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| **TOWARDS A PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF CLOSE-UPS: EXPERIENCING INTIMACY AND THREAT** By [Per Persson](http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/contributors.php?id=59) |  |
| *This article takes a functionalist perspective to cinema. It is insufficient only to describe textual features without awareness of how these function in co-operation with cultural-psychological-behavioural structures in the spectator.* Intimate space, for example, is the distance of both lovemaking and murder! *(Meyrowitz, 1986:261)**Close-up* might be defined in at least two ways - objectively and functionally… Close-up effects can thus be triggered by different sorts of framings, enlargements and lenses. A functional definition places emphasis on the necessary prerequisites for the function to occur, and in this paper I will argue that a functional explanation of close-ups will have to take into account a certain spectatorial behavioural pattern, known in social psychology as *personal space behaviour…*Now, close-ups do undoubtedly have several functions. Directing attention is perhaps the most obvious… This paper will, however, deal with another function, or rather two, which I argue are closely related. They are what I call the functions of *threat* and *intimacy*.**Threat** Many scholars have testified to the threatening and shocking effect of close-ups. The terminology centres around "the threat and the anxiety"[(1)](http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=241&feature#ViewNotes_1) (Dubois, 1984-85:14), "effect of horror"[(2)](http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=241&feature#ViewNotes_2) (Dubois, 1984-85:18), "jolting and excessive" (Gunning, 1994:294), "aggressive"[(3)](http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=241&feature#ViewNotes_3) (Olsson, 1996:34), "confrontation" (Gunning, 1990:101) or "shock" (Bordwell & Thompson, 1993:216). Also Eisenstein (1940/1974) identified this effect: "[A] cockroach/hypocrite [cafard] filmed in close-up seems on the screen a hundred times more terrible than a hundred elephants captured in a long-shot."[(4)](http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=241&feature#ViewNotes_4)Examples of images that produce these effects are not hard to find. In most action scenes in modern mainstream cinema the quick use of medium shots and close-ups is an important instrument to generate a feeling of tension and 'vividness' in the viewer. Fig. 1a-1d try to exemplify this phenomenon from a *Die Hard* (1988) fighting sequence.

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Here the close-up (of course in tandem with many other parameters) indeed is "threatening to transgress its frame, to burst the screen in order to invade the space of the spectator"[(5)](http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=241&feature#ViewNotes_5) (Dubois, 1984-85:22) in a quite forcible way. In contrast, a similar event represented in long shots - e.g. in *The Life of Charles Peace* (1905) - does not seem to engage the viewer in the same way (fig. 2).Splatter movies and thrillers often use sudden close-ups in order enhance the frightening effect of the object depicted (a knife or an assassin), for example in *Psycho* (1960) in fig. 3…The threatening close-up effect might also be found in television genres. In nature programs close-ups of small dangerous animals (snakes, spiders, scorpions) are in some viewers provoking fear and dread. And many people take offence at close-ups in medical documentaries. In these cases it is mainly the objects depicted that brings forth the experience of fear and shock, but the close-up device undoubtedly has an intensifying function.mhtml:file://H:\Film%20Studies\FM4%20Popular%20film%20&%20emotional%20response\Kinema%20%20%20A%20Journal%20for%20Film%20and%20Audiovisual%20Media_php.mht!http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/fileobj.php?type=2&id=428Close-ups thus seems to generate a mental state of threat which in its turn, if it is powerful enough, might generate different kinds of outer behaviour on part of the spectator. This might include looking away, leaning backwards or to the side, to use other's or own bodies as barriers, or simply walk away etc.**Intimacy** On the other hand scholars have placed emphasis on the effect of intimacy that close-ups seem to produce. In these observations the vocabulary focus on, for instance, "greater 'involvement'" (Branigan 1984:6), "intimacy" (Gunning, 1994:210) and "intensity" (Epstein, 1921:235). In contrast to the threat function, these effects are very often associated with facial/bodily close-ups.We must however differ between two types of intimacy. On the one hand intimacy refers to the processes of psychologicalization connected to perception of character faces/bodies. A face in close-up makes it possible for the spectator to generate hypotheses about the mind and feelings of the person depicted and hence get 'psychologically intimate' with him/her. The tears and facial expression of the mother in *Napoleon* (1927) gives the viewer hints at what she feels at this moment of reunification with her son (fig. 7). Since faces are one of the most important cues in the emotion attribution process (of course together with verbal behaviour), facial close-ups are very important in some modes of cinema. However, it must be emphasised that it is not the close-up that generates this kind of intimacy, but the face itself. Undoubtedly the close-up makes it *possible* to discern the facial details of the mother, but the intimacy effect is produced by the face and the viewer’s face-reading competence. However, we might also use intimacy in a more straightforward sense. The close-up seems to produce a more direct effect of *spatial* or *optical* intimacy. The camera lets us 'come close' to the objects/characters depicted…**Personal space** Distance in real life interpersonal communication is of crucial importance. Depending on different factors, for example type of conversation, people establish an appropriate distance to the interlocutor. Often we feel uncomfortable when someone gets unmotivatedly close or stands too far away and in such cases we unconsciously regulate the distance by moving away or closing in. This regulation of micro space in daily transactions is referred to as *proxemic behaviour*. The intimate sphere surrounding an individual is most commonly labelled *personal space*. Both have been studied within social psychology…Personal space is said to have at least two functions. On the one hand, early research emphasised the *protective* function of having a personal boundary. Human spatial behaviour research was initially influenced by ethology and analogous to animal preserves the personal space was thought to regulate intraspecies aggressiveness and reduce stress. Having a protective boundary *outside* the body of the organism might for example anticipate an enemy attack before it affects the organism itself. Such a behaviour might have had a survival value and thus persisted through evolution. Environmental psychology dealing with inappropriately close spacing (e.g., in architecture and city planning) often takes this function as a point of departure to explain spatial over stimulation and stress.But although it is acknowledged that humans do seem to have a built in biologically rooted 'spatial mechanism', the acquisition of specific personal space norms and behaviours is almost invariably explained within the context of cultural experience and with a reference to a theory of social learning. That is, through the process of imitation and reinforcement, children learn the accepted cultural patterns of appropriate proxemic behaviour. This brings us to the second primary function of spatial behaviour, which is *communication*.Generally, by moving closer to someone we signal our wish to establish closer contact and by moving away we indicate a desire to limit accessibility and intimacy. Actively using and manipulating interpersonal distance is an important behaviour pattern to achieve preferred degrees of closeness. The anthropologist Edward Hall was the first to postulate different distance zones depending on the situation and relation between the interlocutors. Aiello's description is clear and short:**Intimate distance** ranges from 0 to 18 inches and is characterised by strong and intense sensory inputs. The voice is normally held at a very low level or even at a whisper. Sight is a bit distorted, heat and smell from another is inescapable and involvement is unmistakable.**Personal distance** ranges from 1.5 to 4 feet and another is within "arm's length." The voice level is moderate, vision is no longer distorted, and body heat and olfaction are either no longer or minimally perceptible. This distance is more likely to be used by friends and aquaintances [sic!].**Social distance** extends from 4 to 12 feet. Nobody touches or expects to touch another person. Voice level is louder and transactions are more formal and businesslike.**Public distance** extends beyond 12 feet. This distance is more characteristic of speakers and their audience or interactions with public figures. The voice and everything else must be exaggerated or amplified. (Aiello, 1987: 392)Each of these zones provides a different level of sensory information with the intimate distance involving almost all senses. Although these measured distances are not to be taken in a rigid fashion since these spheres operates differently depending on culture, sex and personality, it is still fair to say that these zones are respected by most people. Transgressing from one zone to another (in or out) signals a shifting of expectations on the situation and the relationship between interactants.Each of these zones thus has a double function. On the *protective* side, they all work as warning areas to move back if something negatively valued or unknown enters the space. In this respect, the intimate distance zone functions as the last warning area with high degree of alert. On the *communication* side, the zones operate as markers for desired interpersonal relation. By letting the interlocutor inside the intimate distance zone, we flag trust and confidence *vis-à-vis* that person and a wish to get more intimate.**Close-up effects and personal space**My general claim would thus be formulated something like this: *The intensifier-of-contents effects of the close-up device, are results of the interaction between image and spectator's real world interpersonal distance behaviour*.First of all, the auditory and visual character of the cinematic medium has the potential to simulate some of the intense sensory input we correlate with personal space intrusions or objects being too close. If we in a real life situation can discern the scales of a scorpion, we know for sure that we ought to back away. The same is true if we can hear the animal crawling around. The cinematic close-up has the potential of presenting exactly these stimuli to the spectator. Of course some dimensions are missing: we don't smell or taste anything, but the auditory and visual input seems to be sufficient to evoke the personal intrusion effect. If we in real life situations perceive facial details and whispering, which are sensory modes associated with Hall's *intimate distance zone*, of a person *negatively* valued, we conclude that the distance is too close and compensate for this by moving back. We feel intruded upon by that person. The sound close-up has the capacity to present precisely this kind of sensory input. It is thus the collaboration between certain properties of the carefully designed cinematic text and real world proxemic competence on part of the viewer that makes the effect of threat possible and seemingly natural. This is a *functional* description of (threatening) close-ups…*Threat*, *anxiety*, *horror*, *confrontation*, *aggressiveness* and *shock* are terms related to close-ups as well as real world personal space invasions…Conventions of cinema are not totally arbitrary. Surely, there might be devices motivated by arbitrary reasons, but some of them definitely are designed in careful consideration to the psychological makeup of the spectator in order to produce specific visual effects. That is, at least some conventions exploits *extra*-cinematic, real world competence/behaviour of the spectator.  |  |