in space; but the significance of their relation to one another is not a phenomenon pertaining to space, no more than are the emotions, thoughts and ideas which are manifested in the facial expressions we see. They are picture-like and yet they seem outside space; such is the psychological effect of facial expression.

#### SILENT SOLILOQUY

The modern stage no longer uses the spoken soliloquy, although without it the characters are silenced just when they are the most sincere, the least hampered by convention: when they are alone. The public of to-day will not tolerate the spoken soliloquy, allegedly because it is 'unnatural'. Now the film has brought us the silent soliloquy, in which a face can speak with

the subtlest shades of meaning without appearing unnatural and arousing the distaste of the spectators. In this silent monologue the solitary human soul can find a tongue more candid and uninhibited than in any spoken soliloquy, for it speaks instinctively, subconsciously. The language of the face cannot be suppressed or controlled. However disciplined and practisedly hypocritical a face may be, in the enlarging close-up we see even that it is concealing something, that it is looking a lie. For such things have their own specific expressions superposed on the feigned one. It is much easier to lie in words than with the face and the film has proved it beyond doubt.

In the film the mute soliloquy of the face speaks even when the hero is not alone, and herein lies a new great opportunity for depicting man. The poetic significance of the soliloquy is that it is a manifestation of mental, not physical, loneliness. Nevertheless, on the stage a character can speak a monologue only when there is no one else there, even though a character might feel a thousand times more lonely if alone among a large crowd. The monologue of loneliness may raise its voice within him a hundred times even while he is audibly talking to someone. Hence the most deep-felt human soliloquies could not find expression on the stage. Only the film can offer the possibility of such expression, for the close-up can lift a character out of the heart of the greatest crowd and show how solitary it is in reality and what it feels in this crowded solitude.

The film, especially the sound film, can separate the words of a character talking to others from the mute play of features by means of which, in the middle of such a conversation, we are made to overhear a mute soliloquy and realize the difference between this soliloquy and the audible conversation. What a flesh-and-blood actor can show on the real stage is at most that his words are insincere and it is a mere convention that the partner in such a conversation is blind to what every spectator can see. But in the isolated close-up of the film we can see to the bottom of a soul by means of such tiny movements of facial muscles which even the most observant partner would never perceive.

A novelist can, of course, write a dialogue so as to weave into it what the speakers think to themselves while they are



talking. But by so doing he splits up the sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, but always awe-inspiring, unity between spoken word and hidden thought with which this contradiction is rendered manifest in the human face and which the film was the first to show us in all its dazzling variety.

#### 'POLYPHONIC' PLAY OF FEATURES

The film first made possible what, for lack of a better description, I call the 'polyphonic' play of features. By it I mean the appearance on the same face of contradictory expressions. In a sort of physiognomic chord a variety of feelings, passions and thoughts are synthesized in the play of the features as an adequate expression of the multiplicity of the human soul.

Asta Nielsen once played a woman hired to seduce a rich young man. The man who hired her is watching the results from behind a curtain. Knowing that she is under observation, Asta Nielsen feigns love. She does it convincingly: the whole gamut of appropriate emotion is displayed in her face. Nevertheless we are aware that it is only play-acting, that it is a sham, a mask. But in the course of the scene Asta Nielsen really falls in love with the young man. Her facial expression shows little change; she had been 'registering' love all the time and done it well. How else could she now show that this time she was really in love? Her expression changes only by a scarcely perceptible and yet immediately obvious nuance—and what a few minutes before was a sham is now the sincere expression of a deep emotion. Then Asta Nielsen suddenly remembers that she is under observation. The man behind the curtain must not be allowed to read her face and learn that she is now no longer feigning, but really feeling love. So Asta now pretends to be pretending. Her face shows a new, by this time threefold, change. First she feigns love, then she genuinely shows love, and as she is not permitted to be in love in good earnest, her face again registers a sham, a pretence of love. But now it is this pretence that is a lie. Now she is lying that she is lying. And we can see all this clearly in her face, over which she has drawn two different masks. At such times an invisible face appears in front of the real one, just as spoken

words can by association of ideas conjure up things unspoken and unseen, perceived only by those to whom they are addressed.

In the early days of the silent film Griffith showed a scene of this character. The hero of the film is a Chinese merchant. Lillian Gish, playing a beggar-girl who is being pursued by enemies, collapses at his door. The Chinese merchant finds her, carries her into his house and looks after the sick girl. The girl slowly recovers, but her face remains stone-like in its sorrow. 'Can't you smile?' the Chinese asks the frightened child who is only just beginning to trust him. 'I'll try,' says Lillian Gish, picks up a mirror and goes through the motions of a smile, aiding her face muscles with her fingers. The result is a painful, even horrible mask which the girl now turns towards the Chinese merchant. But his kindly friendly eyes bring a real smile to her face. The face itself does not change; but a warm emotion lights it up from inside and an intangible nuance turns the grimace into a real expression.

In the days of the silent film such a close-up provided an entire scene. A good idea of the director and a fine performance on the part of the actor gave as a result an interesting, moving, new experience for the audience.

#### MICROPHYSIOGNOMY

In the silent film facial expression, isolated from its surroundings, seemed to penetrate to a strange new dimension of the soul. It revealed to us a new world—the world of microphysiognomy which could not otherwise be seen with the naked eye or in everyday life. In the sound film the part played by this 'microphysiognomy' has greatly diminished because it is now apparently possible to express in words much of what facial expression apparently showed. But it is never the same—many profound emotional experiences can never be expressed in words at all.

Not even the greatest writer, the most consummate artist of the pen, could tell in words what Asta Nielsen tells with her face in close-up as she sits down to her mirror and tries to make up for the last time her aged, wrinkled face, raddled with

poverty, misery, disease and prostitution, when she is expecting her lover, released after ten years in jail; a lover who has retained his youth in captivity because life could not touch him there.

#### ASTA AT THE MIRROR

She looks into the mirror, her face pale and deadly earnest. It expresses anxiety and unspeakable horror. She is like a general who, hopelessly encircled with his whole army, bends once more, for the last time, over his maps to search for a way out and finds there is no escape. Then she begins to work feverishly, attacking that disgustingly raddled face with a trembling hand. She holds her lipstick as Michelangelo might have held his chisel on the last night of his life. It is a life-and-death struggle. The spectator watches with bated breath as this woman paints her face in front of her mirror. The mirror is cracked and dull, and from it the last convulsions of a tortured soul look out on you. She tries to save her life with a little rouge! No good! She wipes it off with a dirty rag. She tries again. And again. Then she shrugs her shoulders and wipes it all off with a movement which clearly shows that she has now wiped off her life. She throws the rag away. A close-up shows the dirty rag falling on the floor and after it has fallen, sinking down a little more. This movement of the rag is also quite easy to understand—it is the last convulsion of a death agony.

In this close-up 'microphysiognomy' showed a deeply moving human tragedy with the greatest economy of expression. It was a great new form of art. The sound film offers much fewer opportunities for this kind of thing, but by no means excludes it and it would be a pity if such opportunities were to be neglected, unnecessarily making us all the poorer.

#### *Baltic Deputy*

In this film there is a fine long monologue without words, in a close-up of the old professor's face. Professor Polezhayev has joined the Bolsheviks and therefore none of the guests invited

to his birthday party has come. He is left alone at an empty table laid for many guests. The table is a depressing sight and the professor's wife weeps. Suddenly the old man turns away and goes to his laboratory. There he looks, not at the empty festive table, but at a bench laden with retorts, test-tubes and other apparatus, cheerfully glittering tools of his life's work, his ever-faithful loyal friends. This alone would make a fine close-up. But the expression coming to the professor's face is an even finer one. Here is sorrowful defiance, a proud faith in spite of everything, a great mute vow of fidelity to the revolution, all in an unspoken soliloquy. Russian audiences broke into spontaneous applause when they saw this scene.

Not only psychological subtleties or moving emotions can be shown in such close-ups, but greater things too, all the pathos of human greatness. The simple, immediately convincing expression on a human face avoids the danger of over-ornate phrases, or rhetoric. (Of course only if the expression is convincing. The play of features can also have an insincere rhetoric of its own.) I remember Shchukin playing Lenin in the film *Lenin in October*, notably in the scene where he is talking to a little child. The warmth of a paternal tenderness is still on his face when the news is brought of the assassination of his close friend and comrade Uritski. He does not utter a word, only turns his face away. He remains silent for a long time, but his face is all the more eloquent in a microphysiognomic close-up. The expression of love and tenderness does not fade off his face, but is slowly overlaid by another emotion: pain. Then comes the third layer: we see anger hardening into inexorable, fear-inspiring hatred. These four emotions are all seen together and simultaneously on Shchukin's face like a chord of four notes.

The director let this scene follow immediately on the scene with the child, because he wanted to show in this synthesis of emotions the true soul of the great revolutionary. He wanted to show what was most important: that hardness was only the reverse side of tenderness, that the revolutionary could hate so fiercely only because he could love so tenderly.



## SPEECH AND FACIAL EXPRESSION

In the silent film the actor spoke, just as he does in the talkie. But in the close-ups of the silent film we *saw* the actor talking and this, too, was expressive play of features. Those who can see a speaker as they listen to what he says, see and hear something different from those who only hear.

In the silent film the way in which an actor moved his mouth in speaking was also a means of facial expression. That is why we all understood the actors of all nationalities so well. We understood what was meant when a man hissed his words from between clenched teeth, or spat them out like the darting tongue of a poisonous snake. This was acting, in the true sense of the word. We knew what it meant when a drunk pushed out his words with a heavy tongue through slack lips. We understood when the hero let the words drop contemptuously from the corner of his mouth. This was one of the most interesting features of the close-up, for there were a thousand different ways of speaking when the words were only seen, but not heard, by the audience.

## SPEECH IN THE SOUND FILM

The actor in the silent film spoke in a way intelligible to the eyes, not the ears. He could do this precisely because he had no need to speak in a manner intelligible to the ear, he had no need to shape his mouth for the proper pronunciation of sounds, to open his mouth for a broad 'a' or purse it for a 'u'. The reason for any movement of the mouth was only to express some emotion—it was not a rational gesture conforming to the requirements of articulate intelligible speech. This art of expression was virtually killed by the talkie, because a mouth that speaks intelligibly to the ear, can no longer remain intelligible to the eye. It is no longer a spontaneous vehicle of expression, like the other features of the face—it has become a sound-producing instrument.

It is for this reason that the sound film avoids as much as possible the showing in close-up of human faces in the act of speaking, for at such times a part of the face, to wit the mouth,

is devoid of expression and because it nevertheless is in active movement, it often appears grotesque. This disadvantage meant that we had to abandon those close-ups which threw a light into the microphysiognomic depths of the human heart, at least while a character on the screen was speaking.

But even so every speaking face on the screen retained an expressiveness just sufficient to render unpalatable the synchronized substitution of another language for the original. Not only because every word of the dubbed text had to be adapted to the movement of the speaking mouth, often resulting in a ridiculous and unnatural phraseology—there is also an inevitable inartistic, sham quality in all synchronization, because every language has inseparably pertaining to it a play of features characteristic of the people speaking the given language. To speak English and accompany the speech with Italian gestures is a monstrosity and the audience felt this. It is for this reason that dubbing has been abandoned more and more in favour of translated titles.

## ASTA SPEAKS

In one of her old silent films (*Vanina* or *The Wedding under the Gallows*) Asta Nielsen attempts to deliver her lover from prison under sentence of death. She has obtained the keys, she is in his cell, the road to freedom is open. But only for a few minutes. The lover is lying in numb despair on the straw and refuses to budge. Now Asta begins to talk to the prisoner, putting all her own energy and determination into her words. She speaks rapidly, desperately, with furious ardour. We cannot hear what she is saying. No title tells us. There is no need for it. The situation speaks for itself. It is obvious that she is trying to put heart into him and repeating again and again: 'Come, there is no time to lose, come or we must both perish!' This is not the real text of Asta's tremendous, visible exhortation—the real text is the fierce struggle between love and fear which no words could express. Seeing her as she speaks makes a deeper impression than if we saw her tear her hair or claw her face in despair. She speaks like this for a long time; and so much audible speech would have been quite unbearable.

## AN EXAMPLE FROM RUSSIA

Most instructive is the case of Michael Romm and his film of Maupassant's *Boule de Suif*. Romm made this film as a silent film although the sound film was already fully developed at the time. The silence of this film and everything resulting from it was thus no technical necessity, but intentional and deliberately accepted style—rather like the etcher's renunciation of colour. In this silent film Romm did in fact achieve many pictorial and dramatic effects which would have been impossible in a sound film.

The story is well-known, but will bear repetition: a little Parisian tart, escaping in a bus from the Prussians with a number of other passengers, is demonstratively treated with contempt by her fellow-travellers, who, while quite willing to eat generously proffered food, keep her at arm's length in all other respects. The bus is held up by a Prussian patrol and the officer commanding it refuses to allow the fugitives to proceed unless the little cocotte spends the night with him. Two nuns who form part of the strictly virtuous company are the most zealous in trying to persuade the reluctant prostitute to comply with the Prussian officer's demands. Under the pelt-ing rain of their words the little street-walker bows her head. We see the nuns' mouths move with hysterical rapidity. A few minutes before, when they were praying in the immobile poses of statues, no one would have believed that they were capable of such violent passions. The arguments the nuns use to persuade the girl are presented to the audience in two short titles and their essence is that as she is a whore anyway one man more or less would make no difference to her; on the other hand she would be acting in a way to please God if she slept with the German. Much more convincing and effective than their words, however, is their manner of speaking and this can be shown only visually. The incessant, irresistible cataract of words, their cruel, determined, unbearably violent insistence is much more convincingly shown by the *visible*, rapid ceaseless motion of the lips than could ever be conveyed by making *audible* the same, or slightly varied, argu-

ments repeated over and over again. The latter would show only hypocrisy. The former show a fierce passion as well. The loquacity itself is characteristic, but it would have been both tiring and boring to listen to it all. In a sound film the stream of words could never have rushed on with such rapidity—the words would have been unintelligible at such a pace. The motions of speech were here far more expressive and convincing than any spoken words could have been; hence they could be shown only in a silent film.

## DUMB SHOW

The characters in the silent film spoke, but their speech was only visible, not audible. Only the pantomime has genuinely mute characters and hence this is a basically different form of art. Pantomime is mute not only to the ear but to the eye. For the pantomime is not only a silent art, it is the art of being silent, expressing what rises from the depths of silence. The gestures and mimicry of pantomime are not an accompaniment to words which have been spoken and which we cannot hear, but the expression, by means of gestures, of the profound experience of music, the music that lives in the depths of silence. It is interesting to observe that in a film in which we see onlookers watching dancers dancing, the motionless public appears more realistic to us than the dancers who are in rapid movement. The reason for this is that the immobility of the audience is the familiar everyday behaviour of all onlookers, while the movements of the dancers express a distant, exotic experience outside our workaday usage.

## KEEPING SILENT NO SOLUTION

I must anticipate a little here, as the problem of silence will arise again later. The unsolved inner contradictions of the sound film are manifested among other things in the fact that nearly every director prefers to avoid much speaking and wants scripts in which there is as little dialogue as possible. This in itself discredits the talkie and shows that it is an un-



natural form of art—rather as though a painter were to prefer painting pictures without colours.

This problem cannot on any account be solved by making the characters speak little or not at all. The silence of pantomime characters is an inherent quality of this *art form*. But in the film it is a quality, a characteristic of the *personages*, not of the art form. If a human being is silent, although he or she might speak (either audibly as in the talkie or only visibly, as in the silent film) then we attribute this silence to his or her character or to the dramatic situation. We cannot use this powerful means of characterization just for the purpose of avoiding dialogue; the result would be that all the characters in our films would be grotesquely surly and taciturn for no apparent reason.

#### TEMPO OF MIMICRY

The mute soliloquies of physiognomy, the wordless lyrics of facial expression can convey many things for the registering of which other arts possess no instruments. Not only can facial expression itself tell us things for which we have no words—the rhythm and tempo of changes in facial expression can also indicate the oscillation of moods which cannot be put into words. A single twitch of a facial muscle may express a passion for the expression of which a long sentence would be needed. By the time the character would get to the end of such a sentence, his mood may have changed more than once and the words would perhaps no longer be true when he spoke them. The most rapid tempo of speech lags behind the flow and throb of emotions; but facial expression can always keep up with them, providing a faithful and intelligible expression for them all.

There is another Griffith film in which the heroine (Lillian Gish) is a naïve, trustful girl who is seduced by an unscrupulous cynic. The seducer tells her with a sneer that he has deceived her. Lillian Gish, the loving, trusting girl, cannot believe her ears, or rather she is incapable of realizing all at once that her life is in ruins. She knows that what the man says is true, but would nevertheless like to believe that he is

joking. For it is impossible that he should be so evil. In this helpless, breathless struggle, this alternating between faith and despair, Lillian Gish laughs and weeps by turns perhaps a dozen times, while she stares at her seducer without saying a word. This two-minute dumb-show, which one could see in close-up, was one of the great artistic achievements of 'microphysiognomics'. It would in itself suffice to immortalize the art of the silent film—the silent film which has since died.

It is impossible to express such an oscillation of emotions in their original rhythm by means of the spoken word. Described in a novel it would take pages, the reading of which would require much more time than the described scene itself. Here again we find an emotional reality which can be shown adequately by the film alone. But not only by the silent film. There is no technical obstacle to such scenes in a sound film. But the sound films of to-day seem to have torn the strings from their own instruments. In their primitive banality they do not know and do not wish to know the possibilities of their own medium and squander the rich heritage of the silent film.

#### MUTE DIALOGUES

In the last years of the silent film the human face had grown more and more visible, that is, more and more expressive. Not only had 'microphysiognomy' developed but together with it the faculty of understanding its meaning. In the last years of the silent film we saw not only masterpieces of silent monologue but of mute dialogue as well. We saw conversations between the facial expressions of two human beings who understood the movements of each others' faces better than each others' words and could perceive shades of meaning too subtle to be conveyed in words.

A necessary result of this was—as I will show in detailed analysis later in connection with the dramaturgy of the film—that the more space and time in the film was taken up by the inner drama revealed in the 'microphysiognomic' close-up, the less was left of the predetermined 8,000 feet of film for all the external happenings. The silent film could thus dive

into the depths—it was given the possibility of presenting a passionate life-and-death struggle almost exclusively by close-ups of faces.

Dreyer's film *Jeanne d'Arc* provided a convincing example of this in the powerful, lengthy, moving scene of the Maid's examination. Fifty men are sitting in the same place all the time in this scene. Several hundred feet of film show nothing but big close-ups of heads, of faces. We move in the spiritual dimension of facial expression alone. We neither see nor feel the space in which the scene is in reality enacted. Here no riders gallop, no boxers exchange blows. Fierce passions, thoughts, emotions, convictions battle here, but their struggle is not in space. Nevertheless this series of duels between looks and frowns, duels in which eyes clash instead of swords, can hold the attention of an audience for ninety minutes without flagging. We can follow every attack and riposte of these duels on the faces of the combatants; the play of their features indicates every stratagem, every sudden onslaught. The silent film has here brought an attempt to present a drama of the spirit closer to realization than any stage play has ever been able to do.

#### DETAILS OF FACES IN CLOSE-UP

Everything I have said until now about facial expression and play of features referred to the *whole* face. This sort of facial expression is more or less under control—a man may, if he wishes, prevent his feelings from showing in his face—he may even feign other emotions, dissemble, tell a lie with his facial expression.

But the camera can get so close to the face that it can show 'microphysiognomic' details even of this detail of the body and then we find that there are certain regions of the face which are scarcely or not at all under voluntary control and the expression of which is neither deliberate nor conscious and may often betray emotions that contradict the general expression appearing on the rest of the face.

This has a great artistic value and significance because speech, that is the speech of an adult and sober human being,

has no involuntary and unconscious elements. If someone wants to tell a lie and is a capable liar, his words will serve him almost to perfection. But his face has areas over which he has no control. He may knit his brows and wrinkle his forehead as much as he likes, the camera creeps up quite close and shows that his chin, which has no dirigible mimicry, is weak and frightened for all the bravado of the rest of the face. In vain does his mouth smile ever so sweetly—the lobe of his ear, the side of a nostril shown in isolated magnification reveal the hidden coarseness and cruelty.

In one of Eisenstein's films there is a priest, a handsome, fine figure of a man. His noble features, his inspired eyes are made even more radiant by a glorious voice. He is like the sublime image of a saint. But then the camera gives an isolated big close-up of one eye; and a cunningly watchful furtive glance slinks out from under his beautiful silky eyelashes like an ugly caterpillar out of a delicate flower. Then the handsome priest turns his head and a close-up shows the back of his head and the lobe of his ear from behind. And we see the ruthless, vicious selfishness of a coarse peasant expressed in them. This expression of the nape of the neck and ear-lobe is so incisive, so irresistibly convincing and so disgusting that when the noble face reappears, it is like a deceptive screen concealing a dangerous enemy. The expression of the whole face cannot cover up the expression of its details, if these details betray a different, more profound truth. Graphology claims to read the writer's true character from the handwriting even if what is written down is an untruth, but the ability to read handwriting in this way is a very rare gift. The art of reading faces was about to become the very useful property of the masses, thanks to the silent film.

#### I CAN SEE THAT I CANNOT SEE

In the early days of the silent film 'microphysiognomics' had already shown that one can read more in a close-up of a face than what is visibly written on it. On a face, too, one can read 'between the lines'.

The Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa was a film star of



the early silent film. His speciality was an iron immobility of feature and his feelings and passions did not show in his face. His acting was notable for his restraint, his failure to act. How then did he nevertheless express his emotions so intelligibly that we understood what was going on in the film and were interested in the fate of the character he played?

Once he acted this scene: he is captured by robbers and bound, then unexpectedly confronted with his wife whom he had believed in safety and who is now also a captive. He must not betray the fact that he knows this woman—his life and hers depend on concealing this. The bandits have him covered with their guns and watch his face intently. A movement of a muscle, the slightest hint of any love, tenderness, anxiety, surprise or fear, any indication of what is going on inside him, would betray them both and be their death. But Hayakawa's hard Japanese face is a mask of stone. Nothing shows in his indifferent face of what we know is ravaging his heart. He looks into his wife's frightened eyes with a hard look and we are convinced that the bandits believe him when he says that he does not know this woman.

Nevertheless we can see something in his eye. Not really something, for we could not say what it is. But we can see that there is something there that we cannot see. We can read between the lines of the petrified features—not only excitement and a deep affection, but a consoling encouragement that tells the wife's frightened, fixed stare: 'Speak not, move not, know me not. Fear not, all will be well!' It is the 'microphysiognomics' of the close-up that have given us this subtlest play of features, almost imperceptible and yet so convincing. The invisible face behind the visible had made its appearance, the invisible face visible only to the one person to whom it addresses itself—and to the audience.

#### SIMPLIFIED ACTING

In films in which a slight movement can express a deep passion and the tragedy of a soul can manifest itself in the twitching of an eyebrow, broad gesturing and grimacing become unbearable. The technique and style of 'microphysiogn-

nomics' greatly simplified the acting of film actors. Both gestures and play of features had to be toned down in comparison with the technique of the live stage. This is one of the reasons why the acting style of very old films now appears exaggerated and ridiculous. The microscopic close-up is an inexorable censor of 'naturalness' of expression; it immediately shows up the difference between spontaneous reaction and deliberate, unnatural, forced gesture. Only nature moves naturally, even in human beings, and only the unconscious reflex-like reactions of the soul impress the onlooker as natural gestures.

Even the best film actors are told by the director when a close-up is about to be made: 'Do what you like as long as you don't "act". Don't do anything at all, just feel and imagine the situation you are in and what then appears in the face of its own accord as it were and flexes the muscles in gesture is enough.' The close-up puts emphasis on the most delicate nuances.

We cannot use glycerine tears in a close-up. What makes a deep impression is not a fat, oily tear rolling down a face—what moves us is to see the glance growing misty, and moisture gathering in the corner of the eye—moisture that as yet is scarcely a tear. This is moving, because this cannot be faked.

#### CHANGES IN TASTE

The simplification of acting brought about by the close-up changed more than the style of acting. There was also a change in taste accompanying the change of trend which substituted a neo-naturalistic tendency for the neo-romanticism of Rostand and Maeterlinck on the western European stage. After the first world war and the hysterical emotional fantasies of expressionism, a 'documentary', dry, anti-romantic and anti-emotional style was the fashion in the film as in the other arts.

The simplified acting demanded by the close-up conformed to the new taste for the objective and unromantic and this circumstance did much to popularize the American style of acting in Europe.

## SIMPLE FACES

Not only romantic acting went out of fashion but romantic faces as well. Especially among the male stars, popularity was diverted to those who had commonplace faces. Conrad Veidt's romantic, exalted, almost expressionist head, which brought him world success in the years immediately following the first world war, no longer appealed to the public. Not only was he crowded out by ordinary commonplace faces—he himself did his best to tone down his eccentric appearance and look as commonplace as possible, in order to be able to compete with rival stars. The decorative, out-of-the-ordinary face now seemed a mask and no longer seemed attractive. Beauty, too, grew less important, for in the intimacy of the close-up the intimate details of the face gained in significance and such details could be discovered by the camera—and the spectator—in ugly faces no less than in handsome ones.

## SIMPLE VOICES

A related phenomenon is the aversion of the modern director to his characters having too fine and too well-trained voices—except when they play a professional singer or something of the sort, of course. A too fine voice is not 'natural' and gives the impression of an artistic performance and not of a presentation of real life. A song sung by an untrained voice is more intimate and human in its effect.

## NATURE SEEMS UNNATURAL

The value placed on being natural increased to such an extent that directors often attempted to do away with professional actors altogether and take their characters 'from the street'. So far as extras were concerned it was certainly easier to find the right types among the crowds in the street if it was only a matter of episodic parts which involved no acting, and required merely being present and showing some sort of a face. But if the perfectly suitable type had to act and parti-

cularly if he had to speak, the bad, amateurish acting often nullified the effect produced by the suitable physiognomy.

## NATURE TURNED TO ART

To try to cut raw nature into a film is a dangerous business. The fanatics of 'naturalness' (such as Eisenstein and Pudovkin were at one time), simply brought in extras from the street and expected them to move naturally in the set, because they were not actors. But such strangers could not be natural, precisely because they were not actors and hence the studio was something unnatural to them, making them unnatural themselves. But such adherents of the natural did even more than this: they attempted to cut real, natural facial expressions and gestures caught by the camera in the street, into the artistic sequences of their films. They tried to produce art by means of montage, by piecing together natural snapshots. If they wanted a woman looking in terror into the barrel of a gun directed at her and the acting of an actress was not natural enough for their requirements, they went out and searched for a truer one in the street. A woman screamed in terror because the pram with her baby in it overturned by accident. She was photographed without her knowledge and then this really unselfconscious, naturally terrified face was cut into the picture to face the gun.

I am quoting this instance only as an illustration of the method. This method is always a deception; it is rendered possible only by the fact that our physiognomic culture is not as yet sufficiently sensitive to be able to differentiate between terrors induced by different causes—or different laughter for that matter. The close-up which has made us so sensitive to the naturalness of a facial expression will sooner or later develop our sensitivity further, so that we shall be able to discern in a facial expression its cause as well as its nature. Even now we often meet with the paradoxical situation that in the good acting of a good actor things appear perfectly natural, while the photographed reproduction of actual reality does not seem natural at all, as for instance in snapshots of a running man or horse.



Sometimes directors are compelled to produce facial expressions by means outside the story, as for instance in the case of children or primitive exotic characters. The more exotic and foreign the play of features, the more convincing it will be—we are insufficiently acquainted with Zulus or Chens to know when the expression is faked.

#### EDUCATION IN PHYSIOGNOMICS

In his book on film production, Pudovkin describes in detail the method by means of which he could harness the natural unconscious reactions he evoked and create a conscious artistic effect. But it is precisely this same book that shows how great and conscious an artist is required if unconscious nature is to be thus used and formed into a work of art. A vast physiognomical sensitivity is required if unconscious facial expressions are to be correctly assessed and used; if the expressions on faces, taken from a variety of situations and scenes, are to be so collated as to bring them into relation with each other and respond to each other like the phrases of a dialogue. This great director of silent films had the sure and sensitive eye which could discern in a chance face picked up in the street the very shade of expression required in a given scene. But in the sound film this method could be applied only to detail close-ups of silent crowd scenes.

#### CHILDREN AND SAVAGES

The acting of children is always natural, for make-believe is a natural thing to them. They do not want to 'register' this or that, like an actor; they just pretend that they are not what they are but something else and that they are not in the situation in which they are but in some other. This is not acting—it is a natural manifestation of youthful consciousness and it can be observed not only in the human young but in the young of other species as well. It is a transposition such as occurs in dreams, or in a trance. All those who have worked with children on the stage or in films will know that children should not be 'directed', they must be played with. It is not

their acting which is natural—their nature is play-acting.

The same can be observed in savages or primitives. The close-up often reveals unusual gestures and mimicry—unusual, that is, from the white man's viewpoint. If we understand them, they have a particularly fresh and immediately strong effect. But it often happens that we fail to understand them.

Among the red Indians and Chinese for instance the expression of pain or deep sorrow often looks like a smile to our eyes. Not always and not immediately do we know what it is intended to convey. But if we recognize it for what it is, an expression of pain, it moves us deeply, precisely because it is unusual.

#### GROUP PHYSIOGNOMIES

There was no need of close-ups to show us the typical *common traits* of the great coloured races, the group physiognomies recognizable as Negro, Chinese, Eskimo, etc. On the contrary these exotic faces seemed all alike to us only because we knew them so superficially. Here the close-up was needed to show us the individual differences between one Chinese and the other, one Negro and the other.

Nor was it a discovery to see characteristic English or French, Italian or German types in the films. We had known them well enough before. The film could at most improve our knowledge of the type by showing us new varieties.

In any case, it is difficult to say which type of face is really representative of any nation or race. Is there an undisputed, generally accepted English face? If so, what is it like? And why should that particular face be the truly typical and not some other face? As there is a science of comparative linguistics, so there should be a comparative science of gesture and mimicry, with research into these in order to find the common fundamental forms of expressive movement. The film offers the means to establish such a science.

#### CLASS FACES

An important innovation introduced by the film was the

'typing' of class faces and facial expressions. Not stereotyped figures such as the 'over-refined degenerate aristocrat' contrasted with the 'coarse, powerful labourer'. We know that these were rough generalizations and the close-up tore off these primitive masks. Behind the external, conventional characteristics, the close-up revealed the hidden, impersonal class traits in individual faces. These class characteristics are often more obvious than national or racial characteristics and the face of a French miner, for instance, is more like the face of a German or English miner, than like the face of a French aristocrat. The mixtures of national, racial and class characteristics show many interesting combinations and variations, but they all show human beings, human types.

It is not by accident that the discovery and presentation of a rich gallery of class physiognomies fell to the lot of Soviet cinematography. Eyes sharpened by the revolutionary class struggle saw more than just the difference between 'rich' and 'poor'. No theoretical type-analysis could show social stratifications more completely than the 'typing' of certain Soviet films. Who does not remember Eisenstein's *October*? In it not only the faces of workers and of aristocrats are juxtaposed in open conflict with each other. The bourgeois liberals and the moderate Socialist intellectuals also wear their distinctive mark on their foreheads, and when the sailor bars their way on the bridge, face faces face, and two different conceptions of the world clash in two different, unmistakable physiognomies.

A classic example of this is the magnificent scene in Dovzhenko's civil war film *Arsenal*. The scene shows the lull before the storm, the storm being the rising in Kiev. The title says 'Waiting for the First Shot'. The city is waiting in the night, motionless, with bated breath. No one is asleep. Everyone is waiting. For the first shot.

Who is waiting? How are they waiting? Now in a series of brief scenes the film shows a cross-section of the social body of a whole city. The workman harks out. The soldier watches. The artisan listens. The merchant strains his ears. The factory-owner is on the alert. The teacher, the clerk, the landowner, the artist, the declassed down-and-out, the Bohemian—they are all looking expectantly into the darkness. How do we

know who they are? The title does not tell us. It is written in their faces, unmistakably showing their class and showing it immanently in individual physiognomies; showing not man in his social class, but social class in men. When, after this scene, fighting breaks out in the streets, it is not only machine-guns and bayonets that are engaged in battle, but live human faces as well.

#### OUR UNKNOWN FACES

The human face is not yet completely discovered—there are still many white patches on its map. One of the tasks of the film is to show us, by means of 'microphysiognomics', how much of what is in our faces is our own and how much of it is the common property of our family, nation or class. It can show how the individual trait merges with the general, until they are inseparably united and form as it were nuances of one another. Written psychology has often attempted to find by analysis the dividing line between the individual and the general. The 'microphysiognomics' of the film can differentiate more subtly and accurately than the most exact of words and hence it acquires, beside the artistic significance, an important scientific function, supplying invaluable material to anthropology and psychology.

#### THE SECOND FACE

In the mingling of the individual and racial character two expressions are superimposed on each other like translucent masks. For instance, we often see a degenerate specimen of an ancient, long-civilized, refined race. The anatomy of an English aristocrat's face may bear a noble, handsome expression, the physiognomy of an ancient racial culture. But the close-up may show concealed beneath it the coarse and depraved expression of a base individual. Or the film may show the inverse variant: the soulful, beautiful physiognomy hiding between the typically coarse and ugly features of an uncultured race.

'Microphysiognomics' can show, behind the faces we can



control, those other faces which we cannot influence because they have already hardened into anatomy.

#### MICRODRAMA

This is another necessary consequence of micromimicry. The detailed psychology of the close-up picture occupied so much space (and so many feet) in the film, that less and less room was left for the story. The richer the episodes were in inner content, the fewer episodes had room in the film, the length of which is as unalterably predetermined as that of a sonata.

But there was no longer any need for a multitude of adventurous episodes, for a piling of event on event. The extensivity of the early *colportage* style gave way to intensity; the story turned inward, deepened, penetrated the soul. The development of the close-up changed the whole style of the film story and scenario. The stories now dealt with the hidden subtle adventures of the soul.

Great novels rich in incident were no longer found suitable for filmic treatment. What was wanted were not intricate and adventurous, but plain and simple stories. The specific imagination and inventiveness of the film-makers manifested itself in the pictorial forming of details and not in the visual activity of bustling scenes. What the film-makers now liked to show were scenes which could scarcely be described in words, which could be understood only when seen. In this way the silent film grew less and less 'literary', following in this respect the trend at that time prevalent in the art of painting.

#### DRAMATIC STATE

The technique of the close-up which thus simplified the story of the film and deepened and brought to dramatic life its smallest details, succeeded in lending dramatic tension to a mere state or condition, without any external event at all. It was able to make us feel nerve-rackingly the sultry tension underneath the superficial calm; the fierce storms raging under the surface were made tangible by mere microscopic move-

ments, by the displacement of a hair. Such films were unsurpassed in showing the Strindbergian moods in the savagely antagonistic silences of human beings confined together in narrow spaces. The micro-tragedies in the peace and quiet of ordinary families were shown as deadly battles, just as the microscope shows the fierce struggles of micro-organisms in a drop of water.

#### CAMERA RHYTHM

By the movement of the camera or the flickering of the montage even the physical immobility of such static conditions could be mobilized and dramatized. This is a means of expression completely specific to the film. If for some reason or another movement is arrested in a scene on the stage or in the studio, then nothing moves there any more and there can be no question of tempo or rhythm. The film, however, possesses this specific possibility that the scene that is being shot may be completely frozen and motionless and yet the scenes projected on to the screen can nevertheless be in violent and varied motion. The characters may not move, but our glance may leap from the one to the other as it is carried by the camera. Men and things do not move but the camera shifts rapidly and excitedly from the one to the other and the movement of motionless pictures collated by the cutting may have a swift, wild rhythm, making us feel the inner movement of the scene in despite of its outer immobility. The scene in its entirety may be motionless in deadly numbness, like a stationary great machine. But the rushing close-ups show the throbbing of some tiny wheel of the clockwork. We see an eyelid twitch, a lip curl in the motionless figures, their immobility replete with utmost tension.

Lupu Pick, who was one of the greatest German directors of the silent film, once made a crime film. In it safe-breakers burgling a bank vault inadvertently lock themselves into the underground vault. There is no way out of the trap and the mined vault would be blown up in ten minutes. A clock on the wall shows the passing of the minutes. Nine men dash to and fro in mad frenzy, searching for a way out. All in vain. There

are three minutes left. They all stand still and stare numbly at the hands of the clock. They are waiting. Nothing moves in the vault save the hands of the clock. This utmost tension could not be increased any further by even the most frenzied movement of the characters. They even hold their breath, so complete is their numb immobility.

On the stage such immobility is possible only for very brief periods. After a few moments the scene would become empty and dead, because nothing happens in it. But in the film a lot of things can happen even when the characters are motionless. For the camera can move even while they do not. The quick cross-cutting of close-ups can move. In the bank vault just mentioned the camera rushes to and fro and the pictures move faster and more fiercely than the actors could. The actors are motionless and silent. But the flickering close-ups, the 'microphysiognomies,' speak. They show not a general picture of fear, but the horrible symphony of every phase in nine distinct mortal agonies of terror. The crescendo of fear is shown by the increasingly rapid rhythm of ever shorter close-ups in an ever-quickenning montage.

An ant-heap is lifeless if seen from a distance, but at close quarters it is teeming with busy life. The grey, dull texture of everyday life shows in its microdramatics many profoundly moving happenings, if we look at it carefully enough in close-up.

#### COMMONPLACE DRAMATIZED

In the heyday of the silent film there was a vogue for realistic films featuring the commonplace and dramatizing the things we usually leave unheeded. It was at this time that King Vidor made his great film showing the workaday life of the average American man-in-the-street. It is a monotonous affair and yet, how many moving, terrifying, and happy little events occur in it, hidden melodies contained in a monotone.

Of course this technique achieves its greatest effects when it spreads out the crucial moment of an action film in the *ritardando* of detail close-ups, showing that crucial moment in instantaneous sections of time when everything still hangs in

the balance, the pointer of the scales is still oscillating and it is not yet certain in which direction it will finally point.

#### CRUCIAL MOMENT

Let us look at the final scene of Reisman's masterpiece: *The Last Night*. A military train steams into a railway station in Petrograd, which has been occupied by the revolutionaries. It is a mysterious, closed train. Has it brought friends or enemies? We don't know. Bayonets bristle at every window and door of the train, but not a face do we see. Rifle barrels point at the train from every door and window of the station buildings. Who is in there? Friend or foe? No man wants to be the first to step out on to the deserted platform. Expectation and silence. Only the hissing of steam is heard. All action has stopped. But the fate of the station, of the town, perhaps of the whole revolution turns on what will happen in the next few minutes. This frozen state of tension, of doubt and expectation, is not really motionless however. Its elements are agog with nervous impatience. In the restless cross-cutting of close-ups, tiny gestures of boiling excitement sizzle and bubble. Finally an old peasant woman steps on to the platform alone and unarmed, goes to the military train and speaks, asks questions . . .

Of course this scene could not have achieved such powerful tension if the whole film had shown such immobility; the effect is similar to a pause suddenly occurring in a dynamic burst of music.

#### REALITY INSTEAD OF TRUTH

The development of the microdramatics of the close-up to a stage when experiments were made to produce, not only films without dramatic action, but even films without a central dramatic hero, will be dealt with in later chapters, together with other developments. But one thing should be noted here: if stories without plot and incident, single-situation stories escaped the reproach of being 'literature', this had disadvantages as well as advantages, for there was an increasing ten-



dency to make films of which only the details were interesting, while the whole story was over-simple and trivial.

There was of course an ideological reason for this, as for every other fashion in art. The escapism which, almost from the start, was the dominant tendency in the bourgeois film was here given a new direction. Having first escaped to the fairy-tale romanticism of exotic adventure, the film now escaped to the small detail of the new naturalist style. In its fear of the whole truth, it hid its head like an ostrich in the sand of tiny particles of reality.

## CHAPTER NINE

### CHANGING SET-UP

CHANGING SET-UP IS the second great creative method of film art. In this again it differs from the principles and methods of every other art. In the theatre we see everything from the same viewpoint, from the same angle, that is in the same perspective. The photographed theatre could not change this very much. It sometimes changed the angle or perspective from scene to scene but never within the same scene. Different paintings have different perspectives and this is their essential artistic creative element, their artistic characteristic. But the perspective of every single painting is one and immutable; hence the outline of every object shown in the picture is finite, a single definite shape. It may have an expressive physiognomy, but never a changing expression, such as the movement of changing outlines, which changing set-ups can give to things in a film.

Only the changing set-up enabled cinematography to develop into an art. No lighting effects could have done it if the camera could not have been moved in relation to the object. Cinematography would have remained mechanical reproduction.

### SYNTHESIS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHED IMAGE

The free, individual possibilities of the set-up bring about in the image the synthesis of subject and object which is the basic condition of all art. Every work of art must present not only objective reality but the subjective personality of the artist, and this personality includes his way of looking at things, his ideology and the limitations of the period. All this is projected into the picture, even unintentionally. Every picture shows not only a piece of reality, but a point of view as