



## **Gaiety in Death: Close-ups in René Clément's *Jeux Interdits* (1952)**

Kalplata

### **Abstract**

René Clément tells a story of displacement in his 1952 film *Jeux Interdits* (Forbidden Games) in the cinematic language and grammar of close-ups. In June 1940, during the Second World War, France is under German occupation, French people are fleeing Paris and moving towards the south. In this chaotic exodus, Paulette, a five-year-old girl, loses her parents in the air attacks by Nazi aircraft. Left all alone to the mercy of strangers, this child's life changes in a moment who holds tightly what remains from this tragedy, her dog. However, soon after, she loses this dog too but refuses to let go of its dead body. In the pursuit of the dead dog, which is thrown in a river by a woman, Paulette finds Michel, a ten-year-old boy. She develops a friendship with him, and together they create a world where both refuse to accept death as the end; for them, it is just a game, like any other. They play this game sincerely. This game, which starts with burying Paulette's dog with a cemetery cross, continues with their committed engagement in arranging a cemetery cross for the burial of all the dead animals around them. Through the innocent eyes of Paulette and Michel, death does not seem to be the end, the void, but a part of life; it is almost one of its "celebrations". Death becomes as pure and as serene as the innocence of these children. This paper attempts to study the rejection of death as a painful consequence of the War's horrors. René Clément interprets death as the antithesis of pain; he transcends it and builds a joyful mansion. He translates this interpretation on-screen with the help of cinematic language and the grammar of close-ups. This paper endeavours to analyse Clément's close-ups of Paulette in creating a semantic space where the idea of death becomes a synonym of "playfulness" and gaiety.

**Keywords:** Child, Innocence, Death, Playfulness, Game, Gaiety

Endowed with creative power, cinema has continued to mystify and engage the audience since its inception in 1895 with the Lumière Brothers. Since then, theorists and filmmakers have aspired to give a distinct language and grammar to this “new” art form. In the beginning, in the era of silent films, the camera would capture the world within a short distance. This camera allowed a closer look at the world otherwise unknown with the help of a close-up shot. Thus, the “close-up,” in the days of silent films, allowed the audience to see reality with new insight; a closer look helped them understand the genesis of more significant events. For example, a close-up of a face showed the details of the person on screen and revealed its underneath emotions which were often ignored by the audience in real life. Many early film theorists such as Béla Balász were enthused with the cinematic dynamism of close-up for not only its aptness to capture the minute details of an objective reality but also as a tool to “express the poetic sensibility of the director” (Braudy & Cohen 274). A cinematic technique unique to motion pictures, close-up revealed what was underneath the surface appearance; the audience could read the “invisible” sub-structures hidden inside the “visible” structure of the cinematic narrative. As opposed to other shots such as establishing shots, extreme wide shots, and long shots that are concerned more with framing the surroundings with the purpose to contextualise the cinematic narrative, close-up shot is interested in framing the details of a person or an object. Joseph V. Mascelli discusses the close-up shot in his book *The Five C's of Cinematography* in the following way: The close-up may transport the viewer *into* the scene; *eliminate* all *non-essentials*, for the moment; and *isolate* whatever *significant* incident should receive narrative emphasis (173). The “soul of things” (Braudy & Cohen 275) is thus revealed in a close-up. In *Jeux Interdits* (1952), René Clément uses this cinematic technique to project the innocent soul of a child in the midst of the horrors of the Second World War.

Joseph V. Mascelli elaborates on different kinds of close-up shots in his book. Medium close-up frames the subject from approximately midway between waist and shoulders to above

the head. Head and shoulder close-up frames the subject from just below the shoulders to above the head. Head close-up frames the subject's head only. Choker close-up includes a facial area from just below the lips to just above the eyes. This paper discusses Paulette's medium close-up shot, head and shoulder close-up shot and head close-up shot. While Clément uses all these close-up shots to capture Paulette's facial expressions, he mainly uses head close-ups to project the angelic quality of a child's innocence. This paper attempts to read the close-ups of the facial expression of Paulette to reveal her subjective experience in the midst of a disturbing and confusing world outside. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, in *Film Theory and Criticism* observe that "facial expression is the most subjective manifestation of man, more subjective even than speech (...). This most subjective and individual of human manifestations is rendered objective in the close-up" (275). This paper, thus, attempts to read objectively the nuances and phases of the subjective experience of a child amidst the Second World War with the help of close-ups.

In cinematic history, close-up shots have been considered to work against the tenets of realistic cinema, as these shots do not correspond to real life; instead, it is the medium shot that is closest with reality as in most of the situations our eyes capture the view of the other subject/object corresponding to a medium shot in cinema. Nonetheless, certain filmmakers favoring realism in cinema have adhered to the technique of close-ups to bring cinema closer to reality. In his book *Qu'est-ce que c'est le cinéma? (What is Cinema?)*, André Bazin, the French film theorist, relates close-ups with the expressionist school of filmmaking. He argues that Bresson, a French filmmaker of the 1950s, by using a realistic film style, nonetheless, has returned to close-ups, not for its expressionist attributes, which emphasises the human weakness but to regain the dignity of facial expressions. He says:

In the first place if Bresson "returns" to the silent film it is certainly not, despite the abundance of close-ups, because he wants to tie in again with theatrical expressionism – that

fruit of an infirmity, on the contrary, it is in order to rediscover the dignity of the human countenance as understood by Stroheim and Dreyer. (Bazin 138)

In *Jeux Interdits (Forbidden Games)*, René Clément exploits the fantastical nature of close-up shots to create an idealistic world of eternal gaiety amidst the grief of war and displacement. The facial close-up with the use of kicker light with a soft fill of an innocent child unaware of the severity of the situation helps Clément project objectively a subjective world of a child untouched by the chaotic war; a world that continues to exist in an “eternal” and “utopic” gaiety. Far from being theatrical, René Clément’s idealistic close-ups representing the eternal gaiety remember to reiterate the inherent nature of humans to find happiness even amidst grief rather than entangling in its tragic discourse. Thus, in Clément’s close-ups, idealism meets realism. They come together to represent Paulette’s subjective reality and her phenomenon to speak the assertive language of gaiety.

The silent visuals of close-ups in *Jeux Interdits* tell the narrative of war and its consequence on a child. Though domineering, the war is not the sole voice in the film. The child’s innocence does not accept the authoritarian and domineering voice of the war but starts a dialogue with its narrative and perceives it differently from that of adults. Thus, the child enters a dialogical relation with the war. In this dialogue, the child negotiates with its authoritative and destructive figure and continues to “move”.

Amidst the German bombings over Paris during the Second World War, Paulette is with her parents in a car. Along with all the people, they are forced to stop and lie down in a field. After the bombings, the father realises that the car engine has failed. Since the car is causing traffic, the infuriated people push the car down in the plains. The parents are forced to leave behind the car and take just two suitcases with them. Paulette takes her most precious belonging, Jock, her puppy. Holding their belongings, Paulette and her parents start to walk on the road when another round of bombings starts, and they are again forced to lie down on the road. Scared by the noise caused by

the bombings, Paulette's puppy runs away from her. She runs to catch her dog, and her parents run after her. Though she can catch her dog, Paulette's parents are killed in another round of bombings when they are all lying down to save themselves from the bombings. When the bombings stop, Paulette gets up, and she sees her mother closely, touches her face, and compares the warmth of her face with hers; by doing so, she realises that her mother is dead (cf. figure 1). The child is unaware of the consequences of the death of her parents; the grief does not freeze her. She holds her puppy, who is trembling, and gets up from that space and stands on the deserted road. She grasps tightly what remains after the destruction - her puppy and tries to make sense of the situation. Thus, the narrative of war does not stop her from continuing her "journey" and "moving". Through this "journey" and "movement," she enters the realm of a new discourse on death whose meaning is not an end. This new discourse reverses the pathos of death. This paper studies this discourse framed by the silent visuals of Paulette's close-ups, that speak the language of gaiety through her innocent eyes.



**Figure 1: Paulette watching her mother closely in a medium close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***

The poetics of Clément's close-up of a child is heightened with kicker light with soft fill, which keeps the face illuminated to give an angelic effect. Amid the horrid War, we find an escape, an angelic space still serene (cf. figure 2).



**Figure 2. Use of kicker light with soft fill to give an angelic effect in this head close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***

The above shot shows the kicker light with soft fill, which keeps the face gently illuminated, resulting in an angelic effect. This kind of lighting is constant in all the close-ups of the child in the film, which makes close-ups lyrical and, at the same time, allows the audience to delve into the realm of the subjective consciousness of the child and validates the presence of a world of gaiety in her subjective world and her firm belief in it. This world of gaiety is created unconsciously by a child who has just lost her parents but nonetheless accepts life as is presented to her. The inherent joyous character of a child finds a way to cherish even death. The audience, along with the child, tends to participate in the playfulness of the child with a tinge of sorrow in the heart.

### **Close-Up: Bakhtin's Chronotope and Subjective Reality of a Child**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin has used the concept of chronotope uniquely in literature. This concept emphasizes the unity of time and space inherent in a narrative. The unity of time and space refers to the fact that, in a narrative,

they are inseparable; they progress in tandem; when the time changes, so do the space. In other words, they both are interrelated; if there is a change in time, there is a change in space (though time and space may seem static in a certain narrative). A passage of time in a narrative is indicative of a change of space and vice-versa.

While explaining the fusion of time and space in the making of chronotope, Bakhtin says in his book *The dialogic imagination* that we will give the name *chronotope* (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. (...) In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible, likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history (Bakhtin 84).

This paper borrows the concept of time-space, acting in unison, to understand Paulette’s subjective reality of gaiety. Clément constructs the transition of her experience from emptiness to gaiety by unifying time and space; the ‘wholeness’ of her experience is established by creating a temporal and spatial relationship. Paulette is sad and lost at the time of the death of her parents. At this “moment”, she is standing all alone in a deserted space. Both timelessness and empty space works in tandem to create the subjective experience of Paulette’s sorrow and loneliness. Paulette seems to be fully engraved in this empty subjective experience, and so does the audience along with her. Soon a crowd floods the deserted bridge, and she is picked up by a man and kept next to a woman in a cart. Paulette, refusing to give up her puppy so easily, slips away from the cart and goes towards the river to regain her puppy. She succeeds in taking out her puppy floating on the river. It is at this moment that Paulette meets Michel for the first time. Michel invites Paulette to come along with him; she refuses, initially saying she cannot leave behind her dog. When Michel promises to give a better dog in place of the dead puppy, she readily agrees.



**Figure 3: Paulette engrossed in a conversation with Michel, the experience of a new preoccupation of Paulette is revealed in this head and shoulder close-up, *Jeux Interdits***

The shot can be understood in the chronotope of time and space. Here, the child's gaiety is articulated in the context of time. As time progresses for Paulette, the space also changes. She soon finds herself engaged in a new journey with Michel and his family. A change in space accompanies each changing time. Clément relies mainly on the spatiality of Paulette's close-ups of facial expression to indicate a transition from sadness to gaiety. Clément's use of Paulette's close-ups closely frames the complete change of her experience, an experience that changes progressively yet altogether reaching towards playfulness. This change is complete and does not carry traces of the past. When Paulette comes to Michel's house, she is scared the very first night, she cries for her parent, but as time progresses, and as she discovers the "playfulness" of burying the dead animals and collecting crosses for their burial she is not reminded of her loss. Henceforth, she finds herself involved in the joy of a new preoccupation. Clément creates Paulette's new subjective world of gaiety by connecting the passage of time with the spatiality of close-ups working in unity. This temporal and spatial unison protects Paulette from fragmenting even in the tumultuous surroundings. Her experience of gaiety is not fragmented; she is

fully engaged in her joy and convinces the audience of her “whole” experience of joy amidst the horrors of war.

### **Close-Up: The Gaiety of Death in a Child’s Phenomenon**

In *Jeux Interdits*, René Clement does not comment on the war; he refrains from presenting a narrative with a judgement, but instead, he is interested in representing the war as seen by a child. In his cinematic text, Clement distinguishes between the reality in the outside world and how the external reality appears to a child or how a child perceives this reality in her consciousness. In philosophical terms, he is more concerned with the phenomenon (how a child perceives this reality) than the noumenon (a reality that exists in the outside world). According to the concept of phenomenology in the tradition of western philosophy, the noumenon is the outside reality, a thing which is “independent of human perceptions and human senses” (Chattopadhyay). Emmanuel Kant, the 18<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, explains the perception of reality with the help of the concept of noumenon and phenomenon, for him, a noumenon is a “thing in itself” (*ibid*), which is beyond human understanding, the phenomenon, on the other hand, is an appearance of the object as seen or perceived by the human consciousness. Clement’s cinematic text does not attempt to understand the object of war but rather the “objectivization” (*ibid*) or perception in the child’s consciousness. The representation of a child’s phenomenon through the subjective eye of the camera makes Clement’s cinematic text a phenomenological one. He respects the idea of the inaccessibility of the outside reality of war and its consequences, i.e., noumenon, in his cinematic text; war, as an outside entity, remains independent of a judgement, or emotionally charged interpretations. Instead, the subjective eye of his camera is interested in capturing the reality of war and its horrors as perceived by a child and its subjective consciousness i.e., the phenomenon.

The close-ups act as the medium to narrate the child's phenomenon. It captures and explores the realms of perception of a child gripped in a war situation. The close-ups project and explore the child's perceivable and understandable reality of the war. Clement chooses to express the perceived reality of the war of a child, among many other possibilities of the perceived reality of the war. The outside reality of war, displacement, and death metamorphoses, with a temporal and spatial passage, into a joyful "game" for a child. The gaiety of death, which is present in the child's consciousness despite its evident absence in the outside world is validated by the phenomenological field of investigation according to which the existence of phenomenon or its validation does not require the existence of the noumenon in the outside world. Thus, even if the gaiety of death is absent in the outside world, it exists as a valid phenomenal object within the consciousness of the child. We, as an audience, believe in the conceived world of the child's gaiety that comes from her genuine belief in the existence of gaiety in her consciousness. Clement's close-ups project a child's reading of the war and displacement through her perception of the reality of war. The phenomenon of Paulette gets engaged in the game that involves digging a hole, finding a cross, and reading a prayer following the death of her puppy.

In the shot shown below (cf. figure 4), Michel is happy to bring a dead chick, which he had stolen from the neighbour and which had died while he was trying to feed water. Paulette asks him if he had not intentionally killed it for the sake of bringing the third dead animal, adding to the dead puppy and the dead mouse, to give company to her cremated dog. When Michel answers in negative, Paulette seeks to select beautiful crosses for the dead animals.



**Figure 4: Michel brings a dead chicken a medium close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***

In one of the instances, when Michel shows a cross that he had stolen to put on the burial ground of the dead animals, she dismisses it, saying that it was awful (cf. figure 5). Henceforth, they both look out for the most beautiful crosses. Their mind is not distracted from their aim of searching crosses even in the grimmest situation. In the funeral ceremony of Michel's elder brother, who dies of an injury from a horse cart, their eyes are on the beautiful cross hanging in the church (cf. figure 6).



**Figure 5: Paulette is not happy with the cross in a medium close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***



**Figure 6. Clement's subjective camera enters into a phenomenological investigation of Paulette in a head close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***

Clement's subjective camera enters into a phenomenological investigation of the child. It does not want to understand other realities surrounding her than the inner validated consciousness she has created for her "self" independent of what is happening in the outside world. Emphasizing the power of close-up shots to capture the minutest details of the subject/object in cinema, Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen say in their book *Film Theory and Criticism*:

Close-ups are often dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surface of appearances. You may see a medium shot of someone sitting and conducting a conversation with icy calm. The close-up will show trembling fingers nervously fumbling a small object – sign of an internal storm. (Braudy & Cohen 276)

In the same way, as the close-up can reveal the inner storm of an individual, it can also reveal the inner calm amidst the outside noise, as does the close-up of the child's face in Clement's film. Interestingly, the close-ups, i.e., the subjective camera, in *Jeux Interdits*, capture the child's face visual anatomy that facilitates the audience to undertake an objective examination of his/her subjective mind. The accurate display of the child subjectivity in a close-up facilitates the audience's

meaning making process. The audience can, thus, decide whether to believe in the child's world and enter his/her fabricated consciousness of gaiety amidst the outside noise of the War. Thus, the close-ups integrate subjective and objective reality to render cinema "real".

Some of the close-ups capturing the subjective serenity of Paulette engaged in her innocent game can be seen in the following close-up shots (cf. figure. 7&8)



**Figure 7. Paulette in the breakfast table in a medium close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***



**Figure 8. Paulette speaking with Michel in a head close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***

Clement's close-ups are, thus, an objective representation of the inner subjective reality of the child. From the general, they

draw our attention to a particular by singling out a part of an object or person from all other objects or persons present in a frame.

### **Close-Up: A Polyphonic Voice of Gaiety**

Rene Clément's close-ups of a child reject the metanarrative of the melancholic death. The close-ups allow a child to express her unmerged and independent voice amid the chaos of war and displacement. These close-ups enter a Bakhtinian dialogism where the child converse with the narrative of war to present her point of view in an adult world, rendering the close-ups a polyphonic cinematic text. Clement's close-ups create a dialogic text, where the universal meaning of melancholy associated with death is replaced by an "independent", "unmerged" language of the gaiety of a child. In this dialogic cinematic text of Clement, death enters a new semantic field of gaiety. The camera uses the close-ups to construct a new "utterance" of death, a polyphonic utterance.

By giving a polyphonic voice to the narrative of death, Clément's close-ups break the myth of the universal meaning of melancholia associated with death. Clement attacks the idea of a unified and homogeneous meaning of death and responds to the new realities presented before the European society during and after the Second World War with a new meaning of death. In the world of disbelief and dystopia created by the horrors of war and the holocaust, Clement's close-ups give an alternative definition of death and displacement and prepare the audience to face the absurdity of life with gaiety; this gaiety emanates not out of indifference towards the horrors of war but rather by accepting the situation and trying to find hope and joy in the darkest moments.

After the death of her parents, Paulette enters Michel's loving family. On the first night, she is scared of darkness and burst into tears; nonetheless, the past dissipates by morning, and she is happy once again to start afresh. In a conversation the day before, Michel had told her that her parents, after their death, were buried in a hole (cf. figure 9), a common burial practice

arranged for the war victims. The idea of digging a hole for the dead delights her. In the morning, she awaits to dig a similar hole for her dead dog (cf. figure 10). Michel suggests making a cemetery and putting a dead mouse so that the dog does not feel alone in the hole. Later, they also put a cross imitating the adult burial practice. This idea of making a cemetery and putting a cross brings so much joy to them that they decide to do the same for many more dead animals. For the same, they would need many crosses, and henceforth, Michel takes the responsibility of collecting the crosses from different places by stealing from the church and the cemetery. Paulette also learns from the Priest that it is necessary to say a prayer for the dead. She is excited about the idea that Michel will teach her how to say the prayer. Hence, she would be saying the prayer for her dead dog (cf. figure 11).

Death, for Paulette, becomes a game associated with a joyful activity of digging, praying, and putting a cross for the dead. Paulette and Michel, are committed wholeheartedly to this game. Their innocence vis-à-vis the grief of war, displacement, and death rejects the homogenous voice of disdain, terror, and uncertainty surrounding them. The narrative and the polyphonic voice of gaiety in the background of melancholic death can be deciphered in the following close-ups.



**Figure 9. Paulette gets to know from Michel that her parents are buried in a hole after their death in a medium close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***



**Figure 10: Paulette at the breakfast table in a medium close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***



**Figure 11. Paulette speaking with the Priest in a medium close-up shot, *Jeux Interditss***

Clement's silent visuals of Paulette's close-ups silence war and destruction's authorial voice and create an unmerged and undisturbed narrative of joy. Clément creates this new temporal experience in the background of the nostalgic idyllism of the motherland.

Paulette, all alone, after her parents are killed in the bombings, runs back to a village, a land which still carries the nostalgia of the past haven. She succeeds in regaining the idyllic past in this land but soon is deprived of it too. The metaphoric idyllism of the motherland is reflected in Michel's family love of the land and its animals. Even death in this native land is a subject of celebration. Not only do the children collect the cross for the burial of the dead animals with great enthusiasm, the adults too, accept death as a natural event that must arrive at a certain point of life, and one is committed to bidding farewell to the dead with fanfare.

The director uses the concept of nostalgia to create the metaphor of a utopian world from which the present moment has digressed. Clement brings together the story of childhood imagery and the nostalgic past to narrate a story of gaiety in the middle of war and pains of displacement. This land is the "motherland", symbolic of the glorious and happy past. In this space of nurture, Paulette finds friendship and love after losing her parents in the German bombings. As evident in the following shots, she finds herself in the lap of love and friendship in Michel's house (cf. figure 12&13).



**Figure 12: Paulette speaking with Michel in a medium close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***



**Figure 13: Paulette sleeping in the lap of Michel's father in a medium close-up shot, *Jeux Interdits***

### **Conclusion**

Clément project a child's transition of experience from emptiness to the "whole" experience of gaiety by unifying temporality and spatiality of close-ups. The close-ups mirror the experience of gaiety in the child's phenomenon that rejects the authoritative voice of disdain amidst the horrors of war. Clément constructs the cinematic gaiety in a village representative of the idyllic past. In the phenomenological consciousness of Paulette, death does not end the life's journey; instead, it must be accepted to continue "moving." Clément's close-ups succeed in capturing Paulette's gaiety amid the death of her parents and her zeal for continuous "movement." Burying the dead animals reflects Paulette's attempt to preserve the dead forever. Clément's close-ups project Paulette's innocent endeavour to triumph the permanence of time over its evanescent nature, to triumph the gaiety of life over the grief of death. Nonetheless, this attempt does not stagnate time; it moves continuously. Clément's close-ups reflect the movement of life that resonates with gaiety.

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