Distance Changes as the Means of Expression in the Cinema Art

Anry Vartanov
Mass Media Arts Department
State Institute for Art Studies
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: anvartanov@yandex.ru

Ekaterina Salnikova
Mass Media Arts Department
State Institute for Art Studies
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: k-saln@mail.ru

Abstract—**The principle of the changing distance between the camera and the object is discussed in the article. The authors write about significant features of the changing distance in art films of the twentieth century and note some new details in the use of changing distance in the art films of nowadays. It helps to realize the transformation of cinema poetics in the current period. The important trend today is the effects of the static camera in the climax dramatic scenes. The authors analyze several scenes in the films of Fellini, Tarkovsky, Steve McQueen to describe the aesthetical difference between the auteur film of XX century and modern intellectual film directing.**

Keywords—cinema; poetics; camera; changing distance; view; artistic vision; close-up; long shot; Fellini; Tarkovsky; Steve McQueen

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema theorists considered a change in the distance - that is, an ability of a camera to record reality from different distances and at different scales - as one of the main expressive means of cinema [1] [2]. Together with the montage and perspective, it was part of the famous Bela Balazs' triad, which at first focused mainly on the close-up [3]. In many theoretical works there were disputes over who was the first to use the close-up and what film it was in. For aesthetics of silent cinema, the close-up, indeed, assumed tremendous significance. The chance to bring a camera close to the face of an actor, to show emotional states experienced, had a decisive influence on the formation of cinema as a dramatic art.

Equally important are the opportunities of general shots, especially because of their correlation, montage, overflow into other shots, including large and superlarge ones. In the first program of the Lumiere brothers, shown in the "Grand Café", this quality was already actively exploited. "The arrival of the train" was all one shot. Yet, it was not monotonous, but changeable. The train approaching a stationary camera, the transformation of a point on the horizon into a huge steam locomotive - all that gave some specific cinematic dynamics to the image. There was a change of shots from the most distant, general to a close-up.

However, we should not forget about photography, the predecessor of cinema. As early as the 19th century, photo art saw an urgent need for a variety of camera positions in relation to the subject. In fact, many opportunities of changing the distance can be found in early photography. It actually shows how a new technical art gradually reveals its unique capabilities. Photography boldly varies the distance to the subject, which is especially true for such widespread genres as a photo essay and a photo series [4]. Even before the birth of screen art, these genres solved problems in many respects similar to those of cinema and television.

Cinema and television - dynamic arts - went much further than photography. Life is moving forward captured by cine- or tele-cameras. Similarly, a camera itself is moving on a trolley, a crane or in operator's hands. Finally, an illusion of movement is created due to the smooth change of the focal length of the lifting lens (zoom lens). Because of all these forms of movement, the distance between the object and its image on the screen changes.

In this article, in accordance with the methods of art history analysis, the authors set a goal to identify the most significant features of the use of varying the distance in independent films of the 20th century. It also raises the question of what is new in changing distances in the modern cinema, that is, cinema of the end of the 20th - beginning of the 21st century. The relevance of this topic is related to the fact that the aesthetics of cinema is undergoing significant transformation at the turn of the century. This is reflected in domestic and foreign studies [5], [6], [7]. However, the phenomenon of a change in the distance appears to have insufficient reference yet and calls for a closer scrutiny.

II. A CHANGE IN THE DISTANCE IN INDEPENDENT FILMS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

As the classic of the theory of visual culture R. Arnheim wrote, "in the theater ... the spectator sits at the same distance from the stage all the time. In the cinema, however, he seems to be jumping from place to place, looking from a distance and at close range, from above and through the window, to the right and to the left" [8]. In this structure, close-up is only one of the means, but it is precisely because of its contrast with theatrical poetics that the early history of cinema distinguishes this expressive means as the most cinematic, which is the specificity of the new "technical" art. The inconsistency of a close-up as a narrative element is that, on

the one hand, it increases the amount of visual information that the viewer reads at a time, but, on the other hand, it reduces the potential amount of on-screen narration developing in each frame. So, one of the simplest and most obvious functions of close-ups was to provide the viewer with the most of visual information about what seems to be the most important — that is, human nature displayed in gestures, facial expression, the look in people's eyes. Therefore, with the logic of an outstanding director and cinema theorist David Wark Griffith, the need for close-ups will gradually disappear due to the increase in the size of a cinema screen, where facial expressions of actors can be well viewed with medium shots [9]. However, the enlargement of cinema screens went along with the birth and development of the new "small screen" - television. It actualized a close-up as well as the opportunity to deeper comprehend human nature, the "x-ray of personality," according to V. Sappak [10]. At the same time, an actor or a presenter on television can directly address the audience just like a pop artist. [11].

No gigantism of modern cinema screens can eliminate other effects of close-ups, including their symbolic meanings, which appear thanks to the total focus of the camera on one object only. Close-up signals the viewer about the unusual content of the image which remains beyond the continuous narration.

In addition, close-up often offers a riddle, making it difficult to recognize what is actually shown in the frame. Close-ups contain less "life material". Viewers sometimes even lose their bearings and cannot immediately understand what a fragment is all about and what an overall picture of the world is (or at least a specific dramatic situation, a place of action, arrangement of objects in space). The transition from this misunderstanding to understanding (with the help of medium and general shots), to finding the whole and restoring the coordinate system, is not only an important formal device for cinema of the twentieth century.

This is the philosophy of independent films, according to which initially the relations between the part and the whole, the hierarchy of the components of the picture of the world are darkened and unclear. The comprehension of the world cannot be smooth, cannot immediately give the recipient objective knowledge. This knowledge should be revealed gradually, after all delusions and illusions being shattered.

So, the house, standing in the middle of a picturesque green landscape in Andrei Tarkovsky's "Sacrifice" (Offret, 1986), appears in one of the scenes in the background, blurred, as if not quite real. The character wanders nearby and suddenly notices a small model of a house on a wet, swampy land. The camera goes down following the character's eyes, and for a while it may seem to the viewer that there is a real big house in front of them. The camera appears to be about to approach the house and let you have a closer look at it. But instead, the camera climbs higher to capture the confusion of the character examining a toy house made by his son. This episode conveys the sense of awe towards home and at the same time hints at its fragility and the danger of loss, which occurs at the end of the film. The character sets a fire, promising God to sacrifice the dearest

thing, if God overturns the destruction of humanity through war.

The way to new discoveries might be painful, often associated with disappointment and irony, but also with the need to reconsider the attitude to art, to its inevitable convention. At the end of Federico Fellini's "And the Ship Sails On ..." (E la nave va, 1983), the camera moves to the left. The microphone gets into the frame, followed by the operators, cameras, and complex lighting equipment. So, the viewer sees that the ship, suffering the disaster at the epicenter of the sea battles of the First World War, as well as the disturbing sea abyss are just the scenery on the set. However, does this negate the tragedy the scenes on the ship were imbued with? Most likely not. The director reveals the paradox of art, which necessarily contains a convention in order to emphasize the sanctity of spiritual values.

To sum up, one of the main things about independent films of the twentieth century was the drama of transition from close-ups to medium and general plans. A change in the distance contributed to the intensity of the process of understanding the world. It emphasized the difference between illusions and reality, between different angles of an ambiguous author's view. The artistic goal of the director can be described as the display of processes in the objective reality as well as in the reality of a man's inner world. Both of these realities appeared ethically and aesthetically complex, ambiguous, changeable. Moving ahead towards this discovery, the director feels absolutely free to create different meanings. The viewers also seem to be engaged with the process. The changing distance bears the marks of individual creative will, powerfully modeling the view of the reality.

III. TRANSFORMATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF VARYING DISTANCE IN THE ARTHOUSE CINEMA OF THE XXI CENTURY

The era of computerization of many creative processes and sophistication of modern methods of creating screen images have a powerful impact on serious independent films, now increasingly called arthouse. Electronic technologies make it unusually simple to transform various photo and film shots. Multiple recordings, a videotape reversal, special effects making the images look broken and selectively coloring the frame - all these techniques allow a director to play with space for arbitrary changes of shots and distances. These opportunities are comparable in their freedom and diversity with the game of imagination or dreams. However, these and many other methods are actively adopted by mass entertainment cinema. Today the intensive use of new technologies, the game of changing the distance, and complicated montage are associated primarily with mass film production.

Serious cinema of the beginning of the new century in most cases chooses ascetic expressive means, including a very careful use of changing the distance. Feeling surrounded by bright, spectacular entertainment movie, art-house films fundamentally refuse to increase entertainment. In addition, too free and frequent use of the method of varying the distance is associated with the freedom of

creative expression in independent films of the second half of the twentieth century [12]. However, today this freedom seems ill-timed, since modern thinking people - including those who are also directors of art-house cinema - feel painfully unfree, dependent on the complicated world of total media coverage, globalization, rapidly accelerating technical progress. In the face of all this, an individual is acutely experiencing his own smallness, limited opportunities and voting rights in the vast world. One doubts if their voice can be heard at all.

The main issue, however, that is fast becoming a thing of the past is absolute belief in the high value of the author's personal vision. It is partly associated with a certain obsession with oneself, which was characteristic of a creative person of the middle and second half of the twentieth century. Over the last decade of the twentieth century and later all the attention of directing in cinema has been given to the huge rapidly changing world. Rudolf Arnheim sees it as a combination of "contrasting tendencies", "non-stop interaction of objects, everything that forms our living environment and our own ways of activity", in which the tendencies of separation and fragmentation are more evident than structure and consistency [13]. This world is clearly of more of interest to the director today than his own state of mind.

Visual originality does not always appear important in contemporary independent films. As a last resort, Lars von Trier and Thomas Winterberg, in their famous "Dogma 95" manifesto, in "The Vow of Chastity" even urged not to mention the director's name in the credits. Yet, the denial of authorship should not be taken too literally, as Trier's films analysis shows [14]. We are talking about a symbolic self-denial, a declaration of insufficiency of a purely subjective view. Then what purpose should the symbolic "death" of the director serve in the understanding of modern filmmaking? It seems that it is the establishment of the status of an objective statement, a kind of document of the epoch, rather than the author's arbitrary play with images and meanings for a feature film.

According to filmmaking of the beginning of the 21st century, an author is supposed to grow into the role of a non-individual, "indifferent" equipment, like a surveillance camera. This is the view of an outside observer conveying what they actually see without adding anything from themselves or simulating reality on the screen. In contemporary art-house cinema, camera-director relations seem to be going into the shadows, becoming less tangible and obvious than screen-viewer relations, as written by the publishers of the collective work on independent films [7].

It is quite natural that the application of the principle of varying the distance now often involves abandoning it. The so-called "minus techniques" come into play. Modern directors are actively turning to the principle of a fixed camera, but they consider it not as a return to theatrical art, but rather as a neutralization of the author's activity. For example, in the movie "Hunger" (2008) by Steve McQueen there is a scene when the camera remains almost motionless for about twelve minutes, showing motionless characters. A

prisoner seeking liberty of Ireland, is sitting at the table in the meeting room and is trying to convince a priest of the need for the former to begin his hunger strike, which should lead him to death. The camera freezes and all the attention is transferred to the actors, their state of mind and nuances of their interaction. Thus, this scene could have been filmed secretly from the characters by a casual peeper or by a surveillance camera. It looks as if it was an outside independent observer who captures exactly what is within the field of his vision, and does not impose on the viewer his own attitude to what is happening, does not help him in any way to evaluate the situation. Thus, the viewer almost does not feel the presence of a director as a mediator, which increases the illusion of immersion in a real catastrophic situation.

Another significant change in the principle of varying the distance is a cautious use of close-ups. In many culmination scenes of such prominent modern films as "The Pianist" (La Pianiste, 2001), "Love" (Amour, 2012) and "Happy End" (2017) by Michael Haneke, as well as "She" (Elle, 2016) by Paul Verhoeven, "Elena" (2011) and "Loveless" (2017) by Andrey Zvyagintsev, "Arrhythmia" (2017) by Boris Khlebnikov and others, general and medium shots are used. The observing cinema eye as if fears to be noticed, and therefore does not approach what is happening, remains at a distance. As a result, the traditional property of the cinema eye [1] to be omnipresent, invisible and invulnerable in the space where it freely soars and moves is canceled. Such behavior used to grant the cinema eye a superhuman status. The overall picture on the screen was organized as a bunch of randomly changing fragments of reality that hypnotized the viewer and prevented them from thinking, according to the British experimentalist filmmaker Peter Watkins [15].

At the beginning of the 21st century, the superpowers of a cinema eye are perceived as too obvious a convention, a kind of cliché of poetics that violates the illusion of life-likeness. Modern art-house cinema naturally seeks to compare the cinema eye not with a superhuman eye, but rather with human observation. It leads to the tendency to use a hand-held camera, strict dosing of "close-ups", and search for angles available for a person who is watching, who cannot fly in the air, instantly change his or her location, closely approach the danger and at the same time be able to keep calm and show what is happening around.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, the principle of varying the distance undergoes significant transformations in the process of serious cinema development. It is used in different ways, emphasizing the most important semantic links of cinema aesthetics inherent in the era. In independent films of the twentieth century, a change in the distance expresses first of all the specifics of the author's worldview, gives this worldview in development, leads the viewer from errors and illusions to the discovery of

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[1]   The term "cinema eye" ("Cinema-Eye") was introduced by Dziga Vertov, a Soviet director. See: D. Vertov, Kinoki. Revolution / Dziga Vertov. From the heritage. Articles and speeches. In two volumes. Moscow, Eisenstein Center, 2008, V. 2, p. 40-41.

truths or the correction of the picture of the world as a whole. At the same time, the principle of changing the distance emphasizes the high value of personal research of reality. Unlimited freedom in changing the distance contributes to the creation of the myth of superhuman abilities of the cinema eye, this "divine donor of unprecedented experience" [12].

At the beginning of the 21st century, due to a long line of sociocultural and civilizational changes, as well as excessive traditionalization of film aesthetics, the principle of varying the distance begins to serve other purposes. It is often used as a minus-technique; the freedom of multiple changes in the distance is sharply limited, down to the use of the principle of a fixed camera. This technique can be adequately appreciated by the audience of modern art-house cinema, i.e. generations of people who grew up on the aesthetics of independent films of the twentieth century. In addition, there is a close relationship between the aesthetics of arthouse and that of mass cinema, which preserves the principle of superhuman vision.

Against this background, a restriction in the number of close-ups, a semantic focus on medium and general shots as well as a rejection of the excessive freedom of the cinema eye are especially expressive. Arthouse cinema highly appreciates the illusion of a purely human vision, far from superhuman properties. In addition, the new style of applying the principle of varying the distance tends to bring the position of a person observing and reflecting the world to the function of a piece of equipment, an "indifferent" surveillance camera. Such an "eye" does not seem to have an author's principle, does not overburden the visual image with an intentionally subjective artistic originality. These trends should not be absolutized. However, it is obvious that the author's change in the distance is replaced by a search for an objectivized view that argues with an earlier tradition.

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