

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CLOSE-UP

AS WE HAVE already said, the basis of the new form-language is the moving cinematographic camera with its constantly changing viewpoint. The distance from the object and with it the size and number of objects in the frame, the angle and the perspective all change incessantly. This movement breaks up the object before the camera into *sectional pictures*, or 'shots', irrespective of whether that object is moving or motionless. Sectional pictures are not details of a whole film. For what is being done is not to break up into its constituent parts a picture already taken or already envisaged. The result of this would be detail; in this case one would have to show every group and every individual in a crowd scene from the same angle as the one from which they are seen in the total picture; none of the people or things could move—if they did, they would no longer be details of the same total. What is done is not to break up into detail an already existent, already formed total picture, but to show a living, moving scene or landscape as a synthesis of sectional pictures, which merge in our consciousness into a total *scene* although they are not the parts of an existent immutable mosaic and could never be made into a total single *picture*.

WHAT HOLDS THE SECTIONAL PICTURES TOGETHER?

The answer to this question is: the montage or cutting, the mobile composition of the film, an architecture in time, not space, of which much more is to be said later. For the time being we are interested in the psychological question of why a scene broken up into sectional pictures does not fall apart but remains a coherent whole, remains in the consciousness

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of the spectator a consistent unity in both space and time. How do we know that things are happening simultaneously and in the same place, even though the pictures pass before our eyes in temporal sequence and show a real passing of time?

This unity and the simultaneity of pictures proceeding in time is not produced automatically. The spectator must contribute an association of ideas, a synthesis of consciousness and imagination to which the film-going public had first to be educated. This is that visual culture of which we have spoken in previous chapters.

But the sectional picture (or 'shot') must be correctly ordered and composed. There may be shots which slip out of the whole and in respect of which we no longer feel that we are in the same place and see the same scene as in the preceding shots. This is a matter for the director who can, if he chooses, make the spectator feel the continuity of the scene, its unity in time and space even if he has never once shown him a total picture of the whole scene for his orientation.

This is done by including in every shot a movement, a gesture, a form, a something which refers the eye to the preceding and following shots, something that protrudes into the next shot like the branch of a tree or a fence, like a ball that rolls from one frame to the other, a bird that flies across, cigar smoke that curls in both, a look or gesture to which there is an answer in the next shot. But the director must be on his guard not to change the angle together with the direction of movement—if he does, the change in the picture is so great as to break its unity. The sound film has simplified this job of remaining in step. For sound can always be heard in the whole space, in each shot. If a scene is enacted, say, in a night club, and we hear the same music we will know that we are in the same night club even if in the shot itself we see nothing but a hand holding a flower or something of the sort. But if we suddenly hear different sounds in this same shot of a hand we will assume, even if we don't see it, that the hand holding the flower is now in a quite different place. For instance, to continue the picture of the hand holding the rose—if instead of dance music we now hear the twittering of birds, we will not

be surprised if, when the picture widens into a long shot, we see a garden and the owner of the hand picking roses. This sort of change-over offers opportunities for good effects.

SOUND IS INDIVISIBLE

This totally different nature of sound has a considerable influence on the composition, montage and dramaturgy of the sound film. The sound camera cannot break up sound into sections or shots as the cinematographic camera can break up objects. In space, sound is always heard indivisibly and homogeneously; that is, it has the same character in one part of space as in any other; it can only be louder or softer, closer or more distant and mixed with other sounds in differing ways. In the night club, for instance, we may first hear only dance music and then the loud talking and laughter of a noisy company at one of the tables may almost drown it.

SOUND IN SPACE

All sound has an identifiable place in space. By its pitch we can tell whether it is in a room, or a cellar, in a large hall or in the open air. This possibility of placing sound also helps to hold together shots the action of which takes place in the same space. The sound film has educated our ear—or might and should have educated it—to recognize the pitch (timbre) of sound. But we have made less progress in our aural than in our visual education. In any case, the sound film which could use sound as its artistic material in a similar way as the silent film had used the visual impression, was soon superseded by the talkie, which was in a sense a step backwards towards the photographed theatre.

THE FACE OF THINGS

The first new world discovered by the film camera in the days of the silent film was the world of very small things visible only from very short distances, the hidden life of little things. By this the camera showed us not only hitherto unknown

objects and events: the adventures of beetles in a wilderness of blades of grass, the tragedies of day-old chicks in a corner of the poultry-run, the erotic battles of flowers and the poetry of miniature landscapes. It brought us not only new themes. By means of the close-up the camera in the days of the silent film revealed also the hidden mainsprings of a life which we had thought we already knew so well. Blurred outlines are mostly the result of our insensitive short-sightedness and superficiality. We skim over the teeming substance of life. The camera has uncovered that cell-life of the vital issues in which all great events are ultimately conceived; for the greatest landslide is only the aggregate of the movements of single particles. A multitude of close-ups can show us the very instant in which the general is transformed into the particular. The close-up has not only widened our vision of life, it has also deepened it. In the days of the silent film it not only revealed new things, but showed us the meaning of the old.

VISUAL LIFE

The close-up can show us a quality in a gesture of the hand we never noticed before when we saw that hand stroke or strike something, a quality which is often more expressive than any play of the features. The close-up shows your shadow on the wall with which you have lived all your life and which you scarcely knew; it shows the speechless face and fate of the dumb objects that live with you in your room and whose fate is bound up with your own. Before this you looked at your life as a concert-goer ignorant of music listens to an orchestra playing a symphony. All he hears is the leading melody, all the rest is blurred into a general murmur. Only those can really understand and enjoy the music who can hear the contrapuntal architecture of each part in the score. This is how we see life: only its leading melody meets the eye. But a good film with its close-ups reveals the most hidden parts in our polyphonic life, and teaches us to see the intricate visual details of life as one reads an orchestral score.

LYRICAL CHARM OF THE CLOSE-UP

The close-up may sometimes give the impression of a mere naturalist preoccupation with detail. But good close-ups radiate a tender human attitude in the contemplation of hidden things, a delicate solicitude, a gentle bending over the intimacies of life-in-the-miniature, a warm sensibility. Good close-ups are lyrical; it is the heart, not the eye, that has perceived them.

Close-ups are often dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surface of appearances. You may see a medium shot of someone sitting and conducting a conversation with icy calm. The close-up will show trembling fingers nervously fumbling a small object—sign of an internal storm. Among pictures of a comfortable house breathing a sunny security, we suddenly see the evil grin of a vicious head on the carved mantelpiece or the menacing grimace of a door opening into darkness. Like the *leitmotif* of impending fate in an opera, the shadow of some impending disaster falls across the cheerful scene.

Close-ups are the pictures expressing the poetic sensibility of the director. They show the faces of things and those expressions on them which are significant because they are reflected expressions of our own subconscious feeling. Herein lies the art of the true cameraman.

In a very old American film I saw this dramatic scene: the bride at the altar suddenly runs away from the bridegroom whom she detests, who is rich and who has been forced on her. As she rushes away she must pass through a large room full of wedding presents. Beautiful things, good things, useful things, things radiating plenty and security smile at her and lean towards her with expressive faces. And there are the presents given by the bridegroom: faces of things radiating touching attention, consideration, tenderness, love—and they all seem to be looking at the fleeing bride, because she looks at them; all seem to stretch out hands towards her, because she feels they do so. There are ever more of them—they crowd the room and block her path—her flight slows down more and more, then she stops and finally turns back.

The Thirteen

This is the title of a film by Romm. The significant dramatic life the close-up gives to things is not an artistic monopoly to the silent film. Michael Romm used it in his film *The Thirteen* when the sound film was already fully developed. Desert marauders have surrounded a little group of soldiers. One man on horseback is sent out to bring help. We alternately see the life-and-death struggle of the twelve left behind—a struggle that cannot last long—and the long and dangerous ride of the solitary horseman across the sands of the desert. On him depends the life of the other twelve and therefore his struggle and his fate interest us more than the others, whose battle from behind a parapet of sand offers little variety to the eye. The enemy against whom the solitary rider matches his strength is the *length* of the road. How is the director to show this? By showing the rider riding and riding again? The spectator would tire of this even sooner than the rider himself. And so Romm doesn't show us the rider at all, only his trail in the sand. It tells us more than any riding, or even the rider's face, ever could. For this trail shows what is the most terrible—the awful length of the road. We see a great panorama of the boundless desert and on its smooth surface a single solitary, forlorn line of footprints lost in the immensity of space stretching endlessly to a distant horizon. How much time and footage would the director have required to produce by means of riding scenes the effect he achieved by a single panoramic picture?

Then the close-ups of the trail mark the beginning of an exciting drama. For the trail changes its shape, it takes on a physiognomy—it shows us the fatigue and then exhaustion of the increasingly uncertain feet and our imagination is stimulated by the fact that we cannot see, but merely deduce or guess the condition of the man by the state of the trail. Then far away on the horizon we see something lying prostrate on the ground and we do not know at first whether it is man or horse. The suspense is exciting. But presently we see human footprints in the desert sand. That we have not seen a close-up of the dead horse brings home the significance of the close-up

more than anything else. For at bottom the spectator is afraid; he does not really want to see what is lying there and thereby conjures up more intensely than ever the close-up lurking in his own imagination!

Afterwards we see only the trail of the man on foot, sinking into the sand up to the knees. One can see that he is staggering—his footprints are a zig-zag—then the erratic trail sinks below the remote horizon—and the goal is still far away.

Then we see a rifle lying in the sand. A close-up shows the precious weapon—no man would throw such a thing away while he could still muster the strength to carry it. Then a sabre is lying on the ground . . . Close-ups show how the man gradually jettisons his equipment, show his efforts, his suffering, his unbending will, his stubborn struggle forward. He himself has not been shown us even once, but the picture our imagination paints of him is all the more harrowing. We see the tragic ballad of that endless road and every new sign, every new object is a new verse in it.

If the director had shown us the man himself, how often would he have had to show us practically the same picture over and over again? The human face, if it registers nothing but effort and exhaustion all the time, could not contain so much variety as that trail. Only at the end of the road do we see the man himself at the climax of his dramatic struggle. We see him still crawling forward on all fours, then we see him sink down and swoon. Now the man's facial expression also finds its mark, in our hearts, because the director did not use up this effect too soon. Here is a classical example of how the close-up should be used.

On the stage the living, speaking human being has a far greater significance than dumb objects. They are not on the same plane and their intensity is different. In the silent film both man and object were equally pictures, photographs, their homogeneous material was projected on to the same screen, in the same way as in a painting, where they are equally patches of colour and equally parts in the same composition. In significance, intensity and value men and things were thus brought on to the same plane.

Even in the talkie the speaking human being is still only a

picture, a photograph. The word does not lift him out of the community of the common material. For this reason even the sound film still offers the possibility of a consistent style; for instance a scurrilously grotesque evil-faced personage may, like some hidden family trait, take on a resemblance to the scurrilously grotesque malevolence of the character. Or else objects surrounding a charming, smiling girl can all be smiling and graceful.

Having discovered the soul of things in the close-up, the silent film undeniably overrated their importance and sometimes succumbed to the temptation of showing 'the hidden little life' as an end in itself, divorced from human destinies; it strayed away from the dramatic plot and presented the 'poetry of things' instead of human beings. But what Lessing said in his *Laokoon* about Homer—that he never depicted anything but human actions and always described objects only inasmuch as they took part in that action—should to this day serve as a model for all epic and dramatic art as long as it centres around the presentation of man.