

## **ELEMENTS of MISE-EN-SCENE**

*By Gail Lathrop and David O. Sutton*

Mise-en-scene, a French term meaning “place on stage,” refers to all the visual elements of a theatrical production within the space provided by the stage itself. Film makers have borrowed the term and have extended the meaning to suggest the control the director has over the visual elements within the film image. Four aspects of mise-en-scene which overlap the physical art of the theatre are setting, costume, lighting and movement of figures. Control of these elements provides the director an opportunity to stage events. Using these elements, the film director stages the event for the camera to provide his audience with vivid, sharp memories. Directors and film scholars alike recognize mise-en-scene as an essential part of the director’s creative art.

### **Setting**

Setting, as an important visual element of film, includes all that the viewer sees which informs time and place apart from costume. This aspect of mise-en-scene plays an extremely active role in film and periodically may assume as much importance in the total film as the action, or events. Drama on screen, for example, may not even require actors if swirling desert sand, wildly lashing palm fronds, or a falling autumn leaf dynamically contribute to dramatic effect. Although setting provides a container for dramatic action, its significance goes beyond that and invites the film maker to control its various aspects artistically.

One method of setting control lies in selection of natural or artificial locale. Lush green countryside, barren mountain plain, tropical jungle, rocky seashore or snowy forest suggest a story line as well as conflict that is very different from Gothic cathedral, inner-city ghetto, thatched cottage or sterile institution. The selection process includes, too, the choice of constructing the set rather than using an already existing locale. Control may be extended, then, to determination of historical authenticity or creative blends intended to add to the text’s meaning. The set, in other words, might represent exactly a particular place, or it might be deliberately constructed to include the possible, improbable or even impossible locale. For instance, tilted buildings with minute windows and slanted doors might be constructed ingeniously to orient viewers to a world wherein ideas can be expected to differ from their own. Whether selected or constructed, real or surreal, setting functions variously to orient viewers, to contribute dramatic impact, and to add meaning to the film’s narrative.

Setting’s ability to add meaning to narrative implies that props—part of the setting given specific significance in the total action—are also part of the control directors dictate in film art. A bottle of prescription medicine with a name, a shattered

window pane, a broken heel, or a shower curtain shown early in a film may appear later to provide emphasis or even real causal relationships between otherwise seemingly coincidental events. The bottle of medicine is used, for instance, to kill the very patient who seeks good health. Or, the shower curtain hides a killer who later wraps his victim's body in it.

Selecting, constructing, and arranging elements of setting all give the director powerful control over his art. Staging the event for the camera, the director exhibits craft and creativity as he uses this aspect of mise-en-scene.

## **Costume**

Costume, or clothing and its accessories, is also an important visual element in film. Directors concerned with verisimilitude (historical reality) often go to great lengths to research clothing style, textile, and dye likely to be used by folk of a certain era, for costume is an indispensable means of establishing authenticity. Costume as an aspect of mise-en-scene in film, however, gains even more significance when directors manipulate costume so that it functions in special ways in the film as a whole. Costume can serve to enhance the narrative, or story, for instance, by suggesting social position of characters. Obviously a threadbare cotton shirt gives a very different picture than does a silk designer gown. Costume can imply, too, psychological disposition of characters. Viewers certainly gain very different insights into characters wearing casual shoes, loosely fitting jeans with blouses as opposed to those clad in skin tight leathers and wearing stiletto heels. Costume also can hint at character development in the film. When an innocent normally dressed in pale frocks switches to siren red, the audience recognizes a gain in experience. Thus, costume becomes a special tool in the director's kit.

In addition to informing narrative through contribution to setting, character, and plot, clothing—as an aspect of mise-en-scene—functions also as a prop upon which the film's unity may rest. Any portion of a costume may become a prop. Dracula's cape, for instance, tells viewers more and more as first it suggests concealment of evil and later provides a vehicle for the victim's entrapment. Likewise, the cross pendant in an initial shot seems merely a part of costume until other deliberate shots of that prop allow the viewer to pull the story's thread tighter. The pendant, the viewer learns, houses a secret necessary for the conflict's resolution. Anything—sunglasses, a six-gun, a cane, or a pipe—may be a prop derived from costume. The prop becomes significant in the ongoing action of the film. The prop's reoccurrence contributes to viewer's application of the total film. And, it is the director's selection and arrangement of costume as an aspect of mise-en-scene gives him control of visual elements necessary to effective filming.

## Figure Behavior

Like setting and costume, figure expression and movement are important elements of mise-en-scene used by the director to support the narrative as well as help develop the thematic unity of a film. Figure expression refers to the facial expressions and the posture of an actor, whereas figure movement refers to all other actions of the actor, including gestures. Two of the most important aspects of film study are appropriateness of the expression of the actors and the control the director exhibits over the actor's movements.

Often, viewers tend to think of actors as representing real people and, therefore, underestimate the art required in direction. The filmgoer must keep in mind that the actors' behavior on the screen is carefully controlled by the director. The director causes the actors to behave in a way that supports a particular thematic element of the film. A scene like the following illustrates this type of control:

A man whom the mob intends to kill visits his lover for the last time before fleeing the country. The scene takes place in a small cabin. The cabin has one entrance next to a large window on the front wall. Two additional rooms are adjacent to the main living area where the man and his lover sit on the couch. They are engaged in animated conversation. Disturbed by the discussion, the woman gets up and moves toward the large window at the front of the room. Immediately upon being framed by the window, she is shot.

Analysis of the woman's movement from the couch to the window allows the film student to begin to understand the director's control over figures in a film. Here, it is not by accident or by some independent motive of the character that this particular movement takes place. In part, it is the director's knowledge of the significance of the woman's being shot instead of the man which causes him to direct the woman to the window rather than, say, to the kitchen. Likewise, the man's witnessing of the woman's murder reinforces the importance of her movement to the window (the place providing opportunity for her murder). The director's control over movement gives him more artistic power as he deals with the narrative demands of the script.

Figure expression, as an element of mise-en-scene, also provides artistic power to the director. Because the actors in a film are used as vehicles of expression by the director, the viewer must keep in mind that an actor's performance should be examined in terms of how well it complements the film's message as opposed to how well the actor's performance supports the viewer's conception of behavior in the real world. The viewer's preconceived notions of "realistic" behavior should not interfere with his understanding of the appropriateness of the expressions of the actors. The

appropriateness of an actor's expressions ought to be judged according to that particular actor's behavior within a particular environment.

A character's pattern of behavior can alert the viewer to the appropriateness or inappropriateness of an actor's expression. If a character exhibits an expression which is opposed to the expressions he has been displaying throughout the film, the viewer might be led to believe that the actor is demonstrating inappropriate behavior. A scene like the following shows the importance of appropriate behavior:

A heroine in a film demonstrates that she is always under complete emotional control in the face of crisis. Near the end of the film, the character is thrust into a situation less critical to her emotional well-being than several earlier events. In the midst of this trying but not critical situation, the actress displays an exaggerated facial expression.

The viewer may feel as he watches that the actress's expression is not consistent with the previously exhibited pattern of behavior. He is likely to conclude that the expression of the actress is inappropriate to the character she is portraying in the film. However, if the heroine appears from the beginning of the film as someone who is emotionally unstable, an extreme facial expression might be accepted by the viewer as appropriate even if that behavior had not been exhibited by the character earlier in the film. The expression of the actress could be considered generally inappropriate. Within the context of the character's pattern of behavior, however, this extreme expression is appropriate to the heroine's emotional makeup. The viewer should always remember that the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a character's behavior should be judged in relation to the setting of the particular scene and the overall make-up of that particular character.

## **Lighting**

To the film director, lighting is more than illumination that enables the viewer to see the action. Lighting, like the other aspects of mise-en-scene, is a tool used by the director to convey special meaning about a character or the narrative to the viewer. Lighting can help define the setting of a scene or accentuate the behavior of the figures in the film. The quality of lighting in a scene can be achieved by manipulating the quality and the direction of the light. When the director manipulates the quality of the lighting, or the relative intensity of the illumination, he can control the impact of the setting or the figure behavior has on the viewer [and can emphasize the intended central focus of the frame ]. By using lighting that creates clearly defined shadows, the director can suggest a strong division between two spatial areas of a scene. For example, if the setting contains a definite area of shadow, it would be easy for the director to create a feeling of suspense by having one of the figures in the film move into the shadows. In this scene not only does the mood of the setting become intense, but the behavior of the figure may seem exaggerated. Whereas hard lighting creates

crisp edges around images and between spatial areas of the scene, soft lighting produces a diffused illumination. If the director is concerned with emphasizing a source of confusion for a character or the lack of clarity of a particular element of the narrative, he will usually use lighting that tends to blur contours and textures of objects in order to stress the lack of contrast between two extreme locations or postures. Take, for example, two characters, one good and one evil, portrayed in a scene in which the director has chosen to use soft lighting. In this scene the director can send the viewer two messages about the relationship between good and evil in his film. By eliminating the crisp edges of shadow and light, the director may suggest that distinguishing between good and evil people is not an easy task in the view of the world presented in his film. Likewise, the director may suggest that situations as well as people may be difficult or impossible to analyze in terms of all good or all evil. At any rate, it is important to keep in mind that hard and soft are relative terms which designate two extreme conditions of illumination. Actually, most lighting arrangements are variations of hard or soft lighting.

When the director concerns himself with the path of light from the source to the object illuminated, he controls the direction of the light. A carefully controlled direction of lighting allows the director to set the mood of a particular scene. There are five primary types of directional lighting: **frontal lighting, side lighting, back lighting, under lighting, and top lighting.**

Frontal lighting is used when the director wants to eliminate shadows from a scene. It is especially useful when a scene takes place outdoors at high noon or in an indoor location such as a business office. Side lighting is often used when the features of a character or an object play an important role in the development of the narrative. Sidelight causes the features of an object to cast sharp shadows. A director might use sidelight to emphasize the shadows cast by the lips of a character who has been revealed as a habitual liar. Back lighting illuminates only the edges of an object. This type of lighting is used when a silhouette effect is desired. For instance, if a director wishes to conceal the identity of a particular character in a scene, he backlights the figure to allow the viewer to see only the outline of the character's body. Under lighting comes from below the object and tends to distort the features and shape of the object. If the viewer is shown a haunted house in a film, the director probably used under lighting to create the eerie image used in the scene. Top lighting, lighting which shines from directly above the object, can be used to direct the viewer's attention toward an area above the objects in the scene. Take, for example, a character in a film who is lost in the desert. The director could use toplight in the film to stress the deadly effects of the blazing sun on this hopelessly lost individual. Though any of the directional types of lighting can be used alone in a scene, two or more types may be used in combination to create a special effect.

## **Summary**

Though each element of mise-en-scene is combined with other elements to create a specific atmosphere in every film, studying elements of mise-en-scene separately helps the viewer understand the function of each particular element. By focusing on the setting of a scene, the viewer can identify the exact importance of the time and place that he is shown so that he can think about the scene in relationship to the proper historical or cultural context. Costume, like setting, helps the viewer understand the action of a scene in relation to a larger context. It also allows the director to develop important character traits in his characters. Concentrating on the behavior of the figures helps the viewer to understand the personal motivation of the individual characters. Careful observation of figure behavior also allows the viewer to understand the role of each character in relation to the development of the story. When attempting to understand the mood of a scene, the viewer should always remember to pay close attention to the lighting. Lighting can intensify or subdue a setting, but regardless of its effect lighting is one more tool that the director uses to complete his cinematic statement. Therefore, lighting should be a vital concern to the student of film. By studying each of these elements as separate entities the student of film can begin to understand the important role that the manipulation of the elements of mise-en-scene plays within the entire context of film. And, by studying these elements as separate entities, the student of film can begin to appreciate the artistry required in film making.

## FRAMING

### Onscreen / Offscreen Space

(an image that is contained within the borders of the screen/a suggested image that is left to be imagined by the viewer—what the listener (not visually projected) is doing while the speaker (projected onto the screen) in a telephone conversation talks into the phone.

The image created when the sound of a crash is heard but the crash is not seen.

### Angle

Relationship of the camera to the subject

**High**=weak, subordinated, controlled (when not used for maximum wideness—to show *mass* or crowd size instead of weakness)

**Low**=strong, subordinating, controlling

**Flat**=value neutral; neither controlling nor controlled; factual, etc

relative value when juxtaposed to other angles: stronger than high angle and weaker than low angle

**Tilt angle**—when the camera angle is other than 90 degrees may suggest character, action, conclusions, suspicions are not “right” (as in right angled); perhaps not being presented accurately, or intended as stated within the context of the action, etc

## **Framing—Shot Distances**

[the closer the subject, the more potent, powerful, able to create change; the farther away, the less potent, the weaker, less able to create change]

### 1. **Extreme long shot:**

A panoramic view of an exterior location, photographed from a great distance, often as far as a quarter mile away (Giannetti 509)—sometimes an establishing shot that sets context for later closer shots.

### 2. **Long shot:**

A broad view of objects or action of principle interest. This shot allows general recognition of the subject at the expense of detail. Also used as an establishing shot. Reveals the human full human figure, though more in the middle- than fore- or background. (View from audience to proscenium arch)

### 3. **Medium shot:**

A relatively close shot, usually revealing the human figure from head to knees, feet to navel (bellybutton).

### 4. **Medium Close up:**

A relatively close shot, usually revealing the human from head to waist, feet to thighs, or knees to navel (bellybutton).

### 5. **Close up:**

Reveals head and shoulder of human figure in central focus of frame.

### 6. **Extreme Close up:**

Reveals a body part: a face, an eye, a pupil; a finger, a fingernail, etc.