

Close to you: Notorious Proximity in Cinema

Cinema can effect thrilling moments in which an object seems far too proximate. Towards the end of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) has locked herself into an escape pod, securely away from the alien predator who stalks the main ship. We share this tiny safe space with her. Suddenly, however, some of the polished metalwork near the hero suddenly moves, and we realize, too late and too locked in, that the killing machine has made its way, with terrifying proximity, into our sanctuary. Too close: not close as in 'shot up close' but close as in closer than we want it to be. Proximity as contamination. The screen moment is emotionally effective – horrifying – because the audience senses itself to be more and more incapable of drawing away the more the proximity of the creature makes for a fearful inversion of desire. Yet contamination can also be erotic and wondrous, as we see in an extraordinary use of focal proximity in *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), where Grace Kelly's Lisa, leaning over Jimmy Stewart's Jeff as he dozes, is seen by the camera from Jeff's ostensibly half-awake – soon to be fully awakened – point of view. A face coming close, closer, literally looming before us, yet moving slowly and mysteriously rather than with alarming speed (as with what Yuri Tsivian has discussed as the 'train effect' [in Bottomore 1999: 178]).



A small amount of lens diffusion is used by George Barnes so that what might otherwise have been a sharp focal separation between three focal planes – the tip of Grace Kelly's nose, her receding cheeks, her ears – is slightly flattened and unified. Her head is sculpted by the camera to have seeming three-dimensional roundness, yet not so much depth as to disorient the perceiver. Her leaning toward us and becoming so proximate kindles our desire, not to 'feel what she feels' or learn about the intimacies of her life, but to sense that face, smell that perfume, catch the soft glimmer of the pearls around her neck, surf through her blonde hair.

The Kelly close-up is doubly fictive. First, we are to take it as Lisa Carol Fremont approaching us (approaching Jeff, through whose eyes we ostensibly watch), not Grace Patricia Kelly approaching the lens. This is the normal displacement

of storytelling. At the same time, we are not seeing Lisa as Jeff sees her. The vision offered in macro-close-up is different than would have been possible in real life, had we actually become the Jeff we are presently identifying with so closely. In real space, within the realm of real optical action, there is a limit to how proximal something can be before we actually cannot see it clearly at all. Lisa would be a blur. Sitting in the theatre we adopt not only Jeff's (idealised) point of view rather than James Stewart's, but also nothing more than a 'point of view', since full perceptual realism would have had her face soften to imperceptibility. The camera's lens can focus at $f/1.2$ or $f/2$, but the human eye cannot. Thus it is that in order to get a very, very close view of someone we must reside at a slight distance, and that the cinema can dislodge our orientation and thought by coming in yet closer, and also with astounding

clarity. When technicians of any sort (doctors, for example) make a macro-examination of some body part – when they come superhumanly close and for superhuman clarity – they are able to do so only by means of some magnifying device that acts roughly like a camera's lens, a device that can achieve focus on a very near plane (even closer than $f1.2$).¹

The result makes it possible to approach characters with the naked eye at an *extraordinarily* close range, achieving a proximity that is possible only in cinema. We can be close to secret conversations, indeed have the impression we are inside the onscreen listener's ear. And yet the screen and speakers remain at a constant distance from the viewer. Wherever she or he is placed in relation to the screen, proximity can be effected only by illusion, since when we look at film we look at a flatness that pretends to be otherwise. Ortega notes how in the Quattrocento the painting on the canvas – usually involving landscape – was conceived as a flat plane, where size differentials signalled distance and closeness (Titian's *Noli Me Tangere* [1514], for example). The bigger an object was in relation to other objects, the more one was meant to take it as being close to the eye.

Macro-close-ups in which something of the screen con-



tent is at $f/1.2$ or $f/2$ are not plentiful in cinema, perhaps because they are radically dramatic. One of the most celebrated comes at the beginning of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), as we are placed near the body of the perishing Charles Foster Kane (Welles) when he exhales his final breath with the word, 'Rosebud'. To catch this word, not only

as sound but as physical production, we are placed near Kane's organ of expression, as any eager listener would be in a case like this one; yet our placement, thanks to cinema, is closer still than an eager listener's while also being abstract, since the listener would put his ear to the mouth (as, in reverse, with James Stewart and Daniel G  lin in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1956]) whereas in *Kane* we hover directly above the uttering mouth looking directly and only at the moving lips. Kane's mouth and only his mouth fills the entire screen. This has the effect of magnifying the man's articulation, thus from the film's very beginning highlighting how everything that comes out of his mouth is aimed far and wide with full amplification. But it is also a technical study, a revelation to the viewer that language – this film is all about language; what is said and not said – is fundamentally the shaping by the flesh and bones of the oral apparatus of air knowingly expelled: every consonant and vowel is a shaping, a sculpting, as Hamlet put it an 'eat[ing] of the air, promise cramm'd' (III.ii.1976-77).

The macro shot here tags the man on his deathbed as supremely important, magnified already at our first meeting (magnified because of his reputation and because of the gravity of the moment in which we meet him). But beyond our appreciation of the character's sizeable figure in culture, there is an alienation effect, since we recognise ourselves to be gazing at the mouth of a total stranger, and gazing, furthermore, from a position closer than any we would take outside of the magical kingdom of the screen. We are viewing not the fact of Kane's speaking (which could be seen from many other distances) but *the act of speaking itself*. Not what is said, but that this mouth is saying it. Saying it here. Saying it now.

The shifting proximity offered by the cinematic image reflects a variable quality of proximity in our world as we live it, mirrors our ability to bring ourselves near to things and either suggests or implies the sorts of motive we might have in that movement. However, there is no necessary correlation between proximity and involvement. The extreme close shot in film, the macro-close-up, does not inevitably offer us emotional closeness to the subject. The camera can come physically close, whilst as viewers we feel distant, alien, outside the action. An example would be some of the portrait shots of

the hero (Marlon Brando) in Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* (1952) where we seem near enough to the character's face to evaluate it morally while Zapata remains, somehow, a remote legend, outside our purview. Or Lionel Lindon's spectacular track-side shot of the engine slipping off the rails in Frankenheimer's *The Train* (1964). Conversely, one might feel (dangerously) close to action even though it is not being staged to a camera at close range: the teenybopper sex scene in Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), where it is only the crumpling of the mauve seamless, its sound recorded distinctly as David Hemmings, Jane Birkin, and Gillian Hills pull each other's clothes off, that makes us feel engaged in the action.



A technical proximity can be achieved using close-ups, as we can see in Griffith's *Lonedale Operator* (1911): there, a trainman's wrench, clasped in the heroine's hand, is held up for the camera to observe with special interest, thus providing the viewer with an opportunity to identify it as the device by which the girl smartly thwarted the robbers (by pretending it was a gun). This kind of proximity is principally informative; it does not tickle us with a (haptic) sense of being near the object, or bring a thrill of contact, but only lets the eye come into a field of vision where the object can stand out against the ground with special articulateness.



It is always technically possible to use the (wide-angle or close-up) lens for bringing the viewer close, but even equipped with a normal (50 mm.) lens the effect can be achieved. Three distinct and illustrative examples from Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946) are worth considering here. In the first, Devlin and Alicia Huberman (Cary Grant, Ingrid Bergman), having become romantically attached through their involvement in a secret spy mission, are engaged in a kiss on the balcony of her Buenos Aires apartment (an interesting matte shot). The close-up here is from the top of the shoulders up, and this formatting is maintained through the whole long conversational moment as, planting her lips on his she suggests he might stay for dinner and he asks what they could eat and she proposes chicken and he says they would have to eat it with their hands. They are stepping inside (close-up maintained) toward the

door when he takes her phone and calls his hotel for messages, still smooching and still in close-up. A message is read to him while he is still wrapped up with Alicia. Hitchcock's camera is directly engaging us in the protraction of the characters' commitment, fiendishly maintaining its close position even when, turning their backs, yet still in that close-up, they stride toward the door. As to the focal planes of the shot: we can see elements of the architecture shifting in the background just enough to remain convinced that we are in the same space, yet never lose detailed concentration on the two intertwined faces.²



Had this kiss been photographed in long or medium shot, or in numerous differently-angled shots cut together, we would still have been able to take explicit note of the bodies travelling across the room. But the protraction of the close-up makes us feel exceptionally proximate, more so, indeed, as the travelling shot continues over time. Our eyebeam grazes the conjoined faces in a way it wouldn't have dared to in a shorter, more typical arrangement. We are a threesome now. A threesome from which we cannot remove ourselves.

What gains clarity and emphasis in this travelling close-up, instead of the two bodies as characterological frames and instead of the salon space in which the feet are necessarily carving out a pathway, is our own lingering proximity. Our not being permitted to turn away. Not only are we meant to

feel voyeuristic in penetrating the private space so boldly and for such an uninterrupted spate of time, we are meant to feel impassioned and imprisoned in our voyeurism – quite as turned on by seeing them up close and unendingly as they are presumably turned on by one another. We become lost in the moment. The proximity (through temporal stretching) is confounding. To be noted: these two kissers are on the sharp edge of a dangerous blade, and at this time disorientation – for them as for us – is no mere fairground thrill, it is a threat to life. At this moment, orientation and alignment are everything. And one could argue the extended kiss, seen up close this way, is centrally about disorientation, a disorientation that raises the spectre of orientation; orientation that begs the question of propriety or impropriety, that is, who is where?, who is going where?, who is aligned with what outside forces? Is Alicia siding with the enemy and here distracting Dev? Hitchcock's enemy here is a Nazi cadre secretly regrouping just after the War, early 1946. They sip their brandy dreaming and planning a *Neue Anschluss*. While Dev and Alicia kiss, where – not only in the room but in the world political scene – are they going, these two, one by one? And therefore, where are we being led to accompany them? All of the motoring story of the film is conveyed through the aesthetic effect of this lovemaking as observed from 'too' close, for 'too' long.

The other much-noted, thus *notorious*, *Notorious* close-up is one that demanded immense concentration and technical planning: the soirée shot in which, beginning on a high balcony and looking down at the jewelled and tuxedoed guests past a glittering chandelier, the camera spots Alicia with Sebastian immediately below and slowly, methodically, relentlessly – even, for some viewers, nauseatingly – swoops down through the stuffy air, in what Bill Krohn notes as 'a high-angle shot of the foyer filled with people' (2000: 98), until first Alicia's decorously clad body and then her arm and then her hand become more prominent in their turn, and finally a key being clasped inside that hand. Indeed, that key is a 'wrench' to turn the 'nut' of the plot, a key to the lock of the story vault. We must see it; we must see it for what it is; we must see that she has it; we must see that she has it secretly. And further, because in this voyage through space we make a move that can be sensed only as extraordinary, we must see

ourselves seeing; see that key as something toward which we (storygoers) need to gravitate, upon which we need to focus, and which we need to grasp as she is grasping it.

In order to offer a gradual, relentless narrowing of focus on that key, it would not have been necessary for Hitchcock to begin far up on the balcony, looking down and out at the whole flickering scene, *and then to sweep down in one single fluid uninterrupted shot* toward the valued object. A special rig had to be built to stabilise the camera and enable the vertical movement (see Krohn 2000: 98). And a focus puller had to be labouring all the way through the extended shot, because if at the beginning the camera's focus were to have been what it becomes at the end we would have seen nothing but air, surely not the chandelier and the top of the swirling staircase. Since the beginning of the shot is in distant perspective and we end in macro-close-up, the effective 'meaning' is that in a complex and busy social array a single tiny object in precise placement can have an earth-shattering significance (earth-shattering because, in this case, the key leads to a wine cellar; the cellar to bottles of wine; bottles to a single bottle; the single bottle to its own contents, far from wine; and the contents to an understanding of the Nazis' secret plot.³

A query about our experience of that masterful shot, however. As it begins, we are watching a party being hosted at a stranger's house (Sebastian is alien to us in several ways, as



well as being alien to the characters with whom we side) for the benefit of strangers. We are not really invited. It seems as though we have a bird's-eye view, a good opportunity for spying but not a way of being socially involved. When we come to the terminus of that shot – and, by implication, through its process as we travel *toward* that conclusion – do we feel ourselves to be more intrinsically connected to the event? Are we *closer* in being put so close? Closer to the problem, closer to the people, closer to the moment? And here, I think, as in the Griffith, we have a kind of apathetic proximity, a way of seeing a technical detail clearly enough to read it but not a way of cultivating any particular *feeling* about that detail taken in itself. We can be given information without a door being opened to special, emotional involvement. With this *Notorious* shot, it even helps not to be involved, so that we may follow the 'keyed' happenings as the tale unfolds. The key seems to grant magical entry to the wine cellar, surely, but also to the remainder of the film. We do not relate with enthusiasm to the key as object.

My third *Notorious* case for examination takes place upstairs in the Sebastian sitting room as, after a meal, the 'family' sit quietly for coffee. This is the third scene involving Alicia imbibing coffee: first on the patio, in a conventional medium close shot – we see her experiencing ill effects directly afterward; next, a coffee cup virtually empty, with Alicia striding down to the lawn to meet Sebastian (Claude Rains) and again experiencing ill effects – this shot is no closer than the first. But

now, Sebastian, Alicia, the mother (Leopoldine Konstantin), one of Sebastian's tuxedoed confederates (Reinhold Schünzel) are gathered civilly. Alicia is in a gilded throne at the rear of the shot; the villainous mother-in-law is at right on a sofa, with a silver coffee service at her knees. For some of the shots, such as this establishing one, the lens appears to be shooting at *f*/16, which means there is focal clarity from *f*/1.2, directly in front of the lens, the very closest possible proximity, all the way to the very furthest distance in the space. The mother-in-law and Alicia are in clear focus, physically speaking, although they occupy different focal planes. To obtain this clarity, the aperture is closed down (this is the effective meaning of *f*/16), and when this happens the image will not register – because



of the serious reduction of light coming through the aperture – unless a very great quantity of light is used on the set. In one of the shots in this sequence, however – notable and intriguing – there is to be seen in the extreme foreground, as though our hands and face are near enough to graze it, indeed as though, were we to be clumsy in reaching forward, we would spill it, a china coffee cup upon its saucer, quite dominating the perspective. This cup is certainly dramaturgically critical, because, as we should have learned by now (but Alicia hasn't), the coffee contains a slow-acting poison introduced by the diabolical Mme. Sebastian with the intent of gradually and unobtrusively killing her. Hitchcock is saying, most bluntly,



'Keep your eye on this cup (which now, for the third time, I have taken pains to position near your eye).' But that is not all.

The closeness of that piece of chinaware produces for us a sense in which the eyebeam, as Ortega names it, reaches out and embraces the object in view, embraces, indeed, with such a fulsome engagement of sense that the thing embraced seems to offer resistance to the hand (to be, in Ortega's argument, 'real' [1968: 111]). Objects may be in view; even clearly in view; even in view with *special* clarity, without touching or being touchable, without seeming 'real' in this affecting way. The optical embrace allows us to fondle and consider the thing in itself, quite aside from its monumental narrative significance: the roundness and smoothness of the cup, the ornamentation, carefully painted, indicating the fruitful work of delicate, finely focused hands.⁴ The side-on view presents the cup-as-container more centrally than it presents the contained substance, the cup as a means of delivery and storage, for keeping the coffee and poison inviolate in readiness for digestive use. Indeed, this film is full of containers, humans as well as objects, acting to contain secrets: the secret that Devlin and the intelligence cabal give Alicia to hold in; Sebastian and his cronies and their nefarious secret, held in with gracile *gemütlichkeit*; the mother's secret lust for power (over the secret plan, and over her pathetic son); Devlin's necessarily keeping secret his true feeling for Alicia until any



further secrecy will result in her death. Beautiful, and beautifully ornamented, bodies seen up close for their ability to hold what we cannot see.

Hitchcock used this kind of elaborate macro-close shot earlier, in *Spellbound* (1945), where we see a pistol at *f/2*, protruding away from a hand that is also partly visible very very near, directly in front of the lens. This pistol, this partial hand, and the Sebastian coffee cup were all special props constructed so that the illusion of extreme close-up vision could

be fostered in a shot actually made with a deeper focus than appears. Earlier in *Spellbound*, Dr. Brulov (Michael Chekhov) had approached John Ballantine (Gregory Peck), which is to say the camera, with a glass of milk, this, too, finishing in a macro-close-up where the imbibing of the milk is performed by the camera, which is to say, the character and the viewer together.⁵

In the Sebastian salon, we have a similar sense in the coffee-cup shot that an object *actually* seen at *f5.6* or even



f8 ‘swims toward the eye’ (at f2). Oversized in fact and decorated to appear sufficiently sharp even when the principal focal plane was behind it, the cup could dominate through artificial construction. Yet it is worth emphasizing: Hitchcock could have made shots of the Sebastian salon showing people in their seats, a coffee cup on a table, furniture in detail, and so on, without ruining the script structure which calls for a poisoned cup (that dramatic convention, at least since *Romeo and Juliet*). What stands out with that cup is precisely its astounding proximity, its ostensibly being closer to the audience than things of the screen are normally taken to be.

A respectful homage to the Hitchcock focal technique is Spielberg’s ‘finger shot’ in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) where a group of observers come upon a vast crowd of Hindus spread across an Indian plain murmuring in chorus a five-tone melody they have heard coming from the sky. ‘Where did it come from?’ a voice asks off-camera, and suddenly a bevy of fingers come up from below the screen and point upward together, one of these at f2, directly proximate to the lens and thus hyperdramatic in its sudden movement: ‘up into the sky’, we might conventionally read, in accordance with the diegesis of the moment; but it is actually up toward the vertical limit of screen space, as though to suggest the sound came from above the film itself. Again here, the proximal object is informative rather than affective. A finger indicating

an orientation, but not a finger as part of some definitive body with which we might form an association. Information is given here, not touch; an idea, not a taste. Further, the signal is simple, far simpler than the ostensibly simple coffee cup, which in consideration is a repository of secrets.

Yet the proximal shot moves far beyond the merely informative in the Act I finale, conversational surveillance of Dave (Keir Dullea) and Frank (Gary Lockwood) by HAL9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). We see them talking privately, away from the computer’s hearing, but then, in extreme close shot, the red mouth-eye of HAL apparently attending. And *then*: in macro-close-up, first on one astronaut and then on the other, a view of the talking mouth, seen in profile, enough detail being made visible (to HAL) for a lip reading. We are not intended to be reaching desirously or curiously toward the mouths, but this vision indicates the computer’s power and interest, indicates the astronauts’ naïveté and vulnerability. Touch is not invoked, since only the fact of the dialogue is made apparent, not what the astronauts are saying. As we could already see quite clearly that a private conversation was in play, there is nothing informative for us about seeing the mouths up close. And

in the macro-close-shot of HAL’s surveilling ‘eye’, there is no reaction shot to give away informational clues as to its digestion of the moment.

The precise alienation produced in visions of the greatest proximity, such as this shot of HAL and that of Grace Kelly’s face in *Rear Window*, is worth discreet study. In the case of the Grace Kelly close-up, we sense ourselves being brought very close to a persona, close enough to inspect microfeatures of the skin (the bullet holes in Jason Bourne’s back) and clothing (Fry’s cuff in *Saboteur* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1942]). With Kelly, her character approaches us; in many other circumstances, through a zoom or dolly-in, we approach the character. In all these cases, were we to take up a viewing position so near in everyday life we would be self-conscious. As Kelly leans forward toward the lens, we sense ourselves slightly distanced from her, not straightforwardly intimate. She is a curious stranger. She lures, but we must not usurp her lover’s position. The intimacy is to be read objectively, as a part of the diegetic construction involving her with Jeff: it is with him that she is diegetically intimate. But at the same time, close to us she seems intimate; or calls up a dream of intimacy.



As to the human face up close, how seriously do we wish to study, at the closest possible range, any such object, any human face at all? And the answer, rather directly, is, not very seriously. When we say we wish to 'come close' or 'be close', we do not mean proximate. At a critical moment in Sidney Lumet's *The Prince of the City* (1981), there is a full-screen macro-close-up of Carmine Caridi, looking straight into his face as it occupies all the available visual space; we are so desperately close there is no remedy but to perform a kind of medical inspection, something that might border on the erotic or the occupational but that is finally neither. It is partly because of its diegetic placement in the action stream that the shot is disturbing, but only partly so. Also working upon the viewer here is the sense of seeing another person *too closely and too well*. Or: taking up a mode of seeing in which one is pointedly blocked from knowledge and experience by the vitiating distraction of proximity.

With Caridi, we are confronted with a mask of degenerate fear and hopelessness, a facing off with the void. The sweat dripping down the face seems to be flowing from the eyes, and the eyes are two moist lakes, overflowing their banks in a natural storm. A confrontation with nature for us, then, and a subjection to nature's overwhelming power. With Kelly, she is a goddess about to devour us, a creature of immense proportions navigating our way. Her image, this disturbing proximity, was made to be seen on theatre screens measuring thirty-five or forty feet wide and more than twenty feet high, notwithstanding that it was not a VistaVision production; even in the Academy ratio the image was immense for the comparatively Lilliputian folk who ogled it.

The things of proximal cinema have existence in a kind of ultradiegetic domain, beyond the region of story action proper yet not so far beyond as to be resident in audience space. They strike us – before we attempt to decode their content and

positioning – as phantom images lifted out of the film yet still belonging to the film, inhabitants of two spaces at once, or as elements that vibrate rapidly between our position watching and the characters' position playing out. Perhaps only part of a figure seems to emerge, a trick of the light, a matter of angling, but in emerging it enters that indeterminate space, the space of the imagination, neither easy to understand nor convenient to accept. The shaping organ of cinema is a complexity involving performers, décor, lens, film stock, processing, and editing; and the 'air' expelled in the sacred utterance is light itself. This, in cinema always. But in the proximal moment the light bears a special cargo, a shaping we have not taught ourselves fully to recognise.

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1 See also Pye (2010) who sees in the close-up a kind of restriction, not an expansion, of the viewing experience. Many other scholars have written about camera and spectatorial vision in *Rear Window*, including John Belton, Bill Krohn, William Rothman, and Murray Pomerance.

2 See the stable shot in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) for a good example of a protracted kiss where the background does not seem to remain coherent.

3 Hitchcock's gift to us is a kind of Jamesian perspective, with a social arrangement being defined and mobilised by way of a single tiny object, by the telling detail. Even more here: that telling detail is brought by intensive proximity into virtual contact with our imaginary hand, and in a voyage that began on the balcony (far off). The movement is the story.

4 Theorists of cinema and tactility, a growing field, have given a different sort of consideration to the place of haptic events in cinemagoing. Worth examining are Laura U. Marks (2000: especially Ch. 3) and Jennifer M. Barker (2009). Marks's attention to the relationship between hapticity and images that are either intentionally out of focus or blurred, while it holds its own interests, restricts our attention to image 'tricks', as I would call them, for 'faking' or 'imitating' an everyday sensibility in the viewer. The power of the proximal shot as I am discussing it is precisely that nearness alone brings us into a tactile zone, operates proxemically.

5 In the 1970s and later a shot like this one might have been made using a diopter lens, which allows for close-up and very deep focus in a single shot simultaneously. Many films show it, and a notable example can be found in a close-up conversation between Sean Connery and Kevin Costner in Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987). The diopter here helps create the illusion for the audience that the two actors are equally touchable, when they are not.