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Haptic Close-ups and Montage: Surrealist Desire in Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*

Carola Moresche

The Surrealists were fascinated by cinema's ability to visualize desire. The close-up and montage were taken up by surrealist film critics such as Louis Aragon to hail the medium's capacity to focus on the hidden details of quotidian reality. In an evaluation of directors based on their surrealist potential the Surrealists gave advice as to which directors' films to see and which not. Erich von Stroheim is amongst those directors on the to-see list. The frequent use of close-ups in *Greed* focusing the attention of the viewer on the body and the elaborate montage sequences visualizing internal processes such as fear, longing or anger make it an ideal example for what the Surrealists valued in cinema: the visualization of desire by concentrating the look and "restrict[ing] the field of vision so as to intensify the expression" (52), as Louis Aragon states in "On Décor". To emphasize the haptic and emotive qualities of Erich von Stroheim's close-ups I will contrast and compare them with the quintessential surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* by Luis Buñuel.

Walter Benjamin sees the close-up as one of the few truly cinematic techniques that reveals completely new structural formations:

> By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, 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 13)

The Visual Culture of Modernism. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 26. Ed. Deborah L. Madsen and Mario Klarer. Tübingen: Narr, 2011. 197-207.

Mary Ann Doane draws on this capacity to reveal new aspects of familiar objects, referring to Benjamin to observe that a close-up is "a significant entrance point to the optical unconscious, making visible what in daily life [goes] unseen" (Doane 90). Furthermore, Doane argues that the close-up can be regarded as an "autonomous entity, a fragment, a 'for-itself'" (Doane 90) focusing solely on one object or part of an object where its image then forms an entity disengaged from the rest. Doane claims that as a "for-itself" the close-up becomes only an image rather than "a threshold into the world" of the film. I would argue that the object/part of an object in close-up, by becoming an image, enhances the audience's craving for the fulfillment of the desire the close-up arouses. So even though the close-up may be taken in isolation, separated from the rest of the film, as an image it nevertheless possesses the ability to function as a threshold since it stirs desire for the projected image/object.

The close-up, in its literal meaning in English, refers to distance/proximity while in French, *gros plan* refers to size, and in Soviet cinema it means "larger-than-life" rather than closeness. Thus, the close-up is associated with two ideas: firstly the notion of possession. As Benjamin noted, a close-up signifies a "desire [. . .] to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly [and an] urge . . . to get hold of an object" (qtd. in Doane 92). Secondly, the notion of elusiveness or largeness/threat in the close-up is denoted by the French term *gros plan* or the Soviet concept of "larger-than-life." Again, the close-up as a visual realization of desire has a dual capacity, lure and fear, comparable to the feeling of wanting to see what is beyond the door or window and being afraid of the encounter with the hidden.

Béla Balázs also points to the hidden but additionally hints at another important point: the connection between the image/object in close-up and the character/audience:

> When the film close-up strips the veil of our imperceptiveness and insensitivity from the hidden little things and shows us the face of objects, it still shows us man, for what makes objects expressive are the human expressions projected onto them. The objects only reflect our own selves.
> (qtd. in Doane 94)

The close-up of an object or a face/body part, according to Balázs, allows us to understand that "we can see that there is something there that we cannot see" (qtd. in Doane 96). Balazs points to the dichotomy of visible and invisible, hidden and revealed, and the appearance and interiority of the close-up. This dichotomy, inherent in the close-up, has the consequence of leaving us with a slightly unsatisfactory feeling. The

object or face/body parts in close-up can "neither be reached nor renounced" (Barthes, qtd. in Doane 104), and only desire is left: a desire longing to be fulfilled but undermined by the awareness that the actual lure of the desire is its elusiveness.

Part of this elusiveness is due to the fragmentary effect of the close-up. The close-up is a cinematic device that guides the viewers' gaze by delimiting or framing just a fraction of a larger whole. The effect, as Louis Aragon noted in his essay "On Décor," is the transformation of objects "to the point where they take on *menacing* or *enigmatic* meanings" (52, my emphasis). This unique cinematic effect of selection and focus, that neither the theater nor the novel can fully attain to, relates to the Surrealists' principle of *dépaysement*, or poetic estrangement. This process of breaking down normal associations and endowing images as well as objects with new functions, characteristics and relationships is put into practice in film as montage or editing. Thus, the resulting juxtaposition of distant realities – which was the preferred method of using images in surrealist writing as well as in painting and later in photography – leads both to new meaning and also to a kind of disorientation.

Essentially, both close-ups and editing/montage entail dismemberment and fragmentation, resulting in a visual and semantic disorientation. The menacing and enigmatic qualities that Louis Aragon attributes to these cinematic features challenge viewers to go beyond their customary associations with the objects/images presented. Philippe Soupault tells of his encounter with the medium of film during a public exhibition of a cinematograph by Pathé, after which he reached the conclusion that "man was endowed with a new eye." The ability to see more than everyday life, to see the marvelous in quotidian reality, is finally realized, for the Surrealists, in the medium of film and the close-up. However, the close-up's "extractability from all spatiotemporal coordinates [and] its production of hitherto unknown dimensions" (Doane 105) visualizes the unconscious desires, fears and longings both of the characters in the film, and, in a reciprocal fashion, of the viewers.

Thus, we must differentiate between two types of close-ups in the analysis of Erich von Stroheim's films: firstly, those that provide a magnification of an object, a part of an object or a part of a person to reveal something about the character's desires and longings; secondly, those close-ups that have the menacing or enigmatic qualities to which Aragon referred, that are less connected to the character than to the viewers' desires and fears. Certainly, the use of close-ups of the first type also affects the viewers and relates to their hidden or unconscious fantasies; however, the non-diegetic or meta-diegetic quality of these inserts is what relates those close-ups more to the viewers than to the characters.

Hands figure prominently in the close-ups of Erich von Stroheim's first feature film, *Blind Husbands* (1919), as do feet. The introductory scene, which establishes the relationship between the three main characters, Lieutenant von Steuben, Doctor Armstrong and his wife Margaret, fetishizes the object of potency in the hands of the Lieutenant (his sword) as well as Margaret's feet, establishing a sexual context. In *Greed*, the sexual tension between the two main characters Mac and Trina is established by close-ups of their faces, which then, in the course of the film transform into embodiments of menace and fear.[1]

Their first meeting takes place in Mac's dentist parlor. His best friend Marcus brings his cousin and fiancée Trina to have her teeth fixed. The introduction of Trina to Mac is also the introduction of sexual desire into Mac's life. Erich von Stroheim does this by juxtaposing close-ups of their faces, in a shot-reverse-shot manner. By means of lighting, Trina's face appears angelic and her black hair, hat and her high-collar dress emphasize the whiteness of her face even more. Mac's fascination with her angelic appearance is captured in the close-ups that show him staring right at the camera, that is, at Trina. The angelic effect is again used by von Stroheim to make more striking the close-up in the sequence in which Mac is overcome by his passion for Trina. Trina is lying on the dentist's chair and is suffering from the pain that Mac causes her by drilling into her teeth. This forceful action – the sexual connotations of penetration, pleasure and pain are obvious – is juxtaposed with Trina's costuming. Her angelic appearance, from the close-up in the sequence of their first meeting, is transformed into that of a nun, given the cloth wrapped around her head. Thus the forceful passion of Mac acquires a menacing touch. This mixture of desire and menace is the underlying tension of their ensuing relationship and the following close-ups enhance this dichotomy.

When Trina learns that she has won 5,000 dollars in the lottery, von Stroheim utilizes similar close-ups that recall the dichotomy of desire and menace between Mac and Trina. This time, the lottery man embodies the menacing qualities of the money Trina will soon receive, implying the danger this poses to her and subsequently to Mac. Trina is posi-

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[1] Throughout this paper, all the scenes I refer to are from the 1999 Turner Classic Movies reconstructed version of *Greed* by director Rick Schmidlin, which was broadcast by the TV channel Arte on 30 September and 1 October 2005. In an effort to restore Erich von Stroheim's masterpiece as it was intended by the director, Rick Schmidlin used production stills and the original script to fill the gaps left by the rigorous cutting ordered by the Metro-Goldwyn studio. Schmidlin strictly followed the orders for tinting and title cards given in the original script. Thus this reconstructed version gives us a glimpse of the truly artistic vision von Stroheim had in mind when creating *Greed*.

tioned slightly below the lottery man, who is standing at the top of the stairs, bowing when he greets her. By doing this he moves closer to the camera, suggesting that he moves closer towards Trina. She widens her eyes when the lottery man introduces himself. The huge eyes in her pale face – she is again wearing the black hat and high-collar dress – show both fear and disbelief. In the same way that Trina at first resists the attentions of Mac she tries to question the legitimacy of her lottery win, disbelieving her luck. The lottery win then forms the basis for Mac and Trina's relationship because it enables them to get married: it emerges that Trina's initial rejection of Mac was not so much based on her feelings for him, or the lack thereof, but rather on her fear of sinking socially to his level.[2] The fact that by obtaining money this fear is eliminated is taken up by von Stroheim in his focus on hands in many close-ups. The connection between hands, money and sexual desire is established in the sequence following the celebration of her lottery win. This is the first time that Trina initiates intimacy between them and for once she does not resist Mac's kissing her. Significant is her fiddling with the bands of her dress throughout the whole scene. Erich von Stroheim specifically instructed Zasu Pitts to involve a lot of movement of her hands to draw attention to them.[3] In this scene, the movement of her hands has sexual connotations, linking the lottery money with erotic pleasure. This is further emphasized by a title card which has Trina ask Mac what they should do with all that money and whether it does not frighten him that the money was sent to them at just that time. This is the only time that Trina speaks of *their* money, which has come to *them*, instead of *her* money (or later correcting herself to say it is their money). She is clearly excited, yet at the same time scared of the effect it might have. This duality of feelings obviously arouses her so that she actually gives in to Mac's kiss. Leger Grindon, in his examination of *Greed,* describes von Stroheim as "a filmmaker ever sensitive to the crossroads of sadism, sexuality, repression, and guilt," a description that echoes the Surrealists' obsession with exactly these elements in their works of art (34). Gradually, this multiplicity of feelings connected with hands shifts more towards obsession and fear, replacing passion and erotic desire.

The scene after Mac and Trina's wedding ceremony mirrors the aforementioned scene, though it exaggerates the emphasis on Trina's hands and Mac's lust for her. Just as all the wedding guests and Trina's family are leaving, it seems Trina is suddenly reminded of the obligatory

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[2] This is explained in a title card shown before Mac and Trina exit the church.

[3] Leger Grindon states that von Stroheim added the scene of Trina sitting on the bed and creaming her hands during shooting, illustrating how "together von Stroheim and Pitts built Trina's character so that the force of her psyche commands the film" (37).

consummation of the marriage. In panic she runs after her mother who tries to console her. When Trina walks back up the stairs to Mac and her apartment, she tries to move as silently as possible so as not to arouse Mac's attention. She steals into the bedroom but Mac finally notices her. He gets up and walks towards her while Trina raises her hands towards her mouth in anguish. He grabs her, draws her towards him and kisses her violently.

Trina's eruption of fear and Mac's eruption of lust feed on the repression of their desires, to which von Stroheim has alluded in two previous scenes. While Mac operates on Trina's tooth, he is torn between his desire to kiss her, his primal sexual instinct, and his awareness that he would trespass a moral, ethical boundary since Trina is his patient and sedated with ether. As for Trina, the scene with her mother following her afternoon with Mac shows her inarticulateness regarding their sexuality and her inability to deal with her emotions and his desires.

Nevertheless, before ending this sequence with Mac literally drawing the curtain – a gesture that is repeated later in the film after he has murdered Trina – von Stroheim focuses on Trina's feet in a close-up, standing on top of Mac's shoes slowly raising her heels and standing on her toes while he kisses her. The sexual connotation is more than obvious and again combines sexuality, sadism and repression.

During the wedding ceremony Trina's cousin and ex-fiancé and Mac's supposedly best friend, Marcus Schouler, clenches his hands behind his back, which is shown in a close-up. This not only conveys his anger with Mac's marriage to Trina and thus his possession of the 5,000 dollars – so he assumes – but also symbolizes threat. This is then embodied in an elaborate montage sequence in which von Stroheim juxtaposes the character of Marcus with the figure of a cat that attacks the love birds in their cage. Instead of conveying the threat that Marcus emanates in close-ups of him, as von Stroheim does with Mac, he represents the cat in close-up. Marcus's gesture of good luck to Mac and Trina already seems ironic but it develops into sheer mockery during the course of the film.

The consequences for the couple of Marcus's envy are later revealed when Mac receives a letter from the State Dental Board. Mac has been operating his dental clinic without a license, and it seems someone has reported him to the authorities. The Dental Board orders Mac to stop practicing immediately. Mac shows the letter to Trina, who is cleaning the table. While she reads the letter, a close-up shows Trina's hand clutching the sponge she is holding, spilling water on to the table. This close-up relates to both plot and meaning of the film: it mirrors Marcus's clenched hands during the wedding ceremony and foreshadows Trina's job as a cleaning woman scrubbing school floors after Mac has

left her. Regarding meaning, it is a physical display of anger; however, it is also sexually connoted: the spilling of water relates to ejaculation. This reveals a strange mix of danger and sex, placing Trina in the realm of masochism, which develops more and more as the film progresses.

During the steady social decline of Mac and Trina, the tense situation between them as well as Trina's money-obsessed character are visualized through the gestures and motions of her hands and fingers. The gesture of putting a finger to her mouth while narrowing her eyes and twisting her mouth visualizes both her miserliness and greed as well as the satisfaction she gets from acquiring more gold coins. Only after Mac is finally fed up with Trina's obsession and the limitations she places on his life is he involved with this gesture and her hands, which by now have acquired so much meaning. Up to this point, Trina is the only character who violates her body by mutilating her fingers. Now, Mac also starts biting her fingers whenever he is in need of money. The gesture of putting a finger to *her* mouth is extended to Mac putting her fingers into *his* mouth. The violation of her body culminates in a doctor's advice that she have some fingers of her right hand amputated if she does not want to lose the whole hand. The underlying notion of sadism, the sexual pleasure derived from hurting somebody or being hurt, is spelled out by a title card inserted after Mac has once more obtained money from Trina by biting her fingers. After having given him two bills, she asks him obediently whether he still loves her, to which Mac answers that he surely does, laughing sadistically and then pushing her violently on to the bed. The title card then reads "And yet this brutality in some strange inexplicable way aroused in Trina a morbid, unwholesome love of submission."

Von Stroheim, in drawing attention to hands early in the film, enhances the image with layers of meaning that are then visualized in close-ups. The literal disfiguration is cinematically realized in the close-up, which fragments the wholeness of the image depicted.

One purpose of the image or object in Surrealism was to induce bodily sensations, through which the unconscious would then reveal itself. Regarding the medium of film, bodily sensations are mediated through their mechanical reproduction on film stock thus, as Susan McCabe states, producing a "modernist paradox" (3). She concludes that "cinematic montage and camera work often exposed the body's malleability" (3), in this way contributing to the illusion of haptic bodily sensation and dismemberment at the same time. The question why Trina fusses so much with her hands and the attention that von Stroheim draws to her gestures with the close-ups are connected to hapticity. The haptic sensation of touching the gold coins gives Trina pleasure. She is not interested in spending the money and enjoying the luxuries

that the money could afford her. Instead, the bodily sensations of sleeping on the coins displace the sexual sensations she could enjoy with Mac. This displacement of feelings is analogous to the fracturing of the body through close-ups and montage.

In *Un Chien Andalou*, Luis Buñuel also utilized the image of hands to signify sexual obsession and haptic sensations. The violation of the body figures prominently in *Un Chien Andalou* with the infamous slicing of the eye at the beginning of the film. The mutilation of the hand displaces the mutilation of the eye. A hole in the palm of the protagonist's hand oozes ants. The following montage sequence of close-ups of female armpit hair and a sea urchin attributes to the perforated hand the feelings of bodily attraction, repulsion, and pain.

The underlying meaning that links these close-ups with those in *Greed* is physical pain paired with a sexual connotation. This sequence of close-ups creates a transition to the next scene in which Buñuel shows the literal fracturing of body parts by cinematic means and features an amputated hand placed in the street. A woman is poking the cut-off hand with a stick amidst a crowd of bystanders, who seem unsure what to do. One of the men in the crowd is rubbing his own wrist. This gesture is a reaffirmation of the wholeness of his own body in the presence of the mutilated hand before him. This sequence echoes Trina's obsessive fiddling with her fingers and hands. Both gestures are a comment on the fragmentation of body parts both in the close-up and within the diegesis.

The question arises though concerning whose hand has been amputated. One possible explanation can be derived from the balance of opposites, such as female and male, outside and inside, aggression and passion, fear and happiness, cityscape and landscape, which is sustained throughout the film. Consequently, the amputated hand would belong to a man, possibly the protagonist, since it is the female protagonist's eye that is being slit in the opening sequence. The next scene affirms this possibility as we see a fight breaking out between the two protagonists at the end of which she escapes through a door that she slams, jamming his hand. Preceding these close-ups, the conflict between the two protagonists is seen to arise from the sexual assault of the woman by the man: he grabs her breasts which morph into bare breasts and then into naked buttocks. The jamming of his hand in the door is at once punishment for this act of transgression while at the same time embodying the haptic nature of his gestures.

The sequence tying the visual elements together is the last of the interior scenes. The two protagonists face each other and the woman has finally had enough, it seems, of the man's grotesqueness. He covers his mouth with his hand and, when he removes his hand, his mouth has

vanished. Appalled by this, the woman takes out her lipstick and applies it to her lips – a gesture equally affirmative of the mutilated body part as is the rubbing of the wrist of the man in the crowd mentioned above. When the protagonist's mouth then transforms into the sprouting hair of her armpit, she storms out of the room on to the beach where her lover is waiting for her.

Just as von Stroheim uses the hands as a means of displacement, so does Buñuel displace sexual fantasy into haptic reality. In both *Greed* and *Un Chien Andalou*, the diegetic fragmentation and mutilation of body parts is visually translated into close-ups and montage sequences. The result in both is death: Trina dies in the school where she used her hands to earn money, Marcus and Mac (though this is not shown) die in Death Valley fighting over Trina's gold. In *Un Chien Andalou* the final shot is a medium shot of the two protagonists buried up to their chests in beach sand. Their arms are half buried too, suggesting a clean cut of their whole body. The similarities to *Greed* are almost ironic. Mac and Marcus die in a desert; the characters of *Un Chien Andalou* die on the beach. The hands of all four characters are in some way affected, with their hands buried, perforated or cut off or, in the case of *Greed*, with their fingers amputated and hands chained together with handcuffs.

McCabe maintains that close-ups fracture, while montage both fractures and embodies (5). However, I would suggest that the close-up shares the same ability as montage simultaneously to fracture and embody. The difference between the two techniques is that the embodying capacity of the close-up is symbolic in nature, while in montage it is physical as well as symbolic. Cinema has the capacity to visualize an object in a way never seen before – it is both whole and fractured at the same time. This connects directly with the famous surrealist analogy: "Beautiful like a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table." Splicing, fragmentation and mutilation are some of the effects produced by the cinematic features of close-ups and montage. In *Greed*, these features are literally embodied by the biting and finally the amputation of Trina's fingers. McCabe's notion that the close-up and montage expose the body's malleability is transformed into the body's disfiguration and literal fragmentation in *Greed*, but this is additionally infused with a Sadean sexuality embedded in Surrealism.

The sexualization of the hands, while at the same time attributing to them the significance of threat or obsession, is further emphasized by inserts that show close-ups of hands toying with gold coins and gilded dishes or hands that symbolize looming danger. These close-ups have this aforementioned non-diegetic quality. They emphasize Trina's growing obsession with the gold coins by focusing on the haptic sensations derived from handling them. The first two close-ups of these inserts

refer to Maria's treasure of gold dishes about which she fantasizes as well as to the gold coins that Trina enjoys touching. The next non-diegetic insert is actually an entire sequence dealing with Zerkow's desire for gold and this is different to Maria's fantasy because it is a daydream. Thus, this inserted sequence is meta-diegetic. The final insert shows a large hand holding two struggling people, either Zerkow and Maria or Mac and Trina, in a tight grip, squeezing them.

Though these close-ups are still part of the story line, they are strictly symbolic in nature and it only becomes clear through the montage sequence to which characters these inserts belong or refer. Furthermore, they are distinct from the other close-ups already discussed, as they can be taken completely out of context and still possess the multilayered meaning of displacement, fragmentation and mutilation with violent, sexual and haptic experiences.

The first three examples deal with the obsessive nature of the characters related both to their greed for gold and their lust for haptic experiences of that desire. Through the combination of these inserts, the close-ups and the action itself, the centering of *Greed* on the displacement of sexual desire into the desire for gold coins becomes the visual translation of the surrealist notion of *dépaysement*, or poetic estrangement.

The central aim of the Surrealists was the concretization of the hidden and unconscious. Creating these concrete images, the manifestations of the unconscious, was achieved through the juxtaposition of distant realities resulting in poetic estrangement / *dépaysement* / displacement. Arising from that is a disorientation caused by fragmentation, which also leads to a disorientation of the mind. The ensuing mental dislocation reflects the topographical dislocation in the narrative. Trina and Mac, on their way down the metaphorical social ladder, move from one lodging to another. After placing Mac on Polk Street, von Stroheim never again gives a definitive location for the couple. Even when, towards the end of their relationship, they move into the house of the dead Zerkow, von Stroheim avoids shots of the surrounding area, thus displacing the house from a definitive area – Polk Street – into a non-defined area. Finally, Mac's escape into the desert of Death Valley and Marcus Schouler's search for him epitomize the topographic dislocation built up by von Stroheim as a concrete image of their expulsion from society as well as their disconnection from their own sanity. They are lost in the spatial nothingness of both their physical environment, the desert, and their social environment. Similarly, Buñuel's fragmented narrative in *Un Chien Andalou* reflects both the fragmented bodies as well as the mental dislocation of the two protagonists who waver between sanity and madness, passion and aggression, love and repulsion.

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