Chapter 3: Mise-en-Scène

Learning Objectives: After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define *mise-en-scène* overall and in terms of its constituent part:
- Describe the role of the production designer and the other personnel involved in designing a movie;
- Understand the importance of design elements to our sense of a movie’s characters, narrative, and themes;
- Describe some of the major historical movements of film design;
- Explain how *composition* is different from, but complementary to, design;
- Describe how *framing* in movies is different from framing of static images such as paintings or photographs;
- Describe the relationship between onscreen and offscreen space, and explain why most shots in a film rely on both;
- Understand the difference between open and closed framing;
- Accurately distinguish between the two basic types of movement—that of figures within the frame and that of the frame itself—in any film you watch; and,
- Describe not only the details of any movie’s mise-en-scène, but also the effects that the mise-en-scène has on the movie’s characters, narrative, and themes.

What is Mise-en-Scène?

The French phrase *mise-en-scène* literally means “staging or putting on an action or scene,” and, thus, is sometimes called *staging*. In a critical analysis of a film, the term refers to the overall look and feel of a movie. It is the sum of everything the audience sees, hears, and experiences while viewing the movie. A movie’s mise-en-scène subtly influences our mood as we watch, much as the décor, lighting, smells, and sounds can influence our emotional response to an actual place.

The two major visual components of mise-en-scène are **design** and **composition**:

- **Design** is the process by which the *look* of the settings, props, lighting, and actors is determined. Set design, décor, prop selection, lighting setup, costuming, makeup, and hairstyle design all play a role in shaping the overall design.
- **Composition** is the organization, distribution, balance, and general relationship of actors and objects within the space of each shot.

The visual elements of mise-en-scène are all crucial to shaping our sympathy for, and understanding of, the characters shaped by them. As you consider how a movie’s mise-en-scène influences your thoughts about it, ask yourself if what you see in a scene is simply appealing décor, a well-dressed actor, and a striking bit of lighting, or if these
elements have a distinctive significance to your understanding of the narrative, characters, and action of the movie.

Although every movie has a mise-en-scène, some are so powerful that they enable the viewer to experience the aura of a place and time. A list of these films might include:

- *Alexander Nevsky* [1938]
- *Andrei Rublev* [1966]
- *My Beautiful Laundrette* [1985]
- *Leave Her to Heaven* [1945]
- *The Music Room* [1958]
- *The Last Emperor* [1988]
- *Dogville* [2003]
- *Eyes Wide Shut* [1999] has two types of finely controlled mise-en-scène — painterly framing that concentrates our attention and outdoor shots that are chaotic and seemingly natural but are illusionary.
- *The Leopard* [1963] has a mise-en-scène that is a perfect complement to its narrative. [P.D. Mario Garbuglia]

These movies challenge us to read their mise-en-scène and to relate it directly to the ideas and themes that the director is developing.

Another dimension to mise-en-scène also contributes to our responses to a movie: how its surfaces, textures, sights, and sounds “feel” to us. There’s nothing particularly surprising about this. Think about how real-life environments affect your emotions. Similarly, nearly every movie immerses us in its mise-en-scène. When the mise-en-scène in a movie creates a feeling completely in tune with the movie’s narrative and scenes, we may not even notice it; it simply feels natural. But not all movies offer a mise-en-scène that successfully complements the movie’s narrative and themes. Some movies overwhelm us with their mise-en-scène to the detriment of other elements. [A good example of this is Baz Luhrmann’s 2001 film *Moulin Rouge.*]

The creation of a movie’s mise-en-scène is nearly always the product of very detailed planning of each shot in the movie. Planning a shot involves making advance decisions about the placement of people, objects, and elements of décor on the set; determining their movements [if any]; setting up the lighting, figuring out the camera angles from which they will be photographed; determining the initial framing of the shot; choreographing the movement of the camera during the shot [if any]; and creating the sounds that emanate from the shot. Mise-en-scène is the result of all of that planning.
To be sure, impressive aspects of a movie’s mise-en-scène can occur by chance, without planning, whether through an act of nature, an actor’s deviating from the script, or some other accident. However, in most cases, consciously and deliberately put there by someone, staged for the camera, mise-en-scène happens because directors and their creative colleagues have envisioned it.

The term mise-en-scène is quite useful for explaining how all the formal elements of cinema contribute to your interpretation of a film’s meanings. Indeed, the more familiar you become with film history, the more you will see that mise-en-scène can be used to distinguish the work of many great directors noted for their consummate manipulation of cinematic form. Although mise-en-scène can be highly personal and can help us distinguish one director’s work from another’s, it can also be created through a predetermined formula, as it was by the studios during the classical Hollywood studio era when, typically, each studio had its own look. In addition, genre formulas can have a powerful effect on the mise-en-scène of a particular film in that genre.

**Design**

Sometimes the way the actors, setting, and décor in a movie *look* is the most powerful impression we take away from a first viewing. But design involves more than first impressions. Whatever its style and ultimate effect, design should help 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 director counts on a team of professionals to design the look of the movie with these important criteria in mind. Chief among these professionals is the production designer.

**The Production Designer**

Generally one of the first collaborators that the director hires, the production designer works closely with the director, as well as with the director of photography, in visualizing the movie that will appear on the screen. The production designer is both an artist and an executive, responsible for the overall design concept, the *look* of the movie—as well as individual sets, locations, furnishings, props, and costumes—and for supervising the heads of the many departments that create that look. These departments include:

- Art—the design personnel responsible for sketching out the movie’s look, including sketch artists, painters, and computer graphics specialists;
- Costume Design and Construction;
- Hairstyling
- Makeup
- Wardrobe—maintaining the costumes and having them ready for each day’s shooting;
• Location—personnel responsible for finding the appropriate locations, for contracting for their use, and for coordinating the logistics necessary for transporting the cast and crew back and forth between the studio and the locations;
• Properties—personnel responsible for finding the right piece of furniture or object for a movie, either from a studio’s own resources or from specialized outside firms that supply properties;
• Carpentry;
• Set construction and decoration;
• Greenery—real or artificial, including grass, trees, shrubs, and flowers; and,
• Transportation—supplying the vehicles used in the film.

During shooting, the Production Designer also works closely with the camera and lighting crews. The title Production Designer is a relatively new title for this position. In the classical Hollywood studio system this job was called the art director. The most famous art director of the studio era was MGM’s Cedric Gibbons who won the Academy Award for Art Direction 11 times. By the 1960s, the title production designer replaced art director [although William Cameron Menzies of Gone with the Wind fame used the title “production designer” in 1939].

Responsible for everything on the screen except for the actors’ performances, the production designer “organizes the narrative through design.” Of course, the production designer’s control over the final appearance of the movie is limited to a certain extent by the cinematographer’s decisions about how to shoot the film. Art direction has been a springboard to a directing career for famed directors such as: Edgar Ulmer, Alfred Hitchcock, Ridley Scott, and David Fincher.

**Elements of Design**

During the process of envisioning and designing the film, the director and the production designer [in collaboration with the cinematographer] are concerned with several major elements. The most important of these are:

• Setting, Décor, and Properties;
• Lighting; and,
• Costume, Makeup, and Hairstyle.

**Setting, Décor, and Properties**

The spatial and temporal setting of a film is the environment [real or imagined] in which the narrative takes place. In addition to its physical significance, the setting creates a mood that has social, psychological, emotional, economic, and cultural significance. For
example, movies made in England often incorporate the design of the setting and décors to reflect that country’s awareness of class distinctions—the *upstairs/downstairs theme*.

Perhaps the most important decision that a filmmaker must make about a setting is to determine when to shoot on location and when to shoot on a set. Location shooting can be expensive and involve unpredictable events—rain, snow, etc. The evolution of larger studios made possible interiors (or sets) that were large, three-dimensional spaces that permitted the staging of action on all three planes (close up, medium, and long range) and that could accommodate multiple rooms. Interior shooting involves the added consideration of *décor*—the color and textures of the interior decoration, furniture, draperies, curtains—and *properties* (or *props*)—objects such as paintings, vases, flowers, silver tea sets, guns, or fishing rods that help the viewer to understand the characters by showing us their preferences in such things.

Literary adaptations pose special problems for movie designers: How faithfully should the period and the narrative details be reproduced? How can images do justice to the author’s prose textures?

From the early days of cinema, historical dramas, also known as period pieces, have attempted to bring us back to other times, eras, places. Some filmmakers indulge the audience’s desire for entertainment at the expense of historical purpose. The term *spectacle* refers to films that revel in pageantry, opulence, epic scale, and sensory excitement. History, in this context, becomes more a playground than a museum. Because time travel is impossible, human beings look to works of art for historically accurate re-creations of the past. D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* [1916], one of the first super-spectacles of the cinema, audaciously used parallel editing to tell four stories from four different eras—Babylon [539 BCE], Judea [27 CE], sixteenth-century France, and then-contemporary America. Filming long before the advent of digital effects, before even the perfection of matte shots (the combining of two separate shots on one print, bringing together elements, such as figures and backgrounds, not filmed at the same time), Griffith simply built the sets he needed to show, say, the battle for the city of Babylon involving thousands of people. The interiors and exteriors were among the largest and most elaborate ever created in the history of cinema, inspiring one of the first uses of the crane-mounted camera, which was needed to capture the epic scale.

Producer and director Cecil B. DeMille lavished millions of dollars on “historical” films and Biblical epics whose central purpose was to exploit the audience’s desire for romantic spectacle. On films such as *The Ten Commandments* [1923], *The King of Kings* [1927], *Cleopatra* [1934], and his second version of *The Ten Commandments* [1956], DeMille lavished more money on costumes, sets, and props alone than most filmmakers budgeted for their entire productions.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Hollywood attempted to counter the growing success of television (the small screen) with ever-greater spectacles, for example, *Cleopatra*
[1963]. Various widescreen formats -- larger gauges of film stock -- helped make these spectacles possible, as did the use of multiple cameras, special lenses, and special projectors. Cinerama, Vista Vision, Todd-AO, and many other systems competed to bring historical dramas to screens so wide and detailed that viewers could feel transported into the scenes. Though cinematic spectacle typically misrepresents the details of history, in its most successful forms it conveys the majesty and scope of epic human events. Expensive reenactments with “casts of thousands” [sometimes generated by computer] remind viewers of the significance, the weight, of previous historical eras and events.

A movie set is not reality, but a fragment of reality created as the setting for a particular shot, and it must be constructed both to look authentic and to photograph well. Today computer-generated imagery [CGI] has replaced elaborate sets and specialized machinery that made sets look “real.” The old Hollywood studios kept backlots full of classic examples of various types of architecture, which were used again and again, often with new paint or landscaping to help them meet the requirements of a new narrative. Sometimes, however, filmmakers construct and demolish a set as quickly as possible to keep the production on schedule. Only those aspects of a set that are necessary for the benefit of the camera are actually built, whether to scale [life-size] or in miniature, human-made or computer-modeled. Constructed on a sound-stage—a windowless, soundproofed, professional shooting environment, which is usually several stories high and can cover an acre or more of floor space—will be only the minimum parts of the rooms needed to accommodate the actors and the movement of the camera. On the screen, these parts will appear, in proper proportions to one another, as whole units. Lighting helps sustain this illusion.

Lighting

Light not only is fundamental to the recording of images on film but also has many important functions in shaping the way the final product looks, guiding our eyes through the moving image and helping to tell the movie’s story. Light is an essential element in drawing the composition of a frame and realizing that arrangement on film. Through highlights, light calls attention to shapes and textures; through shadows, it may mask or conceal things. Often, much of what we remember about a film is its expressive style of lighting faces, figures, surfaces, settings, or landscapes. Both on set and on location, light is controlled and manipulated to achieve expressive effects; except in rare instances, there is no such thing as wholly “natural” lighting in a movie.

Light is controlled and manipulated to achieve “expressive” effects. For example, Stanley Cortez, a cinematographer, mastered chiaroscuro—the use of deep gradations and subtle variations of lights and darks within an image—and used it to great effect in The Night of the Hunter [1955].
Costume, Makeup, and Hairstyle

During the classical Hollywood studio period, it was important for “contract stars” to project a consistent image that the audience could embrace. Hollywood would do whatever it deemed necessary with hair, makeup, teeth, or cosmetic surgery to achieve an “ideal” kind of beauty in its stars. Today’s audiences accept a wider range of actors and their individual looks and styles. Today’s actors, unfettered by rigid studio contracts tend to play a wider variety of roles than they would have in the 1930s and ‘40s. Although an actor’s range and skill are important in making these different roles believable, perhaps even more important is the work of the art department’s professional staff to render the actor’s appearance appropriate to the role. An example of this is illustrated by Jack Nicholson’s roles in Five Easy Pieces [1970], Chinatown [1974], One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest [1975], The Shining [1980], Batman [1989], A Few Good Men [1992], About Schmidt [2002], and Something’s Gotta Give [2003].

Costume

A costume [or wardrobe] is the clothing worn by an actor in a movie, which can contribute to that setting and suggest specific character traits, such as social status, self-image, the image that the character is trying to project for the world, state of mind, overall situation, and so on. Thus, costumes are another element that help to tell a movie’s story. In historical dramas, costume designers must undertake extensive and lengthy research. Although verisimilitude is a factor in costume design, there are other factors—style, fit, condition, patterns, and color of the clothing—that can also define and differentiate characters.

The movies have always been associated with the greatest style and glamour. Beautiful clothes worn by beautiful people attract audiences, and since the second decade of the twentieth century, filmmakers have invested considerable effort and expense in costume design. Prior to 1920, actors often wore their own clothes. During the 1920s, costume design became a part of the glamour of stars such as Gloria Swanson [Queen Kelly, 1929], Theda Bara, [Cleopatra, 1917], and Clara Bow [It, 1927]. By the 1930s, Hollywood began to devote as much attention to costume as to setting, and fashion in movies often influenced clothing purchased by the public. Yet Hollywood has tended to regard costume design less seriously than some other design areas; costume design was not recognized for an Academy Award until 1948, some twenty years after art direction.

Makeup

Traditionally, whether films took place in modern or historical settings, stars’ makeup invariably had a contemporary look. This approach to makeup preserved the stars’
images and also led to new beauty products being developed that actors could advertise, enabling female consumers to use the makeup worn by their favorite stars. In fact, the history of the commercial makeup industry roughly parallels the history of the movies. The single most important person in the manufacture of movie makeup was Max Factor. He began supplying wigs and makeup to the small movie studios cropping up around Los Angeles in 1908. In the early 1920s, makeup was usually the responsibility of the actors, but Factor standardized makeup procedures—and thus created the position of makeup designer. His products became the industry standard. Through research, the Max Factor Company continued to provide new forms of makeup to meet the challenges created by new camera lenses, lighting, and film stocks, especially color film which required a very different approach to makeup than that required by black-and-white film. The most important names in the history of makeup design are those of George Westmore and his six sons; succeeding generations of the Westmore family have continued to dominate the field.

Although many directors favor makeup that is as natural as possible, we tend to notice makeup design when it helps create an unusual or fantastic character.

**Hairstyle**

During the studio years, hairstyles were based on modified modern looks rather than the period authenticity favored in costumes. An exception was Bette Davis’ appearance in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* [1939] and *The Virgin Queen* [1955]. But few studios were willing to jeopardize their stars’ images. The idea of achieving historical accuracy was completely undercut in the late 1930s when the studios developed a “Hollywood Beauty Queen” wig, serviceable for every historical period. Generic as this wig was, hairstylists could obviously cut and style it to conform to the requirements of the individual production. Thus, one hairstyle served to depict two different characters at two different times in history.

In fact, until the 1960s, actors in almost any film, whether period or modern, were required to wear wigs designed for the film, for reasons both aesthetic and practical. In shooting out of sequence, in which case continuous scenes can be shot weeks apart, it is particularly difficult to re-create colors, cuts, and styles of hair. Once designed, a wig never changes, ensuring, at least, that an actor’s hair won’t be the source of a continuity “blooper.” Such aspects of continuity are the responsibility of the script supervisor, who once kept a meticulous log of each day’s shooting. Today, script supervisors use a tiny video assist camera, which is mounted in the viewing system of the film camera and provides instant visual feedback, enabling them to view a scene [and thus compare its details with those of the surrounding scenes] before the film is sent to the lab for processing. Hair design is so important to today’s styles that many actors have their own hairdressers under personal contract.
International Styles of Design

Although there are as many styles of design as there are production designers, there are arguably only two fundamental styles of film design: the realistic and the fantastic. These two styles were established in France in the very first motion pictures. The Lumière brothers pioneered the nonfiction film, shooting short, realistic depictions of everyday activities. Georges Méliès created the fictional film, using illusions he had learned in the theater. As Méliès employed all kinds of stage tricks, mechanisms, and illusions, he invented a variety of cinematic effects. In so doing, he also invented the film set, and thus we can consider him the first art director in film history.

In Russia, after the 1917 revolution, Vertov, Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko reshaped how film was shot, edited, and looked. They 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 combined highly realistic exterior shots with an editing rhythm that, ever since, has affected the handling of cinematic time and space.

In 1922, Russian artists working in Paris introduced scenic conventions from the Russian realistic theater to French cinema and also experimented with a variety of visual effects influenced by contemporary art movements—cubism, Dadaism, surrealism, and abstractionism. In the following decades, the look of Russian film changed in many ways, including an increased use of art directors, studio and location shooting, and constructed sets and artificial lighting.

However, most important early developments in art direction took place in Germany. Expressionism, which emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century, influenced almost every form of German art, including cinema. Its goal was to give objective expression to subjective human feelings and emotions through the use of 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. In German cinema, in the years immediately following World War I, expressionism gave rise to a new approach to composition, set design, and directing. The object was to create a totally unified mise-en-scène that would increase the emotional impact of the production on the audience.

Expressionist films were characterized by extreme stylization in their sets, décor, acting, lighting, and camera angles. The grossly distorted, largely abstract sets were as expensive as the actors, if not more so. To ensure complete control and free manipulation of the décor, lighting, and camera work, expressionist films were generally shot in the studio even when the script called for exterior scenes—a practice which was
to have an important effect on how movies were later shot in Hollywood. Lighting was deliberately artificial, emphasizing deep shadows and sharp contrasts; camera angles were chosen to emphasize the fantastic and grotesque; and the actors externalized their emotions to the extreme. This exaggerated and distorted look in film strongly influenced horror films, thrillers, and the American film noir.

At the same time the expressionist film was evolving, the Germans developed a realist cinema known as Kammerspielfilm with its masterpiece being F.W. Murnau's The Last Laugh [1924]. This film radically changed the way shots were blocked, and sets were designed and built, thanks mainly to Murnau’s innovative use of the moving camera and the subjective camera. His “unchained camera” freed filmmakers from the limitations of a camera fixed to a tripod; his subjective camera used the camera eye as the eyes of a character in the film, so that the audience saw only what the character saw. These new developments intensified the audience's involvement in events onscreen, extended the vocabulary by which filmmakers could tell and photograph stories, and thus influenced the conception and construction of sets.

British films of the 1930s and ‘40s were, for the most part, indistinguishable in look from Hollywood films, but the two major exceptions were the films directed by Alfred Hitchcock and those designed by Vincent Korda. Because of his background as a designer, Hitchcock created films that were always unusually stylish. Korda’s style was distinctive and lavish.

Italian neo-realism, developed during World War II, influenced how cinema worldwide handled both narrative and design [or in this case, absence of design]. Its use of nonprofessional actors, handheld cameras, and location sets all diverged strongly from the practices of studio-bound productions, even those shot on location, and opened the door for new styles in Europe, India, and Hollywood. Its humanism and concerns with social conditions during and after the war broke away from conventional movie narrative and established a “new realism” in both story and style.

Shooting in “real” locations—a seeming lack of design—actually reflects the work of an art director or a production designer who makes a well-orchestrated selection of streets and buildings, and produces a very definite look and feel—a mise-en-scène as recognizable as the most elaborately designed picture. This approach has been very influential on the design of countless films, both in Hollywood, where, after 1950, the increasing production of stories set in real locations owed much to the postwar Italian cinema. It was also notably influential in India.

Film scholars often focus on the works of particular nationalities and cultures. Scholars have paid more critical attention to Japanese cinema than to most other contemporary national cinemas, in part because Japanese film history extends back to the silent era. In fact, Japan is one of only about a dozen nations that have produced internationally influential film directors, including Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, Akira Kurosawa, and
Art direction and design is a very important element in the films of these directors. Each of these directors has achieved the status of **auteur**, or cinematic “author,” by artistically and idiosyncratically addressing issues, themes, and values of Japanese culture. Many Japanese films include compositions that convey stillness and invite contemplation. Directors typically achieve this effect by using long takes with little character or camera movement, framed by bold but simple compositions. The result resembles a “moving picture” transformed into a static work of art. One of the greatest pleasures of Japanese cinema, this style may have its roots in the Zen Buddhist tradition.

From India, Satyajit Ray is an auteur known for neo-realism and mastery of design details, the character’s state of mind, and mood. [*The World of Apu*, 1959]. From China, we see diverse visual styles from Chen Kaige [*Yellow Earth*, 1984] and Zhang Yimou [*Raise the Red Lantern*, 1991]. From Taiwan come Hou Hsiao-Hsien [*A City of Sadness*, 1989] and Ang Lee [*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2000].

Aside from such postmodern filmmaking efforts as the Danish *Dogme* movement [with its location shooting, handheld cameras, and natural lighting], most movie design today tends to strive for the seamless integration of studio and natural settings. And, with the exception of today’s highly popular and hugely successful science fiction and fantasy films, the majority of today’s stories involve recognizable people, wearing recognizable clothes, and moving through recognizable settings. The design work, however, is as challenging and involved as it was during the classical studio era, and the results, created with sophisticated technologies, are no less impressive.

**Composition**

**Composition** is part of the process of visualizing and planning the design of a movie. More precisely, composition is the organization, distribution, balance, and general relationships of stationary objects and **figures** [any significant things that move on the screen—people, animals, objects], as well as of: light, shade, line, and color **within the frame**. Ensuring that such organization helps develop a movie’s narrative and meanings requires much thought and discussion, so filmmakers use drawings and models—general sketches of the look of overall scenes, specific set designs, costume designs, storyboards for particular shot sequences. And so on—to aid them in visualizing each shot and achieve a unified whole. As filmmakers visualize and plan each shot, they must make decisions about two aspects of composition:

1. **framing**—what we see on the screen; and,
2. **kinesis**—what moves on the screen.

This is true whether the movie strives for verisimilitude or fantasy. Certain visionary directors are known for making shots that resemble the canvas of an enormous
painting, and, in so doing, giving impressive amounts of attention to all aspects of composition. Such directors include, to name only a few, Roy Anderson, Francis Ford Coppola, Terry Gilliam, and David Lynch. Composition can produce a flat image, one in which figures and objects are arranged and photographed in the foreground of the screen, or an image that has the illusion of depth.

Almost every shot in a professional feature film employs some compositional logic that supports the plot, characters, genre, or stylistic approaches of the film. Composition is important because it helps to ensure the aesthetic unity and harmony of the movie, as well as to guide our looking—how we read the image and its component parts and, particularly, how we interpret the characters’ physical, emotional, and psychological relationships to one another.

Over the past century, filmmakers derived such compositional logic from the conventions of the graphic arts and still photography, but they have developed compositional conventions unique to the moving image. There are four compositional conventions characteristically found in film. Three of these are relevant to any graphic art:

- diagonals;
- frame-within-a-frame; and,
- looking space.

The fourth, the eyeline match, is a product of the cinematic need to edit different shots together in a spatially coherent manner. An eyeline match is a careful staging of shots that matches, from one shot to the next, the trajectory of a character’s gaze at an off-screen place, person, or object. In real space, when a person looks directly at a thing, the angle of vision corresponds to the thing. In the filmic space of an edited sequence, however, filmmakers must create a logical and continuous space from the dozens, if not hundreds, of shots that have been filmed independently during multiple takes. An actor’s eyelines can easily shift from one take to the next, but a good eyeline match makes the character appear to look in the appropriate direction and at the appropriate angle. Eyeline-match mistakes commonly appear in student and other low-budget productions. Analyze your shots!

Framing: What We See on the Screen

The frame is the border between what the filmmaker wants us to see and everything else—the dimensions of height and width that provide the shape of the movie’s images. However, unlike the static frame around a painting, the frame around a motion picture image can move and thus change its point of view. This process of reframing results from what is called a moving frame. The movie frame is, therefore, not merely a container for a movie’s visual elements, but is itself an important and dynamic visual element. Framing also implies a point of view [POV]. At times the framing seems to
be presenting us with the point of view of a single character \textit{[subjective POV]}. At other
times, the framing implies a view that seems to be coming from no one in particular
\textit{[omniscient POV]}. However, sometimes the framing can be so varied that it creates a
desirable ambiguity, one in which viewers are required to reach their own conclusions
about the moral issues at hand.

\textbf{Onscreen and Offscreen Space}

How filmmakers envision the look of a film, and how the camera interprets that vision,
depends on the fundamental fact that cinematic seeing \textit{is} framing. The frame of the
camera's \textit{viewfinder} [the little window you look through when taking a picture]
indicates the boundaries of the camera's point of view. Because the frame is dynamic,
it often makes us aware of the \textbf{offscreen space} outside of the frame as well as the
\textbf{onscreen space} inside of it. As the frame moves, it presents on the screen details
that were previously offscreen, thus prompting us to be aware of the dynamic between
offscreen and onscreen space. As the film theorist Noel Burch first suggested, the
entire visual composition of a shot depends upon the existence of both onscreen and
offscreen spaces; both spaces are equally important to the composition and to the
viewer's experience of it. Offscreen space has power, as Burch emphasizes: "The
longer the screen remains empty, the greater the resulting tension between screen
space and offscreen space and the greater the attention concentrated on offscreen
space as against screen space." In any movie—a verisimilar one, in particular—most
shots depend on both onscreen and offscreen space, and our awareness of their
interdependence reinforces the illusion of a larger spatial world than what is contained
in any single frame.

\textbf{Open and Closed Framing}

The first and most obvious function of the motion picture frame is to control our
perception of the world by enclosing what we see within a rectangular border, generally
wider than it is high. Because it shapes the image in a configuration that does not
allow for peripheral vision, and thus does not conform to our visual perception, we
understand framing as one of the many conventions through which cinema gives \textit{form}
to what we see on the screen. Open and closed films [or forms] are two ways of
designing and representing the visible world through framing it, as well as two ways of
perceiving and interpreting it.

Each of these cinematic worlds—open and closed—is created through a system of
framing that should remain fairly consistent throughout the film so as to not confuse
the viewer. Although both types of films are planned and designed, the \textbf{open frame} is
designed to depict a world where the characters move freely within an open,
recognizable environment, and the \textbf{closed frame} is designed to imply that other forces
[such as fate; social, educational, or economic background; or a repressive government] have robbed characters of their ability to move and act freely. The open frame is generally employed in realistic [verisimilar] films, the closed frame in antirealistic films. In the realistic or verisimilar film, the frame is a “window” on the world—a window that provides many views. Because the “reality” being depicted changes continuously, the movie’s framing changes with it. In the antirealistic film, the frame is similar to the frame of a painting or photograph, enclosing or limiting the world by closing it down and providing only one view. Because only that one view exists, everything within the frame has its particular place.

**Kinesis: What Moves on the Screen**

Because the movies move in so many ways, our perception of *kinesis* [movement] in a movie is influenced by several different factors at once—including the use of music in an otherwise static scene—but we perceive movement mainly when we see:

1. the movements of characters and objects within the frame; and,
2. the apparent movement of the frame itself [the moving frame].

Although their particular applications will differ, depending on the specific work, both types of movement are part of any movie’s composition and mise-en-scène.

Of course, all movies move, but some move more than others and differently. The kinetic quality of many movies is determined by their genre: action pictures, cartoons, and comedies tend to include more and faster movement than do love stories and biographical films. Lack of action represents not only a way of looking at the world [framing it] but also an approach to the movie’s narrative and themes.

Which movie, then, is more cinematic—one that moves all of the time or one that moves hardly at all? Because kinetic power 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 the movement, narrative, and overall mise-en-scène. In this way we can determine what movements are appropriate and, furthermore, what movement works to control perceptions.

**Movement of Figures Within the Frame**

The word *figure* applies to anything concrete within the frame: an object, and animal, a person. The most important figure is usually the actor, who is cast, dressed, made up, and directed for the film and thus is a vital element in the composition and resulting mise-en-scène. Figures can move in many ways: across the frame [in horizontal, diagonal, vertical, or circular patterns], from foreground to background [and vice
versa], or from on and off the screen. Figure movements—which can be as prosaic or as poetic as the story requires---not only show where a character is moving, but how [on foot, in a vehicle, through the air in a fight], and sometimes [explicitly or implicitly] also why.

For each scene, the director and his team must plan the positions and movements of the actors and the cameras, and, in rehearsals, familiarize the cast and camera operators with their plan—a process known as 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 physical 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. Ordinarily, close physical proximity implies emotional or other kinds of closeness, but directors may manipulate that relationship as well.

Looking at Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène is the overall look and feel of the film---and mise-en-scène shapes the mood of the film. A fully realized mise-en-scène plays a crucial role in creating the illusion of naturalness that encourages our enjoyment of movies as spectators, but we must consciously resist that illusion if we hope to graduate from being spectators to being students of film, people who look at movies rather than just watch them. Looking at mise-en-scène critically does not mean taking the fun away from movies. You may still have as much fun as you like with [or is the better word in?] The Matrix [1999] while realizing that everything you see, hear, and feel in it was put there for a purpose.

In precise terms, you should be able to describe the framing, composition in depth, the lighting, the setting, the design and use of objects, and the placement and appearance of the characters in a film.

- Tim Burton's Sleepy Hollow [1999]: a unified look, expressive details, and contrasting colors.
- Sam Mendes' American Beauty [1999]: color for symbolism; details such as décor create moods; clothing can reveal personality, different settings, and behaviors.
- Michael Almereyda's Hamlet [2000]: characters and settings transformed for modern adaptation.
Vocabulary

- Art Director
- Auteur
- Blocking
- Chiaroscuro
- Closed Frame
- Composition
- Costumes
- Decor
- Design
- Eyeline Match
- Figures
- Framing
- Kinesis
- Mise-en-scène
- Moving Frame
- Offscreen Space
- On Location
- Onscreen Space
- Open Frame
- Point of View [POV]
- Production Designer
- Properties
- Reframing
- Script Supervisor
- Set
- Sound-stage
- Spectacle
- Video Assist Camera
- Viewfinder