MISE-EN-SCÈNE

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS
What is mise-en-scène?

• French term: “putting into the scene”

• First applied to the practice of directing plays

• The term extended to film direction:
  – The director’s control over what appears in the film frame
What does mise-en-scène include?

Those aspects of film that overlap with the art of the theater:

1. Setting
2. Lighting
3. Costume & make-up
4. Staging
Mise-en-scène & the director

In controlling the mise-en-scène

the director

stages the event for the camera
Mise-en-scène
has a vast range of possibilities

It usually involves some planning
but the filmmaker may be open to
unplanned events as well
Understanding mise-en-scène

While one film may use it to create an impression of realism, others may seek very different effects:

- Comic exaggeration
- Supernatural terror
- Beauty
  
  ... and many other functions

We should analyze its function in the total film:

- how it is motivated
- how it varies or develops
- how it works in relation to other film techniques
The power of mise-en-scène

This technique has the power to transcend normal conceptions of reality

For example, Georges Méliès’ use of mise-en-scène enabled him to create a totally imaginary world on film

His Star-Film studio made hundreds of short fantasy & trick films controlling over every element of the frame.

See Martin Scorsese’s Hugo (2011), with Ben Kingsley as Georges Méliès
Aspects of mise-en-scène

What possibilities for selection & control does it offer the filmmaker?

Four general areas:

1. Setting
2. Costume & make-up
3. Lighting
4. Staging
1. Setting

- An already existing locale in which to stage the action

  OR

- A constructed setting

The overall design of a setting can significantly shape how we understand story action

Color can be an important component of settings
1. Setting - cont.

A full-size setting need not always be built

Miniature buildings can be constructed

Parts of settings can be done as paintings & combined photographically with full-sized sections of the space

Digital effects can be used to fill in portions of the setting
1. Settings - props

Prop: short for ‘property’ – borrowed from the theater

When an object in the setting has a function within the ongoing action, it is called a ‘prop’.

In the course of the film, the prop may become a motif

When the filmmaker uses color to create parallels among elements of setting, a color motif may become associated with several props.
2. Costume and Make-up

Costume can have specific functions in the film

The range of possibilities is huge – costumes in westerns; recent example, *Phantom Thread* (2017)

Film genres make extensive use of costume props – super heroes costumes in the Marvel Universe

Costume is often coordinated with setting – importance of color design

By integrating itself with setting, costume may function to reinforce the film’s narrative & thematic patterns
3. Lighting

Much of the impact of an image comes from its manipulation of lighting.

Lighting shapes objects by creating highlights & shadows.

Highlights & shadows help create our sense of a scene’s space.
3. Lighting – highlights & shadows

A highlight is a patch of relative brightness on a surface.

Attached shadows: light fails to illuminate part of an object.

Cast shadows: projected by an object.
3. Features of Film lighting

• Quality

• Direction

• Source

• Color
3. Lighting quality

Quality refers to the relative intensity of the illumination

Hard lighting creates clearly defined shadows, crisp textures & sharp edges

Soft lighting creates a diffused illumination
3. Direction of lighting

Direction of lighting refers to the path of light from its source to the object lit.

We distinguish between frontal lighting, sidelighting, backlighting, underlighting, and top lighting.
3. Direction of lighting - cont

- Frontal lighting – tendency to eliminate shadows
- Sidelight - sculpts the character’s features
- Backlighting – comes from behind the subject filmed
  Can be positioned at many angles: off to the side, pointing straight to the camera, or from below
  Used with no other sources, backlighting tends to create silhouettes
  Combined with more frontal sources of light, the technique can create an unobtrusively illuminated contour
3. Direction of lighting - cont

Underlighting – light comes from below the subject
It tends to distort features, so it’s often used to create dramatic horror effect
But it may simply indicate a realistic light source, such as a fireplace

Top lighting – the spotlight shines down from almost directly above
3. Source of lighting

A subject normally requires two light sources:

   a key light
   a fill light

Key light – primary source, providing the dominant illumination & casting the strongest shadows

It’s the most directional light

It’s usually corresponds to the motivating light source in the setting

Fill light – less intense illumination which fills in, softening or eliminating shadows cast the the key light
3. Lighting – Three-pointing lighting

Classical Hollywood filmmaking developed the custom of using at least three light sources per shot:

- Key light
- Fill light
- Backlight

It is still widely used

Most Hollywood films will have a different lighting arrangement for each camera position
3. Three-point lighting: high-key lighting

Overall lighting design which uses fill & backlight to create low contrast between brighter & darker areas.

Usually, the light quality is soft, making shadow areas fairly transparent.

High-key lighting is an overall approach to illumination that can suggest different lighting conditions or times of day.
3. Three-point lighting: low-key illumination

Creates stronger contrast & sharper, darker shadows

Often the lighting is hard, & fill light is lessened or eliminated altogether

The effect is of *chiaroscuro*
Lighting – remember!

No component of the mise-en-scène is more important than the drama and adventure of light!
4. Staging: movement & acting

The most familiar case of figure expression & movement are actors playing roles

An actor’s performance consists of visual elements: appearance, gestures, facial expressions, sound: voice, effects.
4. Staging - Acting

Concepts of realistic acting have changed over film history

Consider performance styles along two dimensions

  individualized

  stylized

Many filmmaking traditions emphasize the creation of broader, more anonymous types
3. Acting: Hollywood

Classical Hollywood narrative was built upon ideologically stereotyped roles.

Through ‘typecasting’, actors were selected & directed to conform to type.

Often, however, skillful performers gave these conventions a freshness & vividness.

In Soviet cinema of the 1920s, a similar principle, typage was used – the actor portrayed a Tupica representative of a social class or historical moment.
4. Features of acting

Cinema calls for a strong interplay between restraint & emphasis

Actor must be able to adjust to each type of camera distance

The staging of the action & the camera’s distance from it determine how we will see the actors’ performance

Extroversion & exaggeration create stylized performances
Mise-en-scène in space & time

Each element of mise-en-scène

setting  costume  lighting  staging

seldom appears in isolation

Each usually combines with others to create a specific system in every film

The general formal principles of unity, disunity, similarity, difference & development help us analyze how specific elements of mise-en-scène function together
Mise-en-scène in space

The arrangement of the mise-en-scène creates the composition of the screen space

Our vision is attuned to changes of several kinds: movement, color, differences, balance of distinct components & variations in size

Our sensitivity to these changes allows the filmmaker to direct our notice across the two-dimensional space of the frame

Mise-en-scène creates a dynamic relation between foreground & background
Mise-en-scène in time

Within the confines of the shot’s duration, the director can control the rhythm of time as it unfolds.

The complex choreographies of Busby Berkeley are a case in point – e.g. the song & dance numbers of *The Gang’s All Here* (1943)
Mise-en-scène: summary

As a set of techniques, mise-en-scène helps compose the film shot in space & time

Setting, lighting, costume & staging interact to create patterns of movement, of color and depth, line & shape, light & dark

These patterns define & develop the space of the story world & emphasize salient story information

The director’s use of mise-en-scène not only guides our perception from moment to moment but also helps create the overall form of the film
Interesting examples of mise-en-scène
- opening sequences, unless otherwise noted

• *The General* (1927) dir. Buster Keaton
  - the locomotive as a prop
• *The Godfather* (1972) dir. Francis Coppola
• *The Graduate* (1967) dir. Mike Nichols
• *Hugo* (2011) dir. Martin Scorsese
  - how to stage a scene [74 min & 94 min into the film]
  - digital settings for car race
• *The Naked Kiss* (1964) dir. Sam Fuller
• *Olive Kitteridge* (2014) HBO miniseries
• *Once upon a Time in the West* (1969) dir. Sergio Leone
• *On the Waterfront* (1954) dir. Elia Kazan  
  [conversation in car, 72 min into film]
• *Patton* (1970) dir. John Frankenheimer
• *Phantom Thread (2017)* dir. P.T. Anderson
  - the gowns (props) as emblematic of character
• *Strangers on a Train (1951)* dir. A Hitchcock
• *Sunrise (1927)* dir. F.W. Murnau
• *Walk on the Wild Side (1962)* dir. E. Dmytryk
• *Wild Grass (2009)* dir. Alain Resnais
  - use of color
Mise-en-scène examples – Documentary shorts

- Doc short “James Wong Howe: Cinematographer” (1973)
  - how to light three scenes
- Video “Capturing Avatar”, bonus material in Avatar (2009) dir. James Cameron
  - digital settings
Source:

This outline follows the concepts on mise-en-scène developed by David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson in their book *Film Art, An Introduction* (2001 & 2010)

The list of film examples has been prepared by María Elena de las Carreras