

<sup>1</sup> These French titles refer, respectively, to the following films: Barker's *The Aryan* (1916), *A Sister of Six* (1917), Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), Dwan's *Manhattan Madness* (1916), Gance's *Mater Dolorosa* (1917), Sjöström's *The Outlaw and his Wife* (1918), Dulac's *La Fête espagnole* (1920), Stiller's *Arne's Treasure* (1919), and L'Herbier's *L'Homme du large* (1920).

<sup>2</sup> The one-hundred-seat basement hall of the Grand Café on the boulevard des Capucines was the site of the Lumière brothers first public cinema screening, on 28 December 1895.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. (Billy) Bitzer was Griffith's principal cameraman on *Broken Blossoms*, as he had been for the previous ten years or more; but Hendrik Sartov contributed most of the soft-focus close-ups in the film. L.-H. Burel, of course, was Gance's principal cameraman on *J'Accuse*.

<sup>4</sup> Lillian Gish (1896–) was best known for her roles in previous Griffith films, including *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (1913), *Home, Sweet Home* (1914), *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), *Hearts of the World* (1918), and *True Heart Susie* (1919). Donald Crisp (1880–1974) was also best known as an actor in such films as *Home, Sweet Home* and *Birth of a Nation* as well as a director of films such as *His Sweetheart* (1916). Richard Barthelmess (1895–1963) became an important silent film star with his performance in *Broken Blossoms*.

<sup>5</sup> During this period, the French generally thought of Ince and Griffith as the two master filmmakers of the American cinema, the one (mistakenly) being considered the student of the other. However, Ince was the producer and not the director of many of the films the French associated with his name. Strangely, too, while most of Ince's films were shown in France during the war, the films Griffith made between 1914 and 1918 were not shown publicly there until after the war.

<sup>6</sup> The source of this quote is uncertain. Cf. Germaine Dulac, "Chez D. W. Griffith," *Cinéa* 7 (17 June 1921), 11–12.

<sup>7</sup> That the French were accepting Griffith's own self-aggrandizing testimony about how he discovered and perfected most of the techniques crucial to the cinema can also be seen in "La Réalisation—les moyens d'expression," *Ciné-pour-tous* 55 (17 December 1920), 16.

## JEAN EPSTEIN, "Magnification"

Reprinted, with changes, from a translation by Stuart Liebman in *October* 3 (Spring 1977), 9–15, from "Grossissement," *Bonjour Cinema* (Paris: Editions de la sirène, 1921), 93–108.

I WILL NEVER find the way to say how much I love American close-ups. Point blank. A head suddenly appears on screen and drama, now face to face, seems to address me personally and swells with an extraordinary intensity. I am hypnotized. Now the tragedy is anatomical. The decor of the fifth act is this corner of a cheek torn by a smile. Waiting for the moment when 1,000 meters of intrigue converge in a muscular denouement satisfies me more than the rest of the film. Muscular preambles ripple beneath the skin. Shadows shift, tremble, hesitate. Something is being decided. A breeze of emotion underlines the mouth with clouds. The orography of the face vacillates. Seismic shocks begin. Capillary wrinkles try to split the fault. A wave carries them away. Crescendo. A muscle bridles. The lip is laced with tics like a theater curtain. Everything is movement, imbalance, crisis. Crack. The mouth gives way, like a ripe fruit splitting open. As if

slit by a scalpel, a keyboard-like smile cuts laterally into the corner of the lips.

The close-up is the soul of the cinema. It can be brief because the value of the photogenic is measured in seconds. If it is too long, I don't find continuous pleasure in it. Intermittent paroxysms affect me the way needles do. Until now, I have never seen an entire minute of pure *photogénie*. Therefore, one must admit that the photogenic is like a spark that appears in fits and starts. It imposes a découpage a thousand times more detailed than that of most films, even American ones. Mince meat. Even more beautiful than a laugh is the face preparing for it. I must interrupt. I love the mouth which is about to speak and holds back, the gesture which hesitates between right and left, the recoil before the leap, and the moment before landing, the becoming, the hesitation, the taut spring, the prelude, and even more than all these, the piano being tuned before the overture. The photogenic is conjugated in the future and in the imperative. It does not allow for stasis.

I have never understood motionless close-ups. They sacrifice their essence, which is movement. Like the hands of a watch, one of which is on the hour and the other on the half hour, the legs of St. John the Baptist create a temporal dissonance. Rodin or someone else explained it: in order to create the impression of movement. A divine illusion? No, the gimmick for a toy presented at the *concours Lépine*,<sup>1</sup> and patented so that it can't be used to make lead soldiers. It seemed to Rodin that Watteau's *Cythera* could be animated by the movement of the eye from left to right over it. The motorbike posters race uphill by means of symbols; hatching, hyphens, blank spaces. Right or wrong, they thereby endeavor to conceal their ankylosis. The painter and the sculptor maul life, but this bitch has beautiful, real legs and escapes from under the nose of the artist crippled by inertia. Sculpture and painting, paralyzed in marble or tied to canvas, are reduced to pretence in order to capture the indispensable movement. The ruses of reading. You must not maintain that art is created out of obstacles and limits. You, who are lame, have made a cult of your crutch. The cinema demonstrates your error. Cinema is all movement without any need for stability or equilibrium. Of all the sensory logarithms of reality, the photogenic is based on movement. Derived from time, it is acceleration. It opposes the event to stasis, relationship to dimension. Gearing up and gearing down. This new beauty is as sinuous as the curve of the stock market index. It is no longer the function of a variable but a variable itself.

The close-up, the keystone of the cinema, is the maximum expression of this *photogénie* of movement. When static, it verges on contradiction. The face alone doesn't unravel its expressions but the head and lens moving together or apart, to the left and right of each other. Sharp focus is avoided.

The landscape may represent a state of mind. It is above all a state. A state of rest. Even those landscapes most often shown in documentaries of picturesque Brittany or of a trip to Japan are seriously flawed. But "the landscape's dance" is photogenic. Through the window of a train or a ship's porthole, the world acquires a new, specifically cinematic vivacity. A road is a road but the ground which flees under the four beating hearts of an automobile's belly transports me. The Oberland and Semmering tunnels swallow me up, and my head, bursting through the roof, hits against their vaults. Seasickness is decidedly pleasant. I'm on board the plummeting airplane. My knees bend. This area remains to be exploited. I yearn for a drama aboard a merry-go-round, or more modern still, on airplanes. The fair below and its surroundings would be progressively confounded. Centrifuged in this way, and adding vertigo and rotation to it, the tragedy would increase its photogenic quality ten-fold. I would like to see a dance shot successively from the four cardinal directions. Then, with strokes of a pan shot or of a turning foot, the room as it is seen by the dancing couple. An intelligent decoupage will reconstitute the double life of the dance by linking together the viewpoints of the spectator and the dancer, objective and subjective, if I may say so. When a character is going to meet another, I want to go along with him, not behind or in front of him or by his side, but in him. I would like to look through his eyes and see his hand reach out from under me as if it were my own; interruptions of opaque film would imitate the blinking of our eyelids.

One need not exclude the landscape but adapt it. Such is the case with a film I've seen, *Souvenir d'été à Stockholm*. Stockholm didn't appear at all. Rather, male and female swimmers who had probably not even been asked for their permission to be filmed. People diving. There were kids and old people, men and women. No one gave a damn about the camera and had a great time. And so did I! A boat loaded with strollers and animation. Elsewhere people fished. A crowd watched. I don't remember what show the crowd was waiting for; it was difficult to move through these groups. There were café terraces. Swings. Races on the grass and through the reeds. Everywhere, men, life, swarms, truth.

That's what must replace the Pathécolor newsreel where I always look for the words "Bonne Fête" written in golden letters at the corner of the screen.<sup>2</sup>

But the closeup must be introduced, or else one deliberately handicaps the style. Just as a stroller leans down to get a better look at a plant, an insect, or a pebble, in a sequence describing a field the lens must include close-ups of a flower, a fruit, or an animal: living nature. I never travel as solemnly as these cameramen. I look, I sniff at things, I touch. Close-up, close-up, close-up. Not the recommended points of view, the horizons of

the Touring Club, but natural, indigenous, and photogenic details. Shop windows, cafés, quite wretched urchins, a cashier, ordinary gestures made with their full capacity for realization, a fair, the dust of automobiles, an atmosphere.

The landscape film is, for the moment, a big zero. People look for the picturesque in them. The picturesque in cinema is zero, nothing, negation. About the same as speaking of colors to a blind man. The film is susceptible only to *photogénie*. Picturesque and photogenic coincide only by chance. All the worthless films shot near the Promenade des Anglais [in Nice] proceed from this confusion. Their sunsets are further proof of this.

Possibilities are already appearing for the drama of the microscope, a hystophysiology of the passions, a classification of the amorous sentiments into those which do and those which do not need Gram's solution.<sup>3</sup> Young girls will consult them instead of the fortune teller. While we are waiting, we have an initial sketch in the close-up. It is nearly overlooked, not because it errs, but because it presents a ready-made style, a minute dramaturgy, flayed and vulnerable. The amplifying close-up demands underplaying. It's opposed to the theater where everything is loudly declaimed. A hurricane of murmurs. An interior conviction lifts the mask. It's not about interpreting a role; what's important is the actor's belief in his character, right up to the point where a character's absent-mindedness becomes that of the actor himself. The director suggests, then persuades, then hypnotizes. The film is nothing but a relay between the source of nervous energy and the auditorium which breathes its radiance. That is why the gestures which work best on screen are nervous gestures.

It is paradoxical, or rather extraordinary, that the nervousness which often exaggerates reactions should be photogenic when the screen deals mercilessly with the least forced gestures. Chaplin has created the overwrought hero. His entire performance consists of the reflex actions of a nervous, tired person. A bell or an automobile horn makes him jump, forces him to stand anxiously, his hand on his chest, because of the nervous palpitations of his heart. This isn't so much an example, but rather a synopsis of his photogenic neurasthenia. The first time that I saw Nazimova agitated and exothermic, living through an intense childhood, I guessed that she was Russian, that she came from one of the most nervous peoples on earth. And the little, short, rapid, spare, one might say involuntary, gestures of Lillian Gish who runs like the hand of a chronometer! The hands of Louise Glaum unceasingly drum a tune of anxiety. Mae Murray, Buster Keaton. Etc.<sup>4</sup>

The close-up is drama in high gear. A man says, "I love the faraway princess." Here the verbal gearing down is suppressed. I can see love. It half lowers its eyelids, raises the arc of the eyebrows laterally, inscribes itself on

the taut forehead, swells the masseters, hardens the tuft of the chin, flickers on the mouth and at the edge of the nostrils. Good lighting; how distant the faraway princess is. We're not so delicate that we must be presented with the sacrifice of Iphigenia recounted in alexandrines. We are different. We have replaced the fan by the ventilator and everything else accordingly. We demand to see because of our experimental mentality, because of our desire for a more exact poetry, because of our analytic propensity, because we need to make new mistakes.

The close-up is an intensifying agent because of its size alone. If the tenderness expressed by a face ten times as large is doubtlessly not ten times more moving, it is because in this case, ten, a thousand, or a hundred thousand would—erroneously—have a similar meaning. Merely being able to establish twice as much emotion would still have enormous consequences. But whatever its numerical value, this magnification acts on one's feelings more to transform than to confirm them, and personally, it makes me uneasy. Increasing or decreasing successions of events in the right proportions would obtain effects of an exceptional and fortunate elegance. The close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and that is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of this suffering. I would be able to taste the tears. Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. Ever closer it presses against me, and I follow it face to face. It's not even true that there is air between us; I consume it. It is in me like a sacrament. Maximum visual acuity.

The close-up limits and directs the attention. As an emotional indicator, it overwhelms me. I have neither the right nor the ability to be distracted. It speaks the present imperative of the verb to understand. Just as petroleum potentially exists in the landscape that the engineer gropingly probes, the photogenic and a whole new rhetoric are similarly concealed in the close-up. I haven't the right to think of anything but this telephone. It is a monster, a tower, and a character. The power and scope of its whispering. Destinies wheel about, enter, and leave from this pylon as if from an acoustical pigeon house. Through this nexus flows the illusion of my will, a laugh that I like or a number, an expectation or a silence. It is a sensory limit, a solid nucleus, a relay, a mysterious transformer from which everything good or bad may issue. It has the air of an idea.

One can't evade an iris. Round about, blackness; nothing to attract one's attention.

This is cyclopean art, a unisensual art, an iconoscopic retina. All life and attention are in the eye. The eye sees nothing but a face like a great sun. Hayakawa aims his incandescent mask like a revolver. Wrapped in darkness, ranged in the cell-like seats, directed toward the source of emotion by their softer side, the sensibilities of the entire auditorium converge, as if in

a funnel, toward the film. Everything else is barred, excluded, no longer valid. Even the music to which one is accustomed is nothing but additional anesthesia for whatever is not visual. It takes away our ears the way a Valda lozenge takes away our sense of taste. A cinema orchestra need not simulate sound effects. Let it supply a rhythm, preferably a monotonous one. One cannot listen and look at the same time. If there is a dispute, sight, as the most developed, the most specialized, and the most generally popular sense, always wins. Music which attracts attention or the imitation of noises is simply disturbing.

Although sight is already recognized by everyone as the most developed sense, and even though the viewpoint of our intellect and our mores is visual, there has nevertheless never been an emotive process so homogeneously, so exclusively optical as the cinema. Truly, the cinema creates a *particular system of consciousness limited to a single sense*. And after one has grown accustomed to using this new and extremely pleasant intellectual state, it becomes a sort of need, like tobacco or coffee. I have my dose or I don't. Hunger for a hypnosis far more intense than reading offers, because reading modifies the functioning of the nervous system much less.

The cinematic feeling is therefore particularly intense. More than anything else, the close-up releases it. Although we are not dandies, all of us are or are becoming blasé. Art takes to the warpath. To attract customers, the circus showman must improve his acts and speed up his carousel from fair to fair. Being an artist means to astonish and excite. The habit of strong sensations, which the cinema is above all capable of producing, blunts theatrical sensations which are, moreover, of a lesser order. Theater, watch out!

If the cinema magnifies feeling, it magnifies it in every way. Its pleasure is more pleasurable, but its defects are more glaring.

JEAN EPSTEIN (1897–1953) came to France from Poland in 1908 and became a student of medicine and philosophy in Lyon, where he worked initially as a laboratory assistant to the Lumière brothers. Through Blaise Cendrars, he went to Paris to become an editor at Editions de la sirène and begin writing on the cinema. He worked briefly as an assistant for Louis Delluc and Marcel L'Herbier and then directed his first film for Jean Benoît-Lévy, a feature-length fictionalized documentary, *Pasteur* (1922).

<sup>1</sup> The *concours Lépine*: an exhibition fair for inventors held annually in Paris—TRANS.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Sadoul has suggested that Epstein is here referring to film images stylized in the manner of picture postcards—Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma*, vol. 5 (Paris: Denoël, 1975), 135. Epstein may also be referring to the practice of early film companies who inscribed their trademark emblem on the theatrical sets or inserted placards bearing such emblems into shots taken outdoors to prevent pirating of their prints.—TRANS.

<sup>3</sup> Gram's solution: a solution used in the differential staining of bacteria.—TRANS.

<sup>4</sup> Louise Glaum (1894–?) was best known for starring in the William S. Hart westerns, *The Aryan* (1916) and *Hell's Hinges* (1916), both directed by Reginald Barker. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, she starred in a popular series of "vamp" films. Mae Murray (1889–