

Mise-en-Scene (meez-ahn-sen)

Of all the techniques of cinema, **mise-en-scene** is the one with which we are most familiar. After seeing a film, we may not recall the cutting or the camera movements but we do remember the costumes, lighting, character movements etc.

What is mise-en-scene?

In the original French, *mise-en-scene* means “putting into the scene” and it was first applied to the practice of directing plays. Film scholars use the term to signify the director’s control over what appears in the film frame. Mise-en-scene includes those aspects of film that overlap with the art of the theatre : setting, lighting, costume and the behaviours of the figures. In controlling the mise-en-scene, the director stages the event for the camera.

Any of the types of films can use mise-en-scene. Makers of documentaries arrange some events. Animated and abstract films may control mise-en-scene to a degree impossible with performers shot in real time. Most often when we think of mise-en-scene, however, we think of fictional narratives.

Mise-en-scene usually involves some planning, but the film-maker may be open to unplanned events as well. An actor may add a line on the set, or an unexpected change in lighting may enhance a dramatic effect.

Realism

Mise-en-scene cannot be judged by standards of realism. Look at *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. The film lacks realism because it uses stylisation to present a madman’s fantasy. It borrows conventions of Expressionist painting and theatre and then assigns them the function of suggesting the madman’s delusion.

It is better to examine the functions of mise-en-scene. One film may use it to create realism, others might seek very different effects : comic exaggeration, supernatural terror, understated beauty, and any number of other functions. We should analyse mise-en-scene’s function in the total film – how it is motivated, how it varies or develops, how it works in relation to other film techniques.

Setting

Since the earliest days of cinema, critics and audiences have understood that setting plays a more active role in cinema than in theatre.

The director may choose an existing setting or have a setting created. The overall design of a setting can significantly shape how we understand story action. In manipulating a shot’s setting, the director may create props. Props may be functional or become a motif – have another meaning assigned to them.

Costume and make-up

Like setting, costume can have specific functions in the total film, and the range of possibilities is huge. Costumes may be realistic or stylised and can also form motifs.. Make-up is also necessary and useful in denoting character.

Lighting

Lighting can be manipulated in many ways to create highlights and shadows.. Highlights provide important cues to the texture of the surface. There are two basic types of shadow : attached and shading or cast shadows. An attached shadow occurs when light fails to illuminate part of an object because of the object's shape or surface features. Cast shadows are caused by an object being between the light source and the camera.

Types of lighting also include :

- Sidelight/ crosslight
- Backlighting
- Underlighting
- Top lighting
- Key light
- Fill light
- Low-key illumination

Staging : Movement and Acting

The director may also control the behaviour of various figures in the mise-en-scene. They will manipulate the actors and use the actors' inputs into the way a scene may be portrayed.

Music and Sound

Music plays a crucial role in building and maintaining mood. Sound effects are also added to control realism and create mood.

How to Analyse Mise-en-scene

The viewer who wants to study mise-en-scene should look for it systematically. Watch for how setting, costume, lighting and the behaviour of the figures present themselves in a given film. As a start, try to trace only one sort of element through a scene.

We should also reflect on the patterning of mise-en-scene elements. How do they function? How do they constitute motifs that weave their ways through

the entire film? In addition, we should notice how mise-en-scene is patterned in space and time to attract and guide the viewer's attention through the process of watching the film, and to create surprise or suspense.

Finally, we should try to relate the system of mise-en-scene to the large scale form of the film. Hard-and-fast prejudices about realism are of less value here than an openness to the great variety of mise-en-scene possibilities.