

Proxemic Filmic Manifestation. A Possible Interpretation of the Functions of Shot Dimension

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Abstract: Edward T. Hall's theory of proxemics proposes a form of understanding the relation of the individual in the existential space through the distances (traced by communication) in which the individual chooses to place himself in relation to the people/objects around him. In reference to this theory, we will replace the real individual with the camera, and we will position him in relation to the interlocutors at these communication distances. The result of the experiment proposes a new perspective and theoretical support for the study of the frame dimension, which we will see as a transposition into audiovisual language of the communication distances described by Hall, thus taking over its functions and meanings.

Keywords: frame, shot, size of the shot, composition, proxemics, audiovisual language, spatial relations and boundaries, communication distances, public distance, social distance, personal distance, intimate distance.

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In the physical space, movement involves a visual perceptual experience that materializes in a succession of mental representations of elements/objects in the visual field. Justification and activation of movement are determined by the relationship and rapport a person may have with them. A human being may choose to approach some elements gradually, from a certain distance, and pass by others without interacting. The connections with people/objects are regulated through actual physical distance, the result being larger, or smaller images representing the people/objects in the visual field.

In *The Silent Language* (1980) and *Proxemics: The Study of Man's Spatial Relations and Boundaries* (1963, pp. 422-445), Edward T. Hall proposes a form of interpretation of

human interaction with the space around him, defining the concept of *proxemic* as a notion that makes the connection between a person, and the territory he occupies, through the physical distances at which the individual chooses to place himself in relation to the elements he interacts with. *Proxemics* studies the play of territories, ways of perceiving space in different cultures, the symbolic effects of spatial organization, and the physical distances of communication. This describes a new type of language, determined by the play of distances, in fact, a new science that studies spatial relations as a way and form of communication.

Proxemics is capable of studying the conventional and significant relations that regulate the simple distance between two interlocutors, the mechanics of a kiss, or the distance that transforms a simple greeting into a hopeless parting or a “goodbye”, therefore the entire universe of action transcribed in cinema is already a universe of signals. (Eco, 1970, pp. 11-51)

In *The Silent Language* (1980), Hall defines *proxemics* as a set of theories that explain how humans relate to space (viewed this time as cultural space). In his studies, he transposes upon the territory of inter-human relations the research made by the Swiss ethologist Heini Hediger (1950) regarding the behavior of animals in different natural environments or in captivity. Several types of reactions (flight, attack, acceptance, proximity) were identified by observing the animals, depending on contact distance. Thus, an animal manages to escape by running up to a certain distance; below this critical distance, the “attack” is certain due to the fact that the prey no longer has enough distance to escape. However, a “personal distance” or “interpersonal distance” is also identified between two specimens of the same species, i.e., individuals who tolerate each other and coexist in a relatively limited territory, even if they belong to the animal kingdom. Equally, the study distinguishes a “social distance” that an individual maintains from other members of the group. To these observations, Hall adds effective distance measurements at which the sound of communication (human voice) is perceived and of the metric limits of visual acuity (at which certain details of facial expressions can be distinguished), marking several spatial thresholds that define relationships or interpersonal relationships. He thus launches the idea that all beings, including humans, have a territory adapted to their needs and that people possess the notion of individual space, with inner and outer, private and public areas. He also demonstrates the fact that these areas can be identified by effectively measuring the physical thresholds.

This spatial framework of interpersonal relationships raises the question of it being transposed into images. How do those involved in these relationships see each other and what do they look like as mental visual representations?

How does one person see another, located at the limit of these physical thresholds defined as distances of communication?

I will illustrate the point of view of a camera positioned at certain communication distances from the elements in its visual field, interpreting the *size of the shot (frame)* as an audiovisual translation of the communication distances described by Hall.

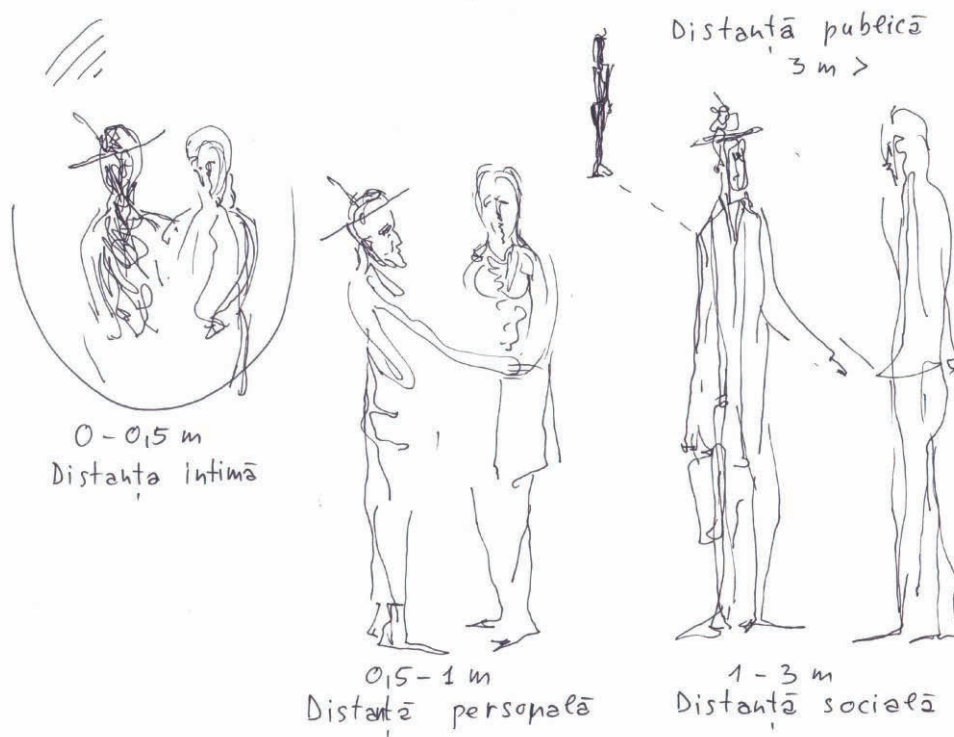


Figure 1. The distances of communion, after E.T. Hall

In *The Hidden dimension*, Hall outlines these spatial thresholds that translate, through their proportions, specific/different relationships between individuals and thus defining communication distances:

1. "Public distance" (over 3, 4 m.)

At a distance of more than approximately 3 meters, the individual perceives a limited level of the interlocutors' details due to the fact that, at this distance, humans relate more to physical or natural space rather than to human interaction. This is the type of positioning in the case of a group of people. Here the individual is not engaged in a personal connection with others, and from this distance, human perceptual audiovisual parameters provide only general coordinates of the presence of others (actions and movements are visible but without the possibility of reading nuances of facial expression, gestures or gazes). In this situation, the person is in a large area/territory where he does not feel threatened due to the fact that there is enough room for maneuvering. It is, in a way, a transposition of the ethological animal research of the flight distance between individuals;

that is to say, a space large enough so that, in case of aggression, the attacker is able to flee to safety. Hall positions this threshold as a type of activity specific to public space and sees it as a distance from the human community or “the distance at which the individual is protected and can become defensive if attacked... at this level we are close enough to follow the actions of the interlocutor, although we might miss behavioral details: facial expressions, direction of gaze etc.”. (Codoban, p. 7)

What does the camera see at this distance from the elements in its field of view?

From this position, the camera (equipped with a lens that has a focal length similar to the human eye) records that which cinematic language defines as the category of wide shot dimensions or, in more detail, the *long shot* and the *full shot*.

Thus, we can identify a correspondent in the audio-visual language of the *public distance* of communication in the so called, Wide or Large Shots, with the different sizes – the *Full Shot*, the *Long Shot* or *Very Long Shot*. These representations have the main purpose of locating and describing the individual in his natural physical environment.

2. “**Social distance**” (between 1,5 and 3 m.)

The second physical threshold identified by Hall is somewhere between 1.5 and 3 meters, and defines the “social distance” of communication, due to the fact that within these physical coordinates individuals come into contact with each other through social rapports. It is the distance maintained by people who do not know each other, but who are still in the common inner or outer social universe. But what do two people look like, standing at this social distance of communication?

What does the camera see at this distance from the subject?

The visual answer is given by a representation in which the interlocutor's body is seen in its entirety. In this metric interval the image comprises the human body as a whole, with the support surface on which it is placed, up to a delimitation placed somewhere below the knee.

The cinematographic code materializes these classifications under the titles of *Medium Long Shot* and *Mid-Shot* size. Thus, the transposition in filmic language of the image of the visual field from a social interaction, proven by a *social distance* of communication, is given by the size of the *medium shot* (with specific nuances, *cowboy shot*, *medium long shot*, etc.).

3. “**Personal distance**” (between 0,5 and 1 m.)

This is the distance at which two people who know each other, who have something in common, dialogue, talk, discuss. It is the distance of friends, partners, confessions, or at the opposite pole, the distance of potentially aggressive or peaceful confrontation. “*Personal distance*” is both defining and emblematic of interpersonal communication.

How do we see two people a meter away?

What does the camera see at this distance from the subjects?

The cinematic language reconstructs this positioning and physical distance through the *Close-up* (also *Medium Close-up*) representation, an element considered to be, along with the editing, one of the coagulating factors of the art of filmmaking.

Close-up images are often the dramatic revelations of what is really happening behind first-hand appearances. You can see a person's face from a distance, sitting and conversing calmly. The *Close-up* image will show the trembling of his fingers... (Balázs, 1957, p. 60)

The Close-up is the copy of the visual field of people standing face to face and it communicates, as the deepest expression of human interaction:

The Close-up eliminates the frame between the spectacle and the spectator. Thus, we do not observe life but penetrate it. This penetration allows all intimacy. A face under the magnifying glass turned on all sides thus displays its fervent geography. (Aumont and Bergala, 2007, p. 122)

Appearing as a result of the physical mobility of the *Cine-eye*, the *close-up* becomes the "soul of cinema" (Epstein) – the fermented element of assertion of the new language and form of artistic expression, by the simple fact that, by drawing the camera near on a *Close-up*, the human face can be seen from the same distance that people experience only in their close relationships.

4. "Intimate distance" (up to 0,5 m.)

The intimate distance is the distance that people with a very strong emotional connection consent to. For example, the distance between mother and child, between husband and wife, between those who come into physical contact in one way or another. However, the same distance can be reached at the opposite pole of intimacy, forced or without consent, therefore the effect is obviously the opposite. Those at this distance can feel each other's breath and smell, there is also the possibility of tactile contact, and details are perceived visually. From an energetic point of view, the intimate distance describes the situation in which one enters someone's personal aura, the vital energetic field. Depending on the relationship with the other (consented/disputed), this type of distance can communicate threat and discomfort, when entering the space marked by this distance is not associated with a very close relationship (in the case of human congestion, elevator, bus). It can also communicate and inspire intimacy, when approaching someone at this distance is mutually accepted. This is the case of approaching a loved one, of a mother and her child, of acquaintances, or those getting to know each other (e.g., the gesture of embracing). This spatial framework of intimate relationships also raises the issue of image transposition.

How do people see each other at an intimate distance?

The imagistic answer to this question is *the Extreme Close-up* (or Big Close-up) because this is the way people who embrace see each other, this is the way a child sees his mother, and this is the way people perceive each other in a fight. *The Extreme Close-up* will

place the viewer looking at the screen either in an intimate position or in a repulsed one towards the characters in the projection.

In Betton's (1994) view, *the Extreme Close-up* is not only important as a significant fragment of the subject, but it is also revolutionary through the privileged "proximity and isolation" offered to the viewer. Furthermore, the selection of how great creators and theorists view the function of the film portrait comes to underline this privilege:

In silent films, the expression of the physiognomy, isolated from its surroundings, seems to access a strange and new dimension, that of the soul. It reveals to us a new world, the world of microphysiognomy that otherwise could not be perceived by human eyes in everyday life. (pp. 39-41)

Thus, *the Extreme Close-up* can be defined as a translator of intimate distance in audiovisual language. Therefore, the different distance of the camera in relation to the subject, which determines the size of the shot is not just a numerical scale, because there is a direct correspondence between the size of the shot and its dramatic significance by determining a certain psychological nature. The communication functions of the shot size can thus be found in those of the specific communication distances defined by the *proxemics* (*intimate, personal, social and public distance*).

In the first films of all time, the distance between the camera and the subject was almost always the same and the framing always allowed people to be seen in their entirety. Very quickly, the idea of movement, approaching or moving away from the camera, arose. In consequence, the subjects would get lost in the scenery or, on the contrary, become very large only allowing details to be captured. In order to take into account these various possibilities and the connection between the subject and the camera, an empirical and crude typology was developed, called the scale of shot sizes. (Aumont, 1990, p. 116)

However, this mobility of the camera did not generate, through the scale of shot sizes, only a list of labels, it actually created the possibility of putting the viewer face to face with the projected characters as in real life, depending on their relationships, on their motivations and desires, just as in the real-world people choose to approach or move away and implicitly to see themselves in a certain way.

In conclusion, seen from this perspective, *the shot size* illustrates the elements described by *proxemics* as indicators of complex inter-human relations. As individuals communicate in human space through their territorial relationship, so is the filmic message equipped with an expressive arsenal offered by the scale of shot sizes, which, as we have seen, translate the functions of the distances of communication.

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