

## ***An Archaeology of the Close-Up: Scale and Affect in Cinema and Early Forms of Visual Media***

Isolated in space, her face commands the audacity of the screen; her eyes twinkle with dampened hope as she stares intensely upon her off-screen accusers. The power of the close-up within Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) becomes immediately apparent. Dreyer uses the close-up to enhance spectatorial affect towards Joan's begrimed circumstances, evoking and enhancing the cinematic power of the human face by drawing us closer towards its pure spiritual essence. But Dreyer also deploys the close-up as a magnification tool, a temporally fragmented image that detaches itself from the whole to form an entirely new autonomous existence within itself. Using both scale and affect, Dreyer deploys the close-up to subconsciously engrave Joan's haunting image into the minds of the spectator, emphasizing the aesthetic power of the close-up as a vital tool within the creation of visual art. In this essay, I aim to create an archaeological portrait of the cinematic close-up by both questioning its meaning and effectiveness within the cinema, and uncovering its origin as a powerful tool within the history of visual media. I shall focus on early film theorists such as Bela Balazs and Walter Benjamin with aim of discovering the impact made by close-ups upon their introduction to the cinema. I will also focus on earlier forms of visual art, analysing how the scale of early microscopic images and the affect of portrait painting informed and shaped what we know to be today's cinematic close-up. I hope to make historical and temporal connections between early forms of affect and scale close-ups in visual media and later uses of the close-up in cinema, thus conducting the archaeology of the close-up as both a cognitive and affective tool.

## New Perspectives

Bela Balazs, highlighting the impact of the close-up upon its cinematic birth, states, “The close-up has not only widened our vision of life, it has also deepened it. In the days of the silent film it not only revealed new things, but showed us the meaning of the old.” (Balazs, 1931, p.55) This comment is made visually apparent within one of the very first uses of the cinematic close-up. Within George Albert Smith’s short film, *Grandma’s Reading Glass* (1900) a young boy uses a magnifying glass to view everyday objects, a pocket watch, a cat, the eye of his grandma, etc. With each view, the young boy’s fascination grows upon gaining detailed visual knowledge of his surroundings. Each close-up is static; they appear as privileged individual viewpoints that harbour within them entire worlds fragmented from the film’s whole.

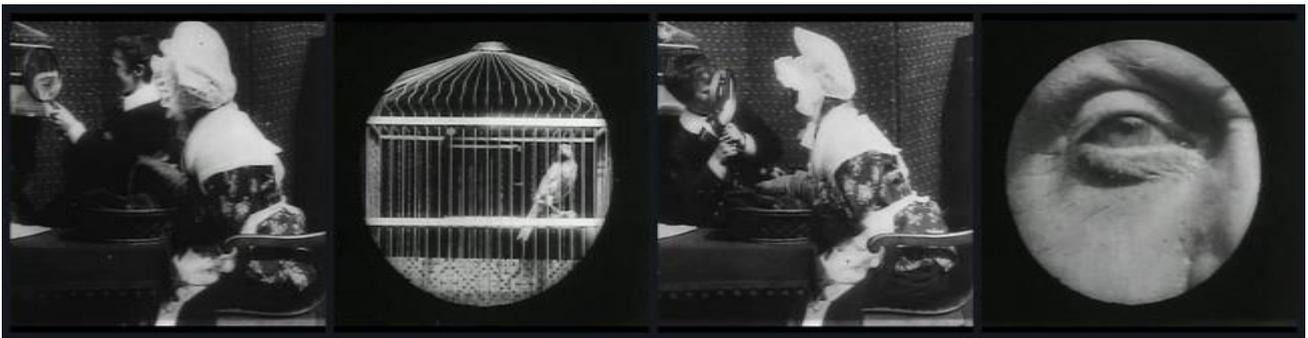


Image 1: A Sequence from *Grandma’s Reading Glass* (1900)

The magnification tool has revealed to the boy new meanings within old objects, widening his vision, yet in turn, uncovering, as Balazs claims, new visual perspectives within the experiences of the early film spectator. These early spectators included Jean Epstein, who lovingly describes the close-up of a face in the most dramatic of manner: “The lip is laced with tics like a theatre 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.” (Epstein, 1977, p.9) Here, Epstein appears to reflect the same visual excitement found within the young boy in *Grandma’s Reading*

*Glass*; he describes the face in terms of everyday objects, gaining new perspectives towards the human face, viewing its tactile features and textures in ways never experienced before. Epstein also breaks down the features of the face, fragmenting the image into sections; in this case, the single human mouth instead becomes the 'mouth', 'lips', and 'smile', three separate elements created within the visual world of the cinematic close-up, each signifying and representing something different. Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', describes the importance of this effect: "By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects ... the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action." (Benjamin, 1936) For Benjamin, the close-up had created a physical change within human perception, extending our perceptual understanding and resulting in a more fully formed and sympathetic acknowledgement of the world and our existence. The close-up contributed to Benjamin's concept of the 'optical unconscious' as a means by which the everyday invisible becomes perceived via the aid of mechanical reproduction technology.

### **Elephants and Cockroaches**

Already mentioned, the issue of proximity, the ability of the close-up to highlight what Balazs labels, "the hidden life of little things." (Balazs, 1931, p.54) Yet, also relevant in studying the close-up as an indispensable tool of cinema is the expansiveness of the screen itself. The cinema screen enlarges small details to giant sizes, enhancing the power of even the smallest of objects. As Sergei Eisenstein explains, "(A) cockroach filmed in close-up seems on the screen a hundred times more terrible than a hundred elephants captured in a long-shot." (Eisenstein, 1949, p.31) Not only does the close-up

reveal unseen details within small objects, it blows them up to a single image, fragmenting the wholeness of larger shots to create new signs and signifiers. On Eisenstein's work, Mary Ann Doane writes, "As opposed to the American cinema's use of the close-up to suggest proximity, intimacy, knowledge of interiority, Eisenstein argues for a disproportion that transforms the image into a sign, an epistemological tool, undermining identification and hence empowering the spectator as analyst of, rather than vessel for, meaning." (Doane, 2003) In this sense, the abrupt largeness of the close-up is used to shock and evoke reaction, but also to suggest. For example, during Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), the Odessa steps sequence is ended rapidly by two quick cutting close-ups of a soldier slashing downwards with his sword. In a previous shot, a baby's buggy is seen moving towards the direction of these slashes, yet the shot after the soldier instead shows a woman with a cut across her face.



Image 2: A sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)

Using this disjointed close-up sequencing, Eisenstein cuts into the largeness of the film's temporal space, not to show a narratively motivated sequence of a slash followed by a cut, but rather to suggest violence and murder upon the film's viewing audience. The scale of the soldier's close-up obscures all other temporal space, emphasizing its sudden jump in size, raising its power and rhythmical energy as a signifier of death and destruction. Gilles Deleuze states that, "[T]he close-up does not tear away its object from a set of which it

would form part, of which it would be a part, but on the contrary, it abstracts it from all spatio-temporal co-ordinates, that is to say it raises it to the state of Entity.” (Deleuze, 1986, p.106) In the case of Eisenstein, the close-up was not primarily used to show ‘the hidden life of little things’; the detail of the soldier’s face is irrelevant, the cut happens too quickly to notice any detail within the shot. Yet, the close-up itself is raised in scale and power; like an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence, the close-up is spatially different from the shots that came before it, but its significance re-writes the entire sequence of shots, disrupting the film’s space to pull the object within the close-up away from any other objects nearby. Or, as Martine Beugnet claims, “the close-up shot initially generates a spatial, temporal and figurative as well as perceptual disruption. It dis-locates the object of gaze, fragments it and carves it out of its surroundings.” (Beugnet, 2007, p.90) The power of the cinema to blow-up images to unnatural and spatially disjointed sizes, as well as its ability to capture the everyday invisible combine harmoniously to form a powerful cinematic tool. But where do the origins of scale in visual art lie? Can the powers associated with cinematic scale be found even before the invention of photography?

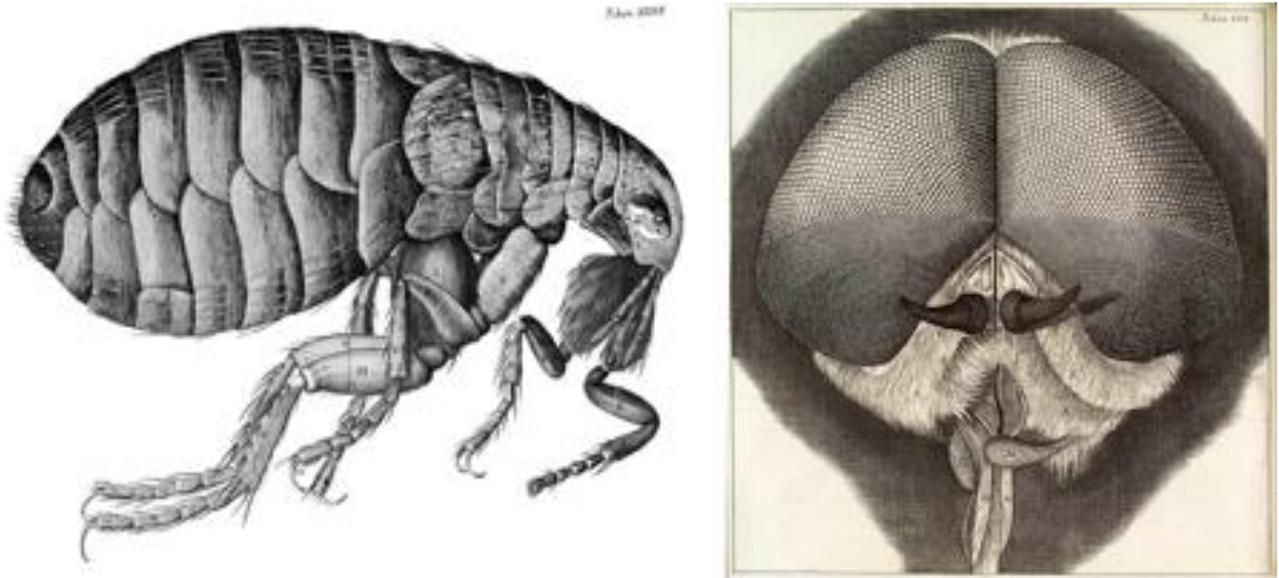
### **An Archaeology of Scale**

In spatially shifting towards an enlarged view of an object within the same temporal space, the cinema transcended other forms of visual art, influencing the history of our mental perception. As Hugo Münsterberg highlights, “The close-up has objectified in our world of perception our mental act of attention and by it has furnished art with a means which far transcends the power of any theater stage.” (Münsterberg, 1916, p.38) Early films such as *Grandma’s Reading Glass* attempted to overcome this jarring perceptual shift by presenting the close-up within a narrative framework, as a gimmick – in this case, via a magnifying glass. Here, the magnifying glass is used to reduce the harsh effect of these

newly experienced shifts, meaning that, during the making of the film, the close-up via magnification technology was an acceptable visual display of social understanding. Walter Benjamin states that, "The desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction." (Benjamin, 1936)

Benjamin's words relate to the cinema, but also to modern technological inventions of vision such as the microscope and the magnifying glass before it; his words closely link the social need within modernity for the close-up as a tool of knowledge and understanding. To this effect, the work of early scientists and biologists such as Robert Hooke, Jan Swammerdam, and Antonie van Leeuwenhoek become relevant. Robert Hooke was an English natural philosopher and polymath who worked extensively with early forms of 17<sup>th</sup> century microscope. Hooke created detailed copperplate engravings of small plants and insects as viewed from his microscope. These engravings were then compiled to form the original work of biology '*Micrographia*' in January of 1665. Hooke's engravings echo Benjamin's comments; they are reproductions of the real, yet their details are of closer likeness to what the naked eye may view alone. The details of the pictures were the first of their kind to be produced, meaning that, for most of their viewers, this type of spatial shift towards such small objects had never been visually experienced; the door to the world of Balazs's 'little things' had truly been opened, many years before even the invention of photography. Interesting to note is the way that Hooke himself describes his work. Towards a flea, he remarks, "The strength and beauty of this small creature, had it no other relation at all to man, would deserve a description." (Hooke, 1665) Like Eisenstein's cockroaches, Hooke's perception of the almost invisible flea is raised to the level of a strong and beautiful creature via way of the magnification technology. To this effect,

Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak connect the “greatly enlarged scale” of Hooke’s engravings to their garnered respect on the page, describing the flea as “a formidable creature with a spiked suit of armor ... ready to spring into action.” (Stafford & Terpak, 2001, p.205)



*Image 3 & 4: From Micrographia – Hooke’s engravings of a flea and a fly’s head.*

Like the cinema’s screen, the size of the paper blows-up the flea’s image, enhancing its visual power. Hooke is fascinated by the small details uncovered by the device; but what’s more, the image has altered his perception of space in much the same way the cinema had for Münsterberg. Via way of Hooke’s engraving, the flea is no longer too ‘small’ for the human eye, but the human eye is now too ‘big’ for the flea; the focus is pulled away from the smallness of the object, and placed upon the largeness of the human. Hooke goes on to describe the eyes of a large fly: “I found this fly to have the biggest clusters of eyes in proportion to his head, of any small kind of fly I have yet seen.” Hooke goes further, fragmenting the “surface of the eye in very lovely rows” from the wholeness of the eye itself. (Hooke, 1665) This kind of description echoes Jean Epstein’s earlier comments on the cinematic close-up. For Hooke, like Epstein’s description of the human mouth, the fly may now be fragmented; no longer just a ‘fly’s head’, he chops the image into sections A B

C D and E, each corresponding towards an individual layer of skin or section of hair. He then describes these individual layers as separate objects, pulling them away from the whole, and, as Deleuze states, “raises (them) to the state of Entity.” (Deleuze, 1986, p.106) The work of scientists such as Robert Hooke paved the way for the close-up as used in cinema, provoking the same visual and perceptual issues surrounding scale that had later been outlined by the early film theorists. Bela Balazs notes, “(The) close-up reveals the most hidden parts in our polyphonous life, and teaches us to see the intricate visual details of life”. (Balazs, 1931, p.55) Here, Balazs is referring to the observing of worldly details previously unseen – an entire world to which the naked eye alone is blind. Both Hooke and Balazs note the power of detailed observation via way of modern optical devices, framing their power as sites of fascination and wonder, as extensions of the human body and mind. These observations, as well as the huge popularity of both the cinematic close-up and Hooke’s visual work point again to Benjamin, who notes that “The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear; it reveals entirely new structural formulations of the subject.” (Benjamin, 1936) The cinematic close-up allowed public audiences to act upon an inherent desire to closely observe the reproduction of everyday existence, yet early microscope technology paved the way for its development, establishing scale as a fundamental tool of worldly connection and instinctive human fascination. While it remains clear that Hooke’s engravings were in no way as visually altering towards our spatial perception as the invention of cinema, they do hold an archaeological key to discovering and uncovering the effectiveness and foundational significance of what would later be known as the cinematic close-up.

## Beyond the Image

The close-up has long been associated with the 'soul', the inner emotions and complexities of human beings expressed within the close-up through the language of the face. Jean Epstein even goes as far as labeling close-ups the "soul of the cinema". (Epstein, 1977, p.9) Returning once more to Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, Mary Ann Doane states, "Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*, a chain of close-ups that seem to constitute the very revelation of the soul, is the epitome of the genre. It is barely possible to see a close-up of a face without asking: what is he/she thinking, feeling, suffering? What is happening beyond what I can see?" (Doane, 2003) Here, the close-up is no longer a sign, no longer a viewing platform from which to view a miniature world too small to comprehend otherwise. In this case, the close-up is a means of human expression, a tool via which to express the unexplainable – a visual bearing of the human 'soul'. Balazs also alludes to the close-up in such manner, commenting that, within the close-up, "we can see that there is something there that we cannot see." (Balazs, 1931, p.76) The comments of both Doane and Balazs are proved relevant in D.W. Griffith's 1919 feature film, *Broken Blossoms*, in which the young Lucy Burrows (Lillian Gish) is abused and mistreated by her aggressive and alcoholic father, Battling Burrows.



Image 5: Two shots of Lillian Gish from *Broken Blossoms* (1919)

During the scene, Battling calls on the frightened and nervous Lucy to smile. Hoping not to provoke her father, Lucy does so by pushing up both corners of her mouth with her fingers, thus simulating the disingenuous gesture. This movement is captured within a close-up on Lucy's face, allowing the spectator to easily perceive Lucy's deception. Though her mouth is smiling, the outlines of her lips are stiff, the skin of her face is drooped, and her eyes glisten with the reflection of water as she clearly struggles to hold back the stream of any impending teardrops. Within a wide-shot, Lucy's forced smile would appear as just that – a forced smile. Yet, within a close-up, Lucy appears completely and utterly horrified; the language of her face cannot only be read, but can be registered beyond what we see on screen. Griffith uses the close-up to turn Lucy's smiling face into an unspoken expression of fear, anxiety, and nightmare. Thus, visually illustrating Balazs's early observation that "Close-ups are often dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surface of appearances ... Good close-ups are lyrical; it is the heart, not the eyes, that has perceived them." (Balazs, 1931, p.56)

### **Personal Space**

Early theorist Rudolf Arnheim expressed some concern upon the invention of the cinematic close-up: "The close-up shows a human head, but one cannot tell where the man is, to whom it belongs, whether he is indoors or outdoors ... A superabundance of close-ups very easily leads to the spectators having a tiresome sense of uncertainty and dislocation" (Arnheim, 1957, p.82) Here, Arnheim is concerned about the reduction of establishing and locational space for that of personal space, which inherently limits atmospheric and environmental information. However, for Per Persson, this shift towards personal space is key to understanding both the 'threat' and 'intimacy' of close-ups: "The close-up seems to produce (a) direct effect of spatial or optical intimacy ... the feeling of

being physically close to another body/thing is central” (Persson, 1998) Persson frames these experiences of affect within a psychological framework of real world human interaction: “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.” (Persson, 1998) Persson draws comparison between the close-up and the degree of personal distance often granted within social human interaction. The close-up does not only ‘show’ the human face, it prioritizes privileged spectatorial access to it, allowing audiences to experience a personal and often vulnerable relationship with the face of those onscreen. In this, an intimate spatial connection is established between actor and spectator. An example of this arrives within Jean-Luc Godard’s 1962 film, *Vivre Sa Vie*, in which Nana (Anna Karina) visits a movie theater to watch Dreyer’s afar mentioned, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.



*Image 6: Two shots from Vivre Sa Vie (1962) of Anna Karina and Renée Jeanne Falconetti*

As Nana views Joan’s emotionally intense close-ups on screen, her face begins to match Joan’s gestures; the framing of her face moves to a tight close-up as tears stream down her face. These two temporally separate faces begin to merge into one, not via personality or visual features, but via personal space. The intimacy of both shots reduces the individuality of their faces, drawing the two characters closer through the matching of

gestures by way of the close-up. The close-ups within *The Passion of Joan of Arc* overwhelm Nana because they penetrate both her and Joan's personal space, establishing a spatially interpersonal and universal relationship defined not by the similarities of their situations or environments, but by the phenomenological and collective humanness of their intimate faces.

### **An Archeology of Gesture and Affect**

These examples highlight cinema's inherent fascination with the human face as both a signifier of unspoken emotion and an explorer of personal space. Gilles Deleuze goes as far as to remove any separation at all between the face and the close-up, stating, "As for the face itself, we will not say that the close-up deals with it or subjects it to some kind of treatment: there is no close-up of the face, the face is itself close-up, the close-up is by itself face and both are affect, affection image" (Deleuze, 1986, p.98) Deleuze is making connections between both the 'close-up' and the 'face' as autonomous elements of expression within themselves. These elements are not so much concerned with their surroundings, environments, or previous shots, but rather, express their qualities outside the spatio-temporality of their position. Nana does not need to hear, know, or even understand Joan to connect with her – the face, like the close-up, stands alone as a carrier of meaning. Regarding this, Mary Ann Doane also remarks, "The close-up transforms whatever it films into a quasi-tangible thing, producing an intense phenomenological experience of presence, and yet, simultaneously, that deeply experienced entity becomes a sign, a text, a surface that demands to be read. This is, inside or outside of the cinema, the inevitable operation of the face as well." (Doane, 2003) Although stretched to its most substantial and valuable within the cinema, the affective nature of the face within the close-up throughout visual forms of media did not begin here; much of what early and

modern theorist proclaim can also be applied to early forms of painting, including, most appropriately, the portrait. Doane states that, "The face in the cinema inherits certain tendencies of the portrait in its reflection/production of the concept of the bourgeois subject." (Doane, 2003) And Deleuze, referring to the 'reflecting surface' and 'intensive micro-movements' of the face, suggests, "In painting, the techniques of the portrait have accustomed us to these two poles of the face." (Deleuze, 1986, p.98) The painting of human faces in close-up established the foundations of the future relationship between the two. Deleuze goes on to note how "fragmentary and broken lines which indicate (the) quivering of the lips" in portrait painting can represent the micro-movements of the face experienced within the cinematic close-up. (Deleuze, 1986 p.98) To this effect, Johannes Vermeer's 17<sup>th</sup>-century painting, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* appears to modern eyes as somewhat cinematic in tone. The girl in the painting looks over her shoulder towards the spectator, marginally opening her mouth as she does so. Her piercing gaze, as well as her open mouth, captures not a 'pose', but rather a 'moment'; the painting becomes, like the cinematic close-up, a segment of moving time captured and fragmented within the image. The lips of the girl appear somewhat moist, quivering within a jolted moment of emotional flux. Research on the painting itself has found that, "Vermeer painted the girl's eyes with a precision that was near the limits of visual acuity ... Vermeer included 3 gaze illusions, none of which researchers have documented as known in Vermeer's time" (West, Van Veen, 2007, p.313) Researchers also conducted an experiment in which "observers ... viewed the painting when her eyes were digitally replaced by those of a real person." (West, Van Veen, 2007, p.313) To which, little difference between the original and manipulated versions of the painting is visible. With this example, the line between the affective nature of both painting and cinema is merged; little difference can be noted between the two; the cinematic qualities within the painting, as well as its structural gaze

illusions, resemble that of a filmic close-up because of the ability of Vermeer's painting technique to leap the boundaries of realism; capturing the face with close similarities to that of a modern film camera. The girl's face visually echoes Joan's readable and textual surface of facial anguish, reflecting once more Doane's affect line of questioning: 'what is he/she thinking, feeling, suffering? What is happening beyond what I can see?'



Image 7: *Girl with a Pearl Earring*: A. showing the original painting. B. Showing the painting when the eyes are replaced with those of a real person

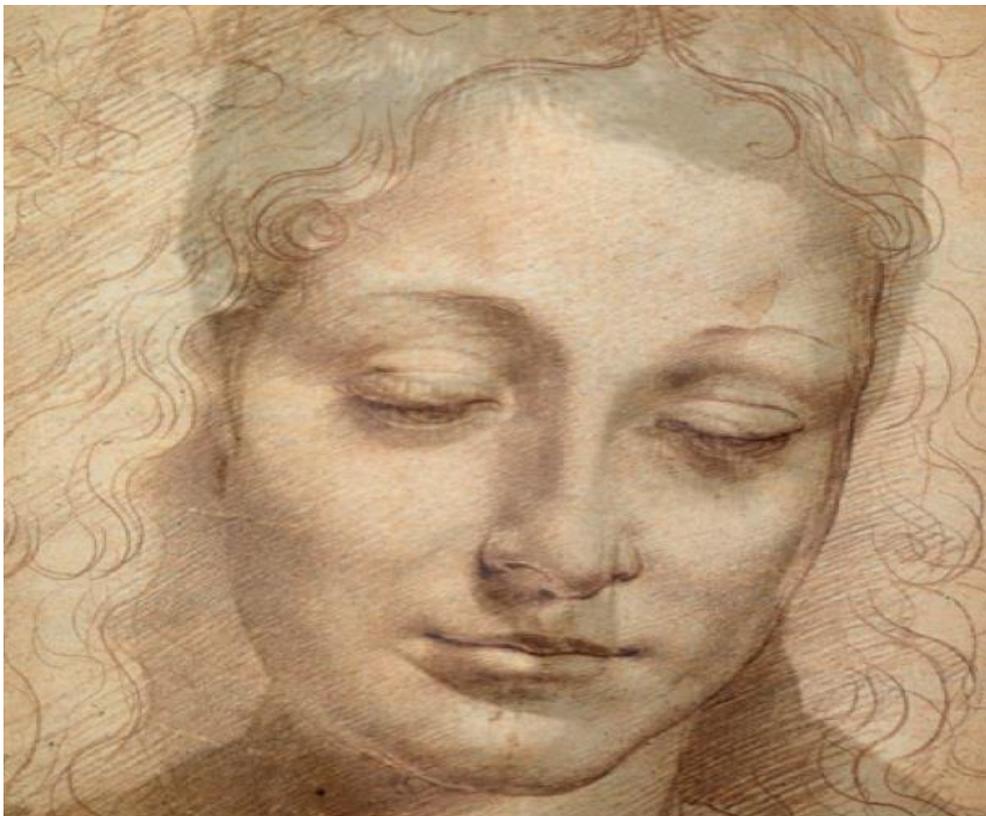
The motifs that connect both portrait art and the close-up are also found within human gesture, the ability of images to 'colonize our bodies' as claimed by Hans Belting. For Belting, "the body ... remains the connecting link between technology and mind, medium and image." (Belting, 2011, p.19) Whether captured by a film camera or the human hand, the body, or indeed, the face, connects the affective humanity of both painting and film. When examined closely, it becomes increasingly clear that many motifs of facial and bodily gesture apparent in cinema were first framed and narrated by the hands of artists. The face of Joan in Dreyer's film shares startling resemblance to a sketch of a *Female Head* by Leonardo da Vinci. The two images share meaning because of the inherently cinematic

gestures depicted, both of which suggest narrative and story. Both women are broken, lacking in hope, and are painfully exhausted.



*Image 8 & 9: Leonardo da Vinci's Female Head, and a shot from The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928)*

A simple matching by superimposing the images highlights their temporal and affective similarities, but also underlines Belting's comments of images as colonizing living bodies.

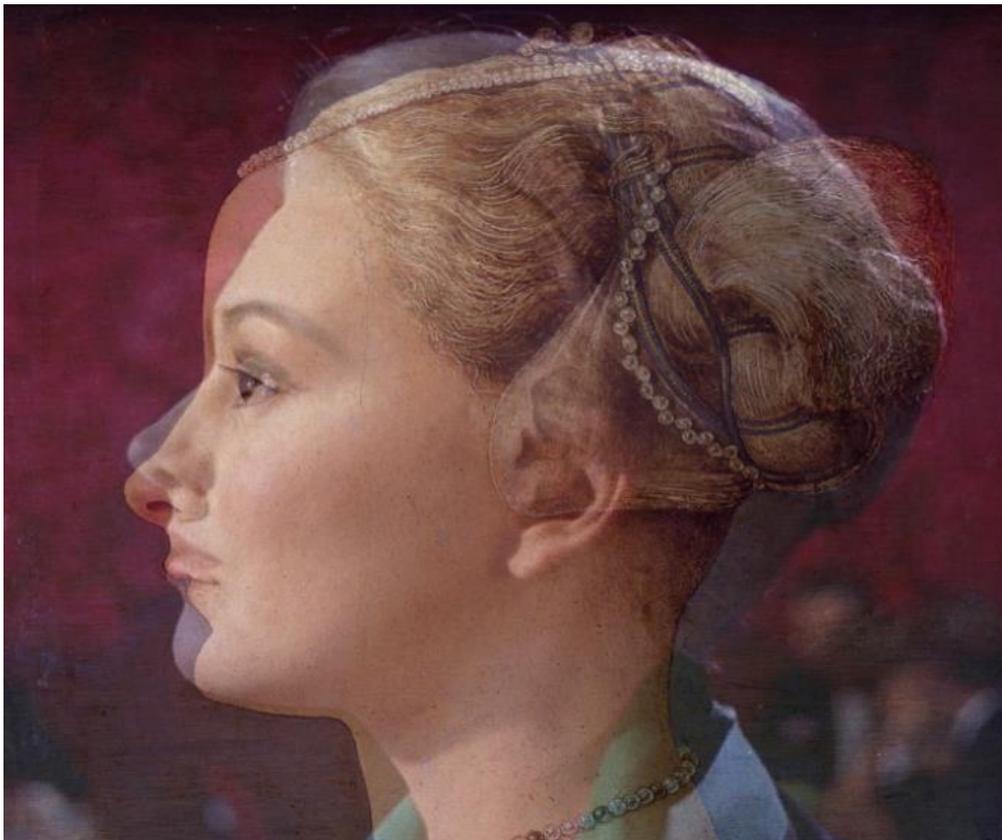


*Image 10: Both images as matched and superimposed*

Similarly, the following images of Kim Novak in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Antonio del Pollaiuolo's *Portrait of a Young Woman* aesthetically link in much the same way.



*Image 11 & 12: Kim Novak in Vertigo (1958) and Pollaiuolo's Head of a Young Woman*



*Image 13: Both images as matched and superimposed*

These matched images span historical and cultural periods, yet their highlighted facial positions and gestures via way of the close-up connects them emotionally, drawing the subjects of the images together across time and space. Gesture within the close-up becomes a sign, a readable surface that not only signposts certain human emotions, but connects with others expressing similar emotional states. To this effect, Balazs details the cinematic close-up as highlighting what he labels 'microphysiognomics', this relates to uncontrollable expressions found beyond the surface layer of individual faces. Balazs goes on to state that the task of 'microphysiognomics' is to show how "the individual trait merges with the general, until they are inseparably united and form as it were nuances of one another." (Balazs, 1931 p.83) Balazs notes not only the importance of the close-up to show unique and individual traits of singular faces, but also to highlight human similarities between conflicting historical periods, class structures, and cultural distance. The heads and faces of Kim Novak in *Vertigo* and the woman in Pollaiuolo's painting are connected not only by appearance, but by subconsciously learnt cultural and societal positioning of bodily posture and facial expression – they are connected in spirit; a human social understanding that, via way of image and visual media, leaps the boundaries of temporal distance. The portrait painting set the path for what would later become a powerful cinematic tool for connecting people by emotion and affect, breaking the veil of personal space in order to seemingly lay bare the human soul.

The cinematic close-up, as investigated above, had a huge impact not only on the cinema itself, but on all forms of visual media, redefining what temporal space, the enlargement of images, and the human face could be within the visual arts. Yet, as I have investigated, the origins of the close-up were a pre-destined human fascination even before the invention of photography. Our desire for a cinematic close-up exceeded our ability to

produce one, thus the sciences and arts effectively attempted to fill this gap. The microscope and the portrait painting established the theoretical grounds for what the close-up in cinema would later achieve; they redefined the space around us, allowing society to view hidden worlds and connect emotionally with subjects of media. These early visual mediums defined the cinema as we know it today, establishing both the affective and cognitive powers of the close-up, as well as helping to establish what would later become a formidable visual tool.

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