

# Tragedy is a close-up; Comedy, a long shot.

April 7th, 2008 Cinemoose.com

The title of this post, “Tragedy is a close-up; Comedy, a long shot,” is a quote by **Buster Keaton**. One of the great film directors, Keaton understood not only comedy, but also aspects of filmmaking. Keaton knew how to use the camera to create visual gags and set up his story, unlike Chaplin who merely used the camera as a means to record his performances.



Keaton’s quote illustrates an important concept in film directing. Substitute drama for tragedy and you have a good rule of thumb to follow when directing your own movie.

Close-ups focus your attention on something. Whether it’s an insert of a knife in the hands of woman contemplating killing her cheating husband or reaction of the priest when he hears someone confess to a murder in confession, a close up used properly can bring out the inherent drama and tension of a scene. By drawing attention to something with a close up, the director places importance on the subject.

Filmmakers can also use close ups to shorten the aesthetic distance between the audience and character. What this means in plain English is

that close ups can help the audience connect more intimately with the subject. By focusing on an actor's face, the director can bring out a character's thoughts and feelings. This is a valuable tool for use in drama where a character's thoughts and reaction are central to the story.

Comedy, on the other hand, needs to keep the audience at a distance in order to bring out the humor of the situation. Most comedy lies in the reaction of the characters in the scene to what is happening at the moment. That's why so many movies pair up a funny character with a straight man. The reaction of the straight man, or the character that stands in for the audience, is often times the source of the humor. Other times, the straight man is used to set up the comic character. That's why wide shots are better for comedy. It's funnier to see both the comic and the straight man at the same time. For proof, just watch any TV sitcom whether it's *I Love Lucy*, *Friends* or *Perfect Strangers*. The actors are almost always filmed in long shots.



Another reason why side shots or long shots are better for comedy is that in comedy, the audience doesn't want to see what the characters are feeling or thinking. It's the situation that's funny. Take, for instance, the classic comic pratfall of slipping on a banana peel. Now filmed in a long shot, you would see the hero walk down the street, step on the banana peel and then fall hard the ground to the amusement of nearby spectators. That's comedy.

Now, let's take the same scenario only this time we'll film it as a drama. The hero walks down the street. A close up on the hero's face shows that he's lost in his own thoughts. Cut to an insert of the banana peel to warn the audience of the impending danger. The hero steps on the banana peel and slips, and falls hard to the ground. Cut to a close up of the hero's face contorted with pain. This scene is not funny. By showing us the hero's pain, the scene focuses on the character and not the situation. This is the nature of tragedy, or drama.

One of the reasons why so many modern feature film comedies are not funny is because the directors, who often don't know any better, shoot too much of the scene in close ups. They try to focus too much on what's funny by shooting it in close up. What they should do instead is pull the camera back and trust in the actors, the script and the audience to laugh at the humor of the scene.

While there are always exceptions to the rule, directors would be wise to heed the words from one of the great directors of cinema. So the next time you're breaking down a script and getting ready to film a scene, just remember "Tragedy is a close-up; Comedy, a long shot."