

Chapter 2: MISE-EN-SCENE

A French term meaning "putting into the scene," **mise-en-scène** originally described a theater director's staging (arranging the visual elements on the stage). In film criticism, the term suggests the aura emanating from details of setting, scenery, and staging as they are influenced by light and dark, patterns of color, the placement and angle of the camera, and movement within the frame.

Consider the types of information you learn about a person by going to his or her home. Messy? Dirty? Nothing out of place? Sterile? Bare walls? Books? Colorful? Paintings? Everything in a person's home tells you something about what that person values. Filmmakers (actually the **art directors**) mimic the way individuals unconsciously express their inner selves by the way they structure and adorn their environment. In a film, both major and minor details are usually more than mere decoration; they help reveal aspects of character. In *Citizen Kane*, for example, Orson Welles uses the aging Kane's castle, Xanadu, to show the man's love of external splendor but internal coldness and emptiness. The main living room of Xanadu is the size of a ballroom, with a huge walk-in fireplace dominating the setting. Across the distance of the cavernous room, Kane and his wife shout at each other, but their words ring hollowly from the darkened corners. The set helps a viewer sense the hollowness Kane and his wife feel in their souls.

The most exaggerated use of *mise-en-scène* is found in the German expressionists of the 1920s (in the films of such directors as Fritz Lang, Robert Weine, G. W. Pabst, and F. W. Murnau). **Expressionism** uses details of setting primarily to depict the internal state of mind of a character. Twisted rooms with strangely formed windows, for example, reveal insane or deformed minds. Contemporary horror movies carry on many of the techniques developed by the expressionists. The castle of Dracula is always remote, forbidding, dark, decrepit, empty, and mazed with strange twisting corridors and rooms. The settings make the viewer feel Dracula's inner character, while providing the atmosphere that stirs the audience's emotions.

The Camera Lens

We often speak of "the camera eye," but consider a few of the

ways the camera's "eye" differs from the human eye. The eye judges depth through stereoscopic vision; the camera does not see in stereo and must rely on setting for the illusion of depth. The eye can instantly adapt itself to a wide variety of changing lighting conditions; the camera cannot. The eye refocuses instantly and unnoticeably, moving at will from objects within inches to those miles away; camera focus is slow and easily seen. The eye has a dominant center of vision, concentrating on certain things while aware of a much larger field (approximately 180 degrees); the camera cannot discriminate among those things that are in focus within the frame. The eye blinks and shuts, closing off the world by accident or choice; the camera keeps running, never blinking or wavering, until it stops completely. By changing lenses, a filmmaker can move away from what the eye takes to be "normal," developing ideas and moods through a variety of **image sizes** and **perspectives**.

Image size can be considered in two ways. First is the distance between camera and subject. By moving the camera closer to a subject, its image size will be increased; movement away decreases image size (just as an object seems to grow larger or smaller as you come nearer or move away). The second method for considering image size is by **focal length** (literally the distance from the focal point of a lens to the plane of the film, but from a viewer's perspective focal length can be considered the amount of area a lens can photograph from a given distance). A lens with a normal focal length (about 50mm for a 35mm camera) records an image approximating what the eye sees naturally.

If a filmmaker leaves a camera in the same place but substitutes a lens with a shorter focal length, he or she will be using a **wide-angle lens**. The wider the angle of vision the lens accepts, the greater the area photographed by the camera (having an effect much like moving away). Because a wide-angle lens takes in a greater amount of area than a normal lens, the size of individual objects will be smaller and more difficult to see.

If a filmmaker chooses a lens with a longer than normal focal length, he or she will use a **long lens** (also called a **telephoto**, although technically a telephoto is a lens with greater power of magnification than that of a long lens). A long lens photographs an area smaller than that seen by a normal lens, having an effect much like moving closer. Thus an object will appear much larger on the screen when photographed through a long lens.

Lenses are only occasionally used solely because of requirements of distance. For example, photographing a person across a wide river requires a long lens, while photographing a person in a small room calls for a wide-angle lens because the cameraperson cannot move farther away from the subject. Usually, however, a filmmaker selects a lens for its effect on perspective. **Perspective** is the way objects appear to the eye in terms of their relative positions and distances. A normal lens, of course, provides almost the same perspective as the human eye. But wide-angle and long lenses affect images in often startling ways. Each change in lenses forces the viewer to perceive a shot through a slightly different consciousness. The further a lens moves away from what is normal, the more subjective the effect.

The **wide-angle lens** frequently provides more information than a longer lens. More objects appear on the screen, creating a sense of their interrelationships. At the same time, an image seems to be stretched out; objects appear to be farther apart than they actually are. A hand thrust toward the camera will appear huge and out of proportion. In addition, movement toward and away from the camera seems very rapid. Because movement seems so fast, the effect is surprising and frequently threatening, providing an effective approach for filming scenes of fighting, arguing, or confusion. Although two people walking toward each other may seem isolated and distant through a wide-angle lens, they come together at a startling rate. The ability of the wide-angle lens to exaggerate or emphasize actions or relationships between people provides filmmakers with a way to help viewers share subjective responses with characters on the screen.

The extreme wide-angle lens, called a **fish-eye**, offers the most subjective effect of the wide-angle lenses. Used primarily for scenes of fantasy, drug, or alcohol effects, insanity, or dreams, the fish-eye lens distorts everything it sees, creating an eerie sensation. This lens rounds off an image, taking in an immense area with central objects made very prominent.

The **long lens**, or **telephoto**, is much more selective than the wide-angle lens. The long lens compresses space, forcing a subject into its background. Viewers find their eyes guided quickly to key elements as the cinematographer selects what is significant from a context. Movement toward and away from the camera seems sluggish and futile. Everyone recalls scenes of actors running hard and appearing to get nowhere. The longer the lens, the more ghostly, light, and romantic the effect. While the

wide-angle lens typically provides information, the long lens often conveys mood and emotion by eliminating all but a few key details.

Special anamorphic lenses (which distort through unequal magnification) and prismatic distortions create even further exaggerated effects. The images obtainable from such equipment resemble the grotesque distortions of fun-house mirrors--double or multiple images, bodies appearing fat, elongated, wavy, and so on. Filmmakers use these devices primarily to show great mental aberration.

Wide-angle and long lenses also alter **depth of field** (the range of distances within focus). A wide-angle lens usually offers greater depth of field than does a long lens; objects far away and up close will all be in focus. A long lens, on the other hand, creates a more shallow depth of field. The principal subject will be in focus while foreground and background are blurred, highlighting and concentrating attention on the principal subject.

A shallow depth of field means that objects normally in focus will appear out of focus when filmed. For example, a person in an image will be in focus, but not objects in front of or behind her. A shallow field allows **focus-through** (also called **rack focus**) which is a change of focus within a shot caused by changing focus from a person or object to another previously out of focus. For example, a man will be seen sitting in a car with a frightened look while only a blur can be detected on his far side. Suddenly, the focus "racks" from the frightened man to another man sitting on the opposite side of the car holding a gun. Focus-through explains the look seen earlier in the shot.

A deep depth of field contributes to a style called **deep focus**. All the planes of the image (fore, middle, and background) remain in sharp focus, de-emphasizing the plane of action. In most films, what occurs on each side of the plane of action tends to be slightly blurred, focusing attention on the main action and setting characters off against the background. **Deep focus** encourages the viewer to explore the entire scene and to discover what is more--and less--significant. This sort of shot asks more mental involvement from the viewer and creates ambiguity since the reader's attention is less manipulated by the editing. Deep focus depends heavily on the mise-en-scène rather than on the relationships between shots. **Deep focus** was a primary goal in

Citizen Kane, and its success owes much to the ideas of cinematographer Gregg Toland.

In addition, focus can reveal mental states or moods. A muddled state of consciousness, for instance, can be conveyed by throwing an image out of focus. Consider a familiar example: a patient wakes up through a haze and eventually focuses on the worried but reassuring face of a doctor.

Soft focus, which imparts a hazy but recognizable look to a scene, can idealize or romanticize a subject. For example, a hero's look at the heroine, an old homestead, or a character's return to her home and family after a long absence might be shot with soft focus.

Filters (transparent glass or gelatin placed in front of or behind a lens) control tone or contrast either by removing certain light waves or by making a single color dominant. Light is not homogenous but composed of each of the seven dominant colors of the spectrum. By removing certain light rays, filters allow the properties of light to be manipulated: contrast can be increased, a sky darkened, barely visible clouds made striking, or light softened. By using a solid color filter with colored film, a filmmaker can cause a scene to appear all reddish, bluish, and so on. With other kinds of filters, a "night" scene can be shot in broad daylight yet look like the darkest night on film. (Filmmakers call these **day-for-night** shots.) In short, filters allow a filmmaker to color and alter reality.

Film Stocks and Exposure

Once an image passes through the lens and shutter (a mechanism allowing light to pass through very briefly), it must be recorded on **film stock**. Light-sensitive emulsions record images on long strips of celluloid. Film comes in widths of 8mm (the standard for home movies before camcorders), 16mm (the standard for classroom use), 35mm (the standard for both still photography and theatrical movies), and occasionally in 70mm and larger. As film size increases, so does the quality of the projected image.

The emulsions on film stocks vary in both light sensitivity and appearance. Stocks called slow need more light to record an image than fast stock. **Slow stock** is appropriate for bright, well-lighted conditions, while dim light requires **fast stock**. **Slow film stock** offers a more even and polished image than fast

stock, which appears grainy and contrasty (as in newspaper photos). Fast films--using **black-and-white film**--were first used in reporting situations requiring natural light. Consequently, the grainy and contrasty effect of fast film connotes on-the-spot recording of events to viewers who were raised on black-and-white images from film or TV. While few films are now shot in black-and-white, we can still admire the depth and beauty of the images. The main limitation of black-and-white film is its ability to show only a scale of greys, but that is also its advantage: the grey scale can be controlled precisely and its parts integrated tonally.

Most films now depend upon a **color scheme**, a pattern of interrelated colors. Some films, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, rely on a mixed color scheme of both color and black-and-white. Within a single shot, **color composition** can also underline meaning. For example, in a shot in *The Wizard of Oz*, we see Dorothy, the scarecrow, and the yellow brick road appearing brightly on one side of the screen. On the other is a grey tree and the cape of the witch, providing gloomy contrast to the other half of the image.

The **saturation** of color also affects the way viewers respond. **Highly saturated color** approaches pure color, while **desaturated color** seems bleached out. To reduce the intensity of color, some films are **postflashed**--i.e., exposed to a dim light in a second exposure to reduce contrast and to mute the colors. Filmmakers manipulate color, as they manipulate black-and-white, to establish mood and to tie patterns of color to specific characters or traits of character.

The rhetorical properties of a film stock can be further enhanced by **exposure**. Overexposed film appears too bright, and underexposed film seems dark. Overexposure tends to wash out details and create glaring white areas on the screen. It often creates images that seem unreal or dreamlike. Underexposure, unlike limited light, does not usually destroy significant details, but it does establish a dark and dense image that feels mysterious, gloomy, or threatening. Severe underexposure can destroy details by bleeding out texture. Exposure provides the filmmaker with yet another way of leading the viewer to see an image in a particular way.

Another manipulation of film stock is the **negative image**. Viewers looking through a normal negative for black-and-white

prints see the black tones of the print appear white on the negative. By reversing blacks and whites (or color values with color film), the filmmaker creates a world where normal tonal values have been reversed. Reality itself appears to be reversed. The result has a variety of effects, primarily distancing the audience and creating a sense of fantasy.

Camera Placement

The normal height for a camera to be placed is slightly below the eye level of a person. Any movement away from this norm alters perspective. The most important variations involve movement on the camera's vertical plane. If the camera looks upward, the result is a **low-angle shot**. A low-angle shot sets the subject against the sky or a ceiling, making the subject seem dominant, large, and even threatening. At the same time, background is reduced and movement appears quick. The point of view suggested by a low-angle shot is often that of a child, a small person, or someone who feels inferior and who must "look up to" others.

When the camera is aimed down toward a subject, a **high-angle shot** results. These shots reduce the appearance of characters and seem to make them move more slowly. In a high-angle shot, a character appears vulnerable and diminished. The point of view is that of a tall person, and whatever is seen is looked down upon and made to appear weak.

High- and low-angle shots convey attitude, showing what the subject feels in relation to the people or objects around. Consequently, a filmmaker in part tells the viewer how to feel about a character or an action by shot angle. The greater the angle, the more a feeling is intensified. If, for example, a filmmaker wants an orphan in a poor house to look overwhelmed and powerless (as does David Lean in *Oliver Twist*), the filmmaker would use very low-angle shots to re-create the boy's viewpoint and suggest his feeling of being overwhelmed by a large and hostile world. Decreasing the camera angle would reduce the viewer's sense of the boy's feelings of intimidation. In some cases, a filmmaker will use an extreme angle to make a point. An extreme high angle might appear to be directly above a person's head ("bird's-eye"), while an extreme low angle will be shot with the camera on or below floor level.

Cameras can be held at other angles to enhance various

feelings. Occasionally a camera will be placed upside-down, for instance, disorienting viewers. At times a camera will be angled as if someone had his head tilted to the side. In *The Third Man*, for example, the camera is often tilted at an oblique angle to suggest the confusion of the main character. Such angles can disorient and even create a wavelike movement if continued from side to side. A camera angled to make a hill look steeper makes the efforts of a man climbing the hill seem that much more impressive. Emphasizing the steepness of someone moving downhill intensifies the feeling of danger.

When a camera adopts the point of view of a character, it is called **subjective camera**. This technique might call for angling, tilting, panning, or taking an oblique angle in order to suggest a character's perspective. Often a hand-held camera or a tracking shot conveys a sense of the character's movements. Usually a close-up of the character's face precedes the switch to subjective camera as an editing preparation for the shot which will follow. **Subjective camera** creates a dramatic sense of the way a character views the world, usually implying how the character feels. In some cases (like horror films) the technique of subjective camera will be used, but the character remains unseen (i.e., unsignaled by a preceding close-up). The effect can be chilling as the audience often unconsciously senses an unidentified presence.

Camera angles alter the way we perceive an image. They change the composition of shots, using perspective to achieve rhetorical and psychological emphasis. As with other camera devices, the greater the degree of movement away from the norm, the stronger the effect.

Lighting

Lighting provides another key element of control over atmosphere. Occasionally, **local light** (an exposed bulb, a blazing neon sign, the row of lights at a football stadium) will contribute to mood because the light source recognizably relates to the subject at hand. But in most cases, a viewer remains unaware of the origin of lighting.

Lighting can be either **natural** (usually from the sun) or **artificial**. The color properties of **natural lighting** change constantly from the warm reddish cast of sunrise and sunset, or the ominous grayish-green depth preceding a thunderstorm, to the bright, flat, and relatively colorless light of the noontime sun.

The intensity of natural light also ranges from the brilliance of noon to the dimness of the long, darkened shadows of evening and the cold, shallow light of the moon. The intensity of light contributes heavily to atmosphere and meaning. A sunny day, for instance, conveys feelings of exuberance and joy, while dark days seem depressing and ominous. The increasingly strong light of the rising sun speaks of birth and renewed life, while the flickering rays of the setting sun suggest decline and death.

Artificial lighting, on the other hand, has fixed color properties that are highly predictable and consistent. With artificial lighting, filmmakers can control the effect of lighting over a long period of time. The primary light illuminating a subject is called the **key light**, and the key light sets up the basic look and feel of a scene. It is usually above and to the side of the subject, directing light across the front of the scene. The key light tends to be "hard," with distinct shadows. (When a scene is shot outdoors, the sun becomes the key light.)

Fill light softens the shadows created by the key light. (Key or fill light may use either one or a series of lamps.) The **fill light** usually comes from the direction of the camera, filling in the shadows of the key light. The key light is set up first, then the fill. A bright fill light softens or eliminates the shadows. No fill light allows strong shadows.

Lighting rich in shadows is called **low-key**. **High-key** lighting is bright and relatively shadowless. **Low-key lighting** heightens suspense and creates feelings of gloom and mystery. Horror movies and most old detective movies rely on low-key lighting. **High-key lighting**, on the other hand, characterizes comic or happy moods. It is the optimistic and cheerful lighting used in comedies and romances.

In addition to the general lighting of a set, special **lighting angles** also enhance aspects of character. **Front light** generally softens and blurs a face, flattening and taking away character while making a face seem more beautiful. **Side light** creates a sense of depth and solidity while lining a face and detracting from loveliness; **side lighting** frequently makes faces look mysterious. **Back lighting** idealizes a face, while adding a feeling of depth by separating a subject from its background. **Bottom lighting** produces a sinister, evil appearance. Finally, **top lighting** provides a mood of freshness that often seems spiritualized.