FILM Chapter 3: Mise-en-Scene and Design

Key Concepts
Mise-en-scène, French for "staging or putting on an action or scene," refers to how filmmakers determine what the audience sees and hears within the frame of the movie image.

Mise-en-scène includes
  - placement of people, objects, and elements of décor (and their movements).
  - lighting.
  - camera angles.
  - sound (although some critics and instructors do not consider this a part of mise-en-scène).

Design is the conception and creation of the look of a film—a plan for creating the form of what the audience sees on the screen.

This chapter describes elements of design:
  - setting
  - lighting
  - costume, makeup, and hairstyle

Learning Objectives
Once you have read this chapter, you should be able to
  - explain the concepts of mise-en-scène, composition, and design.
  - identify mise-en-scène in any movie you watch and explain its effect.
  - describe the difference between an open frame and a closed frame.
  - describe the functions of the art director and the production designer.
  - accurately note the presence or absence of the two basic types of movement in any film you watch.
  - name three major elements of cinematic design.
  - explain why most shots in a film rely on both onscreen and offscreen spaces.
Chapter 3: Mise-en-Scene

1. What is Mise-en-Scene?
Mise-en-Scene (meez-ahn-sen) literally means “staging or putting on an action or scene”.
- It is sometimes called STAGING.
- In critical analysis of movies, the term refers to the overall look and feel of a movie.
- Everything the audience sees, hears, experiences while viewing it.
- Influences our mood as we watch
- Décor, lighting, smells, sounds influence our emotional response

Two Components: Design and Composition

**Design:** Process by which the look of the settings, props, lighting and actors is determined.

**Composition:** Organization, distribution, balance and relationship of actors and objects within the space of each shot. The visual elements of Mise-en-Scene are crucial to shaping our sympathy for, and understanding of, the characters shaped by them.

When viewing, consider this: Ask yourself if what you see is simply appealing décor (well dressed actor, dramatic lighting), or if these elements have a distinctive significance to your understanding of narrative, characters, action.

2. Design – Sometimes the way the actors, setting, and décor in the movie look is the most powerful impression we take away from a first viewing. But whatever its style and ultimate affect design should express a movie’s vision; be appropriate for the narrative; create a convincing sense of times, spaces, and moods; suggest a character’s state of mind and relate to developing themes.

The Team

-Production Design- Works closely with the director as well as the director of photography (DP), in visualizing the movie. (S)he is an artist and executive responsible for the overall design concept, the look of the movie and for surprising the heads of each department that creates the look.

-Departments-
  - Art- design, CGI, painters
  - Costume- design and construction
  - Hairstyling
  - Makeup
  - Wardrobe- maintaining the costumes
  - Location- finds locations, transport, logistics
  - Properties- Furniture, objects used
  - Carpentry- set construction and decoration
  - Greenery- real or artificial
  - Transportation- vehicles

Little Known Facts: Alfred Hitchcock learned about visual and SFX from his career as an art director; Ridley Scott was a set design for the BBC; David Fincher did SFX for Return of the Jedi and Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom before directing music videos for artists such as Madonna.
A. Elements of Design:

1- Setting, décor, and properties
2- Lighting
3- Costume, make-up, and hairstyle

1- Setting, Décor, and Properties: The spatial and temporal setting of the film is the environment in which the narrative takes place. In addition to its physical significance, the setting creates a mood that has a social, psychological, emotional, economic, and cultural significance.
   - On location- Real World Locations
   - On Set- created looks to look real
   - Décor- set dressings; help define world
   - Properties- vases, flowers, guns; help define characters

2- Lighting:
   - Most production designers include an idea of the lighting in sketches. These sketches help guide the cinematographer in coordinating the camera and lighting.
   - Light is an essential element of drawing the composition of a frame.
   - Light calls attention to shapes and textures; through shadows, it may mask or conceal.
   - Light is controlled and manipulated to achieve expressive effects; except in rare instances, there is no such thing as wholly “natural” lighting.

3- Costume, Make-up, and Hairstyle:
   - During the years of the classical Hollywood studio system (30s and 40s), an actor’s box office appeal would depend on that actor’s ability to project an image that audiences would love (any names come to mind?). These actors were made contract to not only act in the studio’s films, but also have to fix teeth, get plastic surgery, hair dyed to maintain that look.
   - Although an actor’s range is important, the art department’s ability to change an actor’s appearance is equally important.

   Costume: The setting of the film generally governs the design of the costumes, which can contribute to the setting and suggest character traits.
   - social status
   - self image
   - projection of time
   - state of mind

EXAMPLES:
Traditionally, whether films took place in modern or historical settings, actors’ makeup usually contemporary look. It preserved the actors’ image and led to beauty products that are still used today. (Max Factor, MAC)
- Today, most makeup is natural, but those films that require a expensive design usually depict unusual or fantastic characters.

**EXAMPLES:**

**Hairstyle**
- During the studio years, hairstyles were based on modern looks rather than period authenticity favored in costumes.
  - Until the sixties, actors in every film, whether period or modern, were required to wear wigs designed for the film. (Why do you think this was the case?)
  - The script supervisor keeps track of the continuity by keeping a log of each day’s shooting. Today, SS, use a tiny video assist camera which is mounted on the film camera to get a replica of the scene shot.

**EXAMPLES:**

**B. International Styles of Design**

**FRANCE**
- These two styles were established in France in the first motion pictures.
  - Luminere brothers: nonfiction – shooting short, realistic depictions of everyday activities.
  - Georges Melies: Fiction – using illusions learned in the theater; he employed stage tricks, mechanisms, and cinematic effects. In doing so he invented the film set and … the first art director.

**RUSSIA**
- In Russia after the 1917 revolution, avant-garde constructivists and futurists reshaped the entire concept of …. what it is, how it is shot, how it is edited, and how it looks.
  - The great Russian directors (…Leu Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein and others) were influenced by two seemingly contradictory forces: 1. the nonfiction film with its documentary look and 2. a highly dynamic style of editing. Their films- masterpiece both of … design and of political propaganda involving so-called Socialist Realism- combined highly realistic exterior shots with an editing rhythm that has affected the handling of cinematic time and space up until this point in time.
  - In 1992, Russian artist working in Paris introduced scenic connections from the Russian realistic theatre to French cinema and also experimented with a variety of visual effects influenced by contemporary art movements (cubism, realism, futurism, Dadaism, surrealism…). In the following decades, Russian flus, increased the use of art directors, studio and location shooting, constructed sets and artificial lighting. Check out the following films to see the development:
Germany-Expressionism: The most important early developments in art direction took place in Germany. Expressionism’s goal was to give objective expression to subjective human feelings and emotions through the use as such objective design elements as structure, color, or texture; it also aimed at heightening reality by relying on such nonobjective elements as symbols, stereotyped characters, and stylization. Expressionism, in the years following WWII, gave rise to a new approach to composition, act, design, and directing. The object was to create a totally unified mise-en-scene that would increase the emotional impact of the production on the audience.

Britain- British films if the 1930’s and ‘40’s were indistinguishable to look from Hollywood films. Two exceptions were the films by Alfred Hitchcock and those designed by Vincent Korda.

- Alfred Hitchcock, because of his background as a designer, created films that were always unusually stylish, including such early films as: The man who knew too much (1934), Sabotage (1936), and The Lady Vanishes (1938)
- Korda’s distinctive, lavish style can be seen in The Thief of Bagdad (1940). In addition, Korda designed the sets for the science fiction film Things to Come and was one of the designing on Coral Reed’s The Third Man “(1949).

Italy- Italian Neo-Realism, developed during WWII, influenced how cinema worldwide handled both narrative and design (or absence of design). Its use of nonprofessional actors, handheld cameras, and location sets all diversified strongly from the practices of studio productions. This style opened the door for new styles in Europe, India, and the U.S. Its humanism and concerns with social connections during and after the war broke away from convention/movie narrative and established a “new realism” in both story and style. Robato Roscellai’s “Rome” (1945), Vidhorlo Desica’s The Bicycle Thieves (1948), Fredaico Felliai’s I Vitellani (1953)

Japan- Art direction and design is a very important element in the films of the three Japanese directors best known in the West:
- Kurosawa’s: “Ran” has visual simplicity and dramatic power.
- Mizoguehi’s: “Sansho the Bailift” (’54) poetic and realistic in its beauty.
- Ozu’s films have a style based on Jap. Culture itself- how they live, design their houses, eat their meals- therefore esoteric to the outside world. Late Spring (’49)

China- Diverse visual styles. Distinctive directors including Kaige Chen (Yellow Earth ’84) and Yimou Zhang (Raise the Red Lantern ’91) exploit color in impressive ways. In Hong Kong, a new cinema emerged in the 1960s characterized by its focus on the local Cantonese culture and technological sophistication. Its achievements include the Bruce Lee films, Ann Tsui’s Ordinary Heroes (’98), and John Woo’s The Killer (’89) which had a strong influence on Quintin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez.
3. Composition:

--Composition is part of the process of visualizing and planning of the movie. More precisely, composition is the organization, distribution, balance, and general relationship of stationary objects and figures (any significant thing that move on the screen—people, animals, objects, as well as the use of light, shade, line and color within the frame.

--Ensuring this organization on screen helps a movie’s narrative and meanings. Therefore, it requires much thought and discussion:

- Drawings
- Designs (set, costume, makeup)
- Models
- Storyboards (for shot sequence)

These tools help aid in visualizing each shot and achieving a unified whole.

--As filmmakers visualize and plan each shot, they must make decisions about two aspects of composition:

**Framing:** What we see on screen

**Kinesis:** What moves on screen and how

--Composition is important because it helps to ensure the aesthetic unity and harmony of the movie, as well as to guide our viewing: how we read the image and its parts as well as how we interpret the characters’ physical, emotional, and psychological relationships to one another.

*EXAMPLES:*

**A. Framing: What We See On the Screen**

The frame is the border between what the filmmaker wants us to see and everything else. However, unlike the static frame around a painting, the frame around the motion picture can move and thus change its point of view (the process of reframing is called a “moving frame”).

**Framing Implies POINT OF VIEW:**

**Subjective POV**—POV of a single character

*EXAMPLE:*

**Omniscient POV**—A view that seems to be coming from no one in particular.

*EXAMPLE:*

**Various POV**—Sometimes the POV is so varied that it creates a desirable ambiguity, one in which viewers are required to reach their own conclusions.

*EXAMPLE:*

The director’s choices in camera angle, framing, and camera movement contribute to the viewer’s reaction but do not lead those reactions. In face, the use of reflections in windows/mirrors make us wonder which image to trust.
B. Onscreen and Offscreen Space

--How filmmakers envision the look of the film, and how the camera interprets that vision, depends on the fundamental fact that cinematic seeing IS framing (finger frame example).

--Because the frame is dynamic, it often makes us aware of the offscreen space outside the frame as well as the onscreen space inside it. As it moves, it presents details that were previously offscreen, thus prompting us to be aware of the dynamic between offscreen and onscreen spaces.

--Space divided into SIX SEGMENTS:
   --Four infinite spaces beyond each frame
   --The spaces that lie beyond the movie setting (door, window, etc.)
   --The space behind the camera (suggests POV)

--Offscreen space has power. The longer the screen remains empty, the greater the resulting tension between screen space and offscreen space and the greater attention concentrated on offscreen space. Most shots depend on both spaces, and our awareness of their interdependence reinforces the illusion of a larger spatial world. EXAMPLES:

C. Open and Closed Framing

--Framing is one of the many conventions through which cinema gives form to what we see on the screen.

--Open/closed films depict (in two ways), the visible world through the way it is framed as well as them being perceived and interpreted (in two ways).

--OPEN FRAME: Designed to depict a world where characters move freely within an open, recognizable environment. Realism uses this mostly. In the realistic film, the O.F. acts as a “window” that provides many views. Directors: Renior, Ford, Altman

--CLOSED FRAME: Designed to imply that other forces (fate, socio-economic background, government) have robbed characters of their ability to move or to act freely. Anti-realism uses this primarily. In anti-realism, the frame is similar to a painting or photograph, closing it down and providing one view. Directors: Hitchcock, Kubrick

4. Kinesis:

--Because movies move in so many ways, our perception of kinesis (movement) in a movie is influenced by several different factors at once.

--We perceive movement when we see:
   1). Movement of objects and characters within the frame
   2). Movement of the frame itself
All movies move, but some move more than others and differently. The kinetic quality of many movies is determined by their genre.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action, animation, comedies…</th>
<th>faster</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love stories, drama, biography…</td>
<td>slower</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What type of kinetic quality?

Steamboat Bill Jr._________________  Joan of Arc_________________
Potemkin_________________________  Nosferatu___________________
Touch of Evil______________________  Sixth Sense__________________

The action (or lack thereof) represents not only a way of looking at the world (framing it) but also an approach to the movies narratives and theme.

--Which movie is more cinematic—one that moves all of the time or one that moves hardly at all? Because kinetic energy is only one of the inherent creative possibilities of movies, not an essential quality of every movie, we can answer this question only by examining the relationships among movement, narrative, and overall mise-en-scene. In this way we can determine what movement is appropriate and what movement works to control perceptions.

A. Movement of Figures Within the Frame

**FIGURE:** Anything concrete within the frame: object, animal, person. The most important figure usually is the ACTOR who, because of how s/he looks, dressed, made up, and directed for the film and thus is a vital element in the composition and resulting mise-en-scene.

Diagonal, horizontal, vertical, circular, foreground to background (or vice versa), or from on/off screen.

**EXAMPLE:**

*2001*—Frank Poole floats weightlessly into space
*Royal Wedding*—Dances on the floor, walls, ceiling
*Forrest Gump*—Breaking free from braces and run like the wind defying a childhood affliction and gravity itself

These depictions show *where* the characters move, but also *how* and *why*.

--For each scene the director must plan for the positions and movements of the actors and cameras—a process called blocking
--In designing a film, another essential element to be considered is how all of the figures move within the space created to tell the story, as well as how they are placed in relation to each other
--The placement of characters can suggest the nature and complexity of whatever relationship may exist between them, and thus their placement and proximity are relevant to our understanding of how the composition of a shot helps to create meaning.
Review Questions for Unit 3

1. What is the literal meaning of MISE-EN-SCENE? What do we mean by this phrase more generally when we discuss movies?

2. What are the two major visual components of MISE-EN-SCENE?

3. Does a movie’s mise-en-scene happen by accident? If not, what, or who determines it?

4. What are the principal responsibilities of the production designer?

5. Name and briefly discuss the major elements of cinematic design.

6. What is composition? What are the two major elements of composition?

7. What is the difference between the static frame and the moving frame?

8. Why do most shots in a film rely on both onscreen and offscreen spaces?

9. What are the essential differences between the open frame/closed frame?

10. What are the two basic types of movement that we see onscreen?