

Chapter Title: The Close-up

Book Title: Bela Balazs: Early Film Theory

Book Subtitle: Visible ManandThe Spirit of Film

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Published by: Berghahn Books

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qch5p.13>

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THE CLOSE-UP

*The possibility and the meaning of the art of film
lie in the fact that each object appears as it is.*

The first, radical change in distance was produced by the close-up. It was without doubt a daring stroke of genius when Griffith first severed his characters' heads and spliced them one by one, full-size, into scenes of human interaction. For this did not simply bring the characters into closer proximity within the same space; it removed them from the space altogether and transposed them into an entirely different dimension.

The New Dimension¹

When the camera lifts a part of the body or an object from its surroundings and shows it enlarged, the object is still seen to exist in space. For a hand, even if depicted in isolation, signifies a human being; a table, likewise in isolation, signifies its function in a space. We perhaps do not see this space but we picture it to ourselves. We do this of necessity since in the absence of an external context an isolated close-up has no meaning. And therefore no expressive power.

But if we see a face isolated and enlarged, we lose our awareness of space, or of the immediate surroundings. Even if this is a face we have just glimpsed in the midst of a crowd, we now find ourselves alone with it. We may be aware of the specific space within which this face exists, but we do not imagine it for ourselves. For the face acquires expression and meaning without the addition of an imagined spatial context.

The abyss into which a figure peers no doubt *explains* his expression of terror, it does not *create* it. The expression exists even without the explanation. It is not turned into an expression by the addition of an imagined situation.

Confronted by a face, we no longer find ourselves within a space at all. A new dimension opens before our eyes: *physiognomy*. The position of the eyes in the top half of the face, the mouth below; wrinkles now to the right, now to the left – none of this now retains its spatial significance. For

1. *TotF*, pp. 60ff.

what we see is merely a *single* expression. We see emotions and thoughts. We see something that does not exist in space.

Physiognomy and Melody²

Henri Bergson's analysis of 'duration' (*durée*) and time can help us to gain an understanding of this novel dimension. A melody, Bergson asserts, consists of individual notes that follow one another in time, but despite this the melody has no extension in time. For from the vantage point of the first note the last one is already implicit, and on the last note the first one is still – interpretatively – present. That is what makes every note part of a melody, which latter as a form has a duration, a course to run, and yet exists as a totality from the outset, instead of gradually coming into being in time. For the melody is not just the notes but their (audible) relationship. This relationship is not temporal. It exists in a different, spiritual dimension. To make a logical deduction may similarly take time because it involves work. But its premises and conclusions do not follow one another in temporal sequence.

Physiognomy has a relation to space comparable to that existing between melody and time. The facial muscles that make expression possible may be close to each other in space. But it is their relation to one another that creates expression. These relations have no extension and no direction in space. No more than do feelings and thoughts, ideas and associations. All these are image-like in nature and yet non-spatial.

This issue of the new, curiously paradoxical dimension of film, its creation of the visible spirit, is one we shall return to in connection with the montage of associations and ideas.

Visually Performed Dialogues³

Close-ups have long been part of the repertoire of film, and in *Visible Man* we analysed in some detail the miracles of the play of facial expressions revealed by film. What has happened since then? What further developments has film introduced into visual performance?

As the camera has moved ever closer to the face, we have learned to catch (and to understand!) nuances of expression with such precision that modern films can include performed dialogues of the length of a detailed

2. TotF, pp. 61ff. The reference to 'visible spirit' at the end of this section disappears in the later version.

3. TotF, pp. 73ff. In the later version, Balázs emphasizes more forcefully that it was in the silent film that film's capacity to explore inner life through the close-up was most developed. He writes '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 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.'

conversation as a matter of routine. Nowadays, the inner action, which becomes visible only in the face, is deemed more interesting than action visible only in external movements. Just as there are conversation pieces on the stage, so in film we have visually performed dialogues with little external action in the story. The clearer a person's face becomes for us through its greater proximity, the more space is allotted in the film to this kind of internal drama, a drama that does not take place in a spatial dimension.

We already have the example of one very powerful film whose wealth of savage, passionate life-and-death struggles is portrayed using *only the face*. Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.⁴ Take for instance the film's long, often shatteringly violent scene with the Inquisition. A group of fifty people sit in the same place for the entire duration of the scene. For a thousand metres of film, nothing but heads. Heads without spatial context. But this spatial absence does not alarm us. Why should it? This is not a scene of horse-riding or boxing. It is not within space that these raging passions, thoughts, beliefs clash. In the dangerous duel played out here, it is looks that are crossed, not swords; and they generate a breathtaking tension that lasts two hours. We see every thrust and every parried blow, every feint, every rapier lunge of the mind, and we see the wounds inflicted on the soul. This film is acted out in a different dimension from Westerns or mountain films; and it is the camera's proximity that makes this possible.

Microphysiognomy⁵

So much for a film that used the face *in its entirety*, as a total effect. That still portrayed the play of facial expressions: expressions made by human beings, albeit not always consciously. Here then, the facial expression is a human production that is also within human control.

But the camera has since moved in closer. And lo and behold! *Inside* the face partial physiognomies come into view which betray qualities very different from those that could be gleaned from the overall expression. It is in vain that a figure on screen furrows his brow and flashes his eyes. The camera comes in even closer, shows just his chin, and reveals it as weak and cowardly. A sensitive smile dominates his face as a whole. But nostrils, ear lobes and neck all have their own face. And displayed in isolation, they reveal a hidden coarseness, stupidity barely masked. The 'general impression' fails to obscure what is betrayed by the detail.

4. *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), d. Carl Theodor Dreyer, starring Maria Falconetti.

5. *TotF*, pp. 74ff. In the later version, Balázs distinguishes between speech and the visual language of physiognomy, and claims that it is only in the latter that the play of the unconscious is visible. He writes (pp. 74–5), '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.'

How noble and beautiful is the face of the priest in close-up in Eisenstein's *The General Line*.⁶ But when, just once, we see his eyes alone, the sly nastiness hidden beneath his eyelashes comes into view.⁷ By the same token, the camera can also discover the barely visible marks of tenderness and kindness in an otherwise coarse and ugly face. It illuminates the many layers of the human physiognomy. It exposes the face beneath the surface. Behind the face shown to the world, it exposes the face we truly possess, the face that we can neither change nor control.

In directing its aim in close up at those minute surfaces of the face that we ourselves do not control, the camera can photograph the unconscious. From close-to, the face becomes a document as writing does to the graphologist. But graphology is a rare gift as well as a science. This microphysiognomy, on the other hand, has become common knowledge familiar to us all.

*The Invisible Countenance*⁸

The first close-ups showed that more can sometimes be read in a face than is written on it. For physiognomy can also express meanings 'between the lines'. 'Between the features', as it were.

An example from one otherwise simple-minded old adventure film. The Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa is required to act out the following: he is captured by bandits, and finds himself face to face with his long-lost wife. He must not betray the fact that he knows her. Five pairs of eyes search his face as he looks at his wife and five revolvers are cocked to shoot if even a single muscle in his face betrays the deep emotion he feels at this unexpected reunion. So he restrains himself. Not the slightest expression passes over his impassive features. We have to believe that the bandits have to believe him. Nevertheless – and this is what is so marvellous – we see clearly from his expression that there is something in his face that we do not see. It is present, but cannot be pinned down. An *invisible but evident* expression.

A masterstroke in a film by Asta Nielsen many years ago.⁹ Called upon to seduce a man for reasons of intrigue, she pretends to love him, and acts out the comedy very convincingly. During the scene, however, she genuinely falls in love with the man. Her gestures (which are identical to her previous gestures), her facial expressions (also identical) gradually become sincere. She behaves exactly as she had previously, and her change of heart is not perceptible; yet she makes us see it nonetheless.

6. *The General Line (Staroye i novoye)* (1928), d. Grigori Aleksandrov and Sergei Eisenstein, featuring Marfa Lapkina, M. Ivanin and Konstantin Vasilyev.

7. 'Like an ugly caterpillar out of a delicate flower' (*TotF*, p. 75).

8. *TotF*, pp. 75ff. Balázs here explains, '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.'

9. *TotF*, p. 64.

But then a further complication. She notices her accomplice watching her from behind a curtain. Now she has to persuade him that she is only pretending, just as previously she had to convince the other man of her sincerity. The double meaning of her facial expressions has become its opposite. Even now, she is still pretending; now too her expression is a sham. Yet now it is her pretending that has become a pretence. She now lies that she is lying.

And all this becomes perceptible without our being able to see how Nielsen's facial expressions have changed. She has invisibly removed a mask and donned a new one; a whole drama has played itself out on her invisible countenance, 'between its features'.

Even the earliest close-ups, then, enabled us to perceive subtleties of facial expression: nuances that cannot be detected with the naked eye and yet which use our eyes to make a decisive impact, like a bacillus that we do not notice when we inhale it, but which is lethal nonetheless.

This invisible expression that I am describing here can arise, however, only through associations triggered by the visible play of features. Just as the expression of ideas can rouse unexpressed thoughts in me. Yet this is not what is meant by the microphysiognomy of the camera close-up. My term refers instead to the face *beneath the play of expressions*. This underlying face cannot be manufactured. We have it from the outset; it has always been there and is inescapable. It may be frequently obscured by our conscious expressions. But the close-up brings it to light. It is not the face we wear, but our actual visual appearance that is decisive. For all of us appear in the end just as we are. Just as the most horrendous avalanche consists of small grains of sand in motion, so too even the grimace of overt expression is merely a summary external image. Real expression is created in the barely perceptible movements of the tiniest parts of the face. This microphysiognomy is the direct making visible of micropsychology. Overt expression, in contrast, relates to conscious feelings and conceptual thought.

*Simplicity*¹⁰

In the proximity afforded by the close-up, micro-expression appears so big that large-scale expression becomes simply unbearable. This is why, in modern films, acting has become increasingly discreet. Where the slightest trembling of an eyelid can be seen clearly, everything over and above this seems exaggerated. Genuineness is more rigorously scrutinized. Artifice and make-up are unmasked. Glycerine tears are out of bounds. Large gestures are convincing only in elemental outbursts; and here they appear as abnormalities, as ecstasy, hysteria or madness. Restraint, in contrast, has come to have the more powerful effect. In today's studios actors are constantly told 'Don't try to act! Just think and

10. *TotF*, pp. 76ff.

feel the situation. Whatever then appears “naturally” on the actor’s face is good enough for the camera.’ The closer the camera comes, the more acceptable is simplicity.

*Technique Comes When it is Needed*¹¹

But simplicity is far from being merely a technical accomplishment! It also implies a thoroughgoing change in taste, a profound alteration in our very way of life. Can this then really be no more than the consequence of a camera trick? Or is it the other way around?

Even artistic innovations never arise by chance or from the whim of a genius. They fall due only in circumstances of economic or ideological need. (Needs of which the innovator himself may not necessarily be conscious.) The current general trend towards simplicity comes from the present generation’s sceptical view of the traditional forms of expression of the feudal and old bourgeois mentality (a scepticism that extends both to architectonic and physiognomical forms.) At present, that scepticism is purely negative, though of great ideological importance nonetheless. It has found its clearest expression in the modern film. Film has brought the camera closer to the face, and the camera for its part has shown that simplicity is less simple than it may at first appear.

*The Unromantic Face*¹²

These developments also explain why our ideal of beauty has changed so much in recent years. The decorative, romantic face has gone out of fashion. What is popular today is the star with the everyday face. Particularly discredited is the old ideal of masculine beauty, whose overall decorative effect is felt to be a mask. As the camera has moved closer, what has become decisive are the intimate features of a face, its attractive details. (The situation is different with female types. Female beauty is an everyday need. The pretty girl is the prototype of erotic confection).

Beauty in its more elevated form is also avoided by film – though the event that is Greta Garbo does call for further discussion. This change in taste – a change of which film is a document – is a change that has occurred under the influence of film, and one of which film has also made us conscious. It signifies a transformation of the value placed on the human. And that transformation penetrates yet deeper. Even sex appeal has shifted, and with it the instincts directed towards sexual selection. It is a long way from Ramon Novarro and Conrad Veidt to Ronald Colman

11. *TotF*, p. 77. Balázs adds, ‘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.’

12. *TotF*, p. 78.

and George Bancroft – a different world. And it is the ever more proximate camera that has taken us on this journey.

The single motif that drives these changes is the increasingly widespread mistrust of all that is conscious and intentional, of the decorative and of pathos.

The Physiognomic Mosaic

Only through montage is it possible to some degree to create the illusion of an imagined action from shots of spontaneous, individual expressions of nature, of original physiognomies. Photographs ‘taken from life’ – here someone laughing, there someone weeping, here mistrust, there fury. Original close-ups of faces: all these are removed in the montage from their original context, with its original causation, and simply inserted into film (as with a mosaic of undressed stones). They then gain the appearance of an interrelation that changes their meaning, their emotional ‘value’. And yet it is also in the montage that the original face comes across more convincingly. We have good reason to mistrust faces that are ‘put on show’. The camera allows us to maintain a connection with a face that is not put on show but is nonetheless visible.

Flight from the Actor

A self-evident consequence of the developments I am describing here has been the tendency to avoid the actor. Actors, it has been supposed, neither should ‘act’, nor do they need to. There is no need for them to ‘represent’ something for the camera to reproduce at one remove. Instead, the camera should discover something and show directly what is naturally there.¹³

This is why film-makers have sought out original types. But in feature films, this has not got them very far with the representation of anything other than utterly primitive and unique situations. For such strongly defined physiognomies cannot be altered and varied to fit the development of a complex dramatic action. Or, rather, any attempt to use them produces the most amateurish of performed grimaces. For the fact is that it takes considerable acting talent to take part in a fictional action, to feel one’s way into invented characters and situations and nonetheless to communicate without ‘acting’.

13. Balázs gives the following example in *TotF*: ‘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’ (p. 79).

Nature Remains Excluded

Of what use is the soothing impression that the farmer I see in a film is a genuine farmer if his genuineness in the film makes itself felt by the fact that he never seems fully identified with his part? He remains natural, but outside the fiction. He remains real, but outside the film. Undigested raw material. The more natural and striking such types are, the more they have the same impact as natural realities: mountains, trees or animals whose physiognomies appear so essential and universally valid that it is impossible to bring them together arbitrarily in the special case of an invented fiction. No, non-acting alone is not an option here. For we know that the director plays with these, and indeed all realities. And, if his play comes to our attention, his efforts are wasted.

The greatest masterpiece of this 'art made from nature' is undoubtedly Eisenstein's *The General Line*. A marvellous cornucopia of original expressions is adopted here for a plot of which the film's actors cannot possibly have been conscious. They may have been asked to do something or other in front of the camera. But it must have been something of immediate concern to them, something quite unconnected with the intentions of the film.

In Pudovkin's book on this subject,¹⁴ he gives a precise description of the directorial technique required to provoke a natural reaction that can then be incorporated in a work of art. But just consider the precision, the vision that is required to distinguish so accurately between natural expressions and to select them so that they respond to one another naturally in the course of a constructed dialogue! What effort is required for the eye and the camera to drill down into the human face and uncover that very nuance which the actor finds so hard to mime, however detailed the director's instructions! The actor here is satisfied with naive expression; and the director must draw on the whole range of that physiognomical education which he has acquired from the study of camera close-ups.

Of course the Russian peasants in *The General Line* are types that actors from our culture would find as impossible to play as they would a Negro or a Chinese. (Impossible particularly because the close-up penetrates both mask and mien to show the underlying face, which latter we are called upon to fathom in order to understand the reasons for the action on screen.)

Natural Actors

Primitive physiognomies, however, correspond to primitive conditions, which cannot be accommodated to the varieties of a constructed plot. Unless the peasants go in for some acting of their own. What does Marfa Lapkina, the peasant heroine of *The General Line*, do if not act? She is a genuine peasant woman who puts on a real performance for us. She does

14. Presumably *Film Technique*, a combination of *Film Director and Film Material* (1926) and *Film Scenario and Its Theory* (1926), published in German as *Über die Filmtechnik* in 1928.

this *naturally*, but it is not *nature*. She merely employs forms of expression that are quite different from those handed down by bourgeois culture. The facial expressions and gestures of such natural actors are still fresh and not yet compromised. If a language has been used for too many lies we find it easier to accept the truth when it is uttered in a different language.

The naive, childlike acting ability to which I am referring is found more frequently among exotic races. We see it for instance in dramatized documentaries.¹⁵ It is surprising and sometimes baffling that South Sea Islanders, for example (in *Moana* or *White Shadows in the South Sea*¹⁶), or Tungusians (in the Russian film *Son of the Taiga*) can act so spontaneously even in constructed scenes. This is not 'theatrical acting', but more like children at play: a kind of trance, a daydream. Now, is this art or nature? It is an intermediate state which, like hallucination and the dream, is undoubtedly closer to nature.¹⁷

*The Face of Class*¹⁸

It is when we are quite unconcerned about the personal fate of individuals that acting becomes most unimportant. There are films in which human types are used as an original background, a human landscape that provides a living backdrop for the action. Here, only the fundamental expression of a fundamental situation is emphasized. The camera looks behind individual, private variations and searches out the humus of expression: the supra-individual face.

The supra-individual face of different races has always been known. The great achievement of film was its discovery of the supra-individual face of different classes. Not simply the distinction between the degenerate aristocrat and the uncouth peasant, between the bloated

15. The German here is *Kulturfilm*: see Glossary entry.

16. *Moana* (1926), d. Robert J. Flaherty, the creator of *Nanook of the North* (1922), is credited with being the first docufiction in the history of cinema. It is set in Samoa and aim to capture the traditional life of the Pacific islanders on film. *White Shadows In The South Sea* (1928) was directed by W.S. Van Dyke.

17. *TotF*, pp. 80f. As elsewhere in *TotF*, Balázs here relativizes the ethnocentric standpoint he adopts in *The Spirit* when he writes, 'the close-up often reveals unusual gestures and mimicry – unusual, that is, from the white man's viewpoint' (p. 81). In a subsequent passage, Balázs also comments on the capacity of the close-up to confound racial stereotypes, and questions the notion of faces specific to nation or race: '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 another, one Negro and another. 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' (*TotF*, p. 81).

18. *TotF*, pp. 81ff.

financier and the penniless proletarian. Such stereotypical distinctions were also visible on the stage. The camera, in contrast, has moved up close and has discovered behind these external, decorative distinctions the hidden expression of a supra-individual, class-determined *outlook*.

For what we see at close range is *disposition*: the perspective of each and every human being on the world. It is no accident that Soviet Russian filmmakers have the keenest eye for class expression and that their films help to sharpen our understanding of it. Their films do not just contain the rich and the poor. No Marxist analysis could document the nuances of class distinctions better than the magnificent typology of Russian films. Who can forget the groups and deputations that populate Eisenstein's *October*?¹⁹ The liberal-bourgeois officials, the Menshevik intellectuals? However they may otherwise behave, all bear the marks of their identity on their faces. A deputation of middle-class democrats crosses a bridge. A Red sailor bars their way. Face confronts face, and two world views collide.

In Dovzhenko's *Arsenal*,²⁰ an outstanding film about the Ukrainian civil war, we are shown the tense moments before the first shot is fired. Heads cocked, listening out. The worker, the soldier, the ordinary craftsman, the small trader, the factory-owner and the rich merchant, the landowner, the peasant, the professional who works with his brain, the stay-at-home scholar, the déclassé Bohemian, the down-and-out ... nothing but close-ups of all these faces, and yet we know precisely what they are. A physiognomical cross-section of social class stratification. Social distinctions and their attendant mentalities are clearly and unmistakably revealed in these faces. It is not just machine guns and fists that wage war on each other here, but faces.

Microdrama

When, as in this instance, close-ups capture and place in relation to one another the most minute and fleeting facial expressions and gestures, when they make them respond to one another, one gesture to another, one look to another, the result is a dissection of the action into its smallest components. What becomes visible at close range is the rapid to-and-fro motion that occurs within a single situation, the microdrama of the moment. The close-up enables the action, the story to develop a deeper dimension.

*The Temperament of the Camera*²¹

The specifically cinematic element of this microdrama is that it is produced not by acting but by the camera. On stage or in the studio, when the 'action' comes to a halt, so also do the human beings and the objects involved in it. In

19. *October* (1928), d. Sergei Eisenstein with Grigori Aleksandrov.

20. *Arsenal* (1929), d. Alexander Dovzhenko and featuring Semyon Svashenko, Amvrosi Buchma and Georgi Khorkov.

21. *TotF*, p. 85.

film, however, while the action can reach a pause and human beings and objects remain quite still, the *images* may continue to succeed one another at the most frenetic tempo. The human beings remain immobile. But our gaze leaps from one to the other. At one moment we are quite close, at another at a distance. However motionless the scene, the camera shifts the spectator to and fro and the alternating shots lend the silence a frenzied rhythm. In the open casing of the machinery of life we obtain a glimpse of the very smallest cogs. Decisive twists of fate are precisely localized in the twitching of an eyebrow or a stray hand gesture. And in the first tiny germ of an event.

Intensity Drives Out Extensiveness

The greater the richness of individual moments, however, the more space they must occupy in the film. The more that happens in a given situation, the fewer the situations that can be shown in a single film. Intensity drives out narrative extension, which means that stories in modern films have had to be radically simplified. Today's films no longer have room for elaborate and intricate narratives. Here too, as in physiognomy, the close-up has awakened our interest in nuance. (Or alternatively perhaps, our interest in nuance has given rise to the close-up.)

*Crisis of the Manuscript*²²

The narrative imagination of novelists and short-story writers has ceased to be of positive use. What is needed today is a special cinematic imagination, one that is alive to the optical nuances of scenes that are devoid of narrative complications. Films have become unliterary in both a good and a bad sense. Adventure stories can be easily varied; but what film actually needs these days are straightforward, basic plot situations. The plot of a new film can no longer be invented; it has to be discovered. Hence the current situation in which, in general, the richer the individual scenes in a film, the more banal the film becomes as a totality. We have better and better variations on increasingly inferior themes.

Naturally enough, there have been ideological reasons for this development. The flight from reality that has always been an essential ideological component of the bourgeois film underwent a change of direction with the emergence of the new technology. Film was once an escape into the romanticism of exotic adventure. Now it is an escape into the intimacy of hidden details.

The Dramatic Situation

But microdrama also has the opposite effect and consequence. By grasping the inner turmoil within an apparent stillness, it is able to portray a *state of affairs* as

22. *TotF*, pp. 87ff.

an exciting event. What we see is not just the explosion, but also the ferment.

If tension arises, moreover, not from the elaboration of a plot, but out of a basic underlying circumstance, the subject matter of the resulting film is not merely more circumscribed, not merely confined to a particular situation, but also capable of expansion beyond the bounds of an anecdotal, self-contained storyline. Contrived intrigue is no longer necessary to render interesting the straightforward trajectory of a life.

Hence King Vidor's glorious film *The Crowd*.²³ What we see in this film is not one specific situation but a whole series of those simple circumstances that go to make up an average life. The film simply teems with events that become turbulent, exciting, even thrilling, simply by virtue of being seen in close-up!

Film Without Heroes

All of this has also made possible the film without heroes, without protagonists. For a *storyline*, an anecdote, an intrigue is tied to the destiny of individual characters. To portray *a single state of affairs*, in contrast, means dispensing with the need to follow the actions of even one single character from start to finish. Hence the absence of heroes in Eisenstein's *October*. The seething turbulence of the masses, the tremor of anxious expectation in the Czar's palace, lengthy scenes constructed from hundreds of individual images, are far more exciting than the most enthralling adventures of a 'hero'.

No, complicated 'plot' is not a prerequisite for film. In Dovzhenko's *Arsenal*, war, for instance, is represented for the duration of an entire act by one silent, abandoned village. An empty street. A solitary woman leans against a doorpost, her head drooping. Motionless. A gendarme walks slowly by. Stops in front of her. Stares in her direction. She does not move. Half-heartedly, he grabs at her breast. She does not move. He goes on his way, embarrassed, his gait becoming somehow tentative in the uncanny stillness. In the field, an old man stands before his plough, exhausted. In the parlour, a young man with no legs sits on the floor. Stares at the medal he has won for valour. Motionless. The woman shares out a piece of bread among her three children, averting her face. Turns to the cripple. Looks out of the window at the old man before his plough. Turns away and gazes blankly into space. Motionless.

And so the film goes on. There is no 'action' as such, but the atmosphere is as stifling as a still and sultry day. No action could be as thrilling, as dramatic as this single circumstance depicted in close proximity, close shot upon close shot.

23. *The Crowd* (1928), d. King Vidor, featuring James Murray and Eleanor Boardman. Vidor avoided casting big-name stars in the film to attain greater authenticity; Murray was a studio extra, and Boardman was a minor actress and Vidor's second wife (*TotF*, p. 86).