

CINEMA SURVEY HONORS

Reading #1

MISE EN SCENE

<http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Independent-Film-Road-Movies/Mise-en-sc-ne.html>

By Robert Kolker

Mise-en-scène is what we see in a film; editing is what we do not. These are simplified definitions, but they emphasize two essential things: the basic building blocks of a film—the shot and the cut—and the complexities of each that allow a film to achieve its texture and resonance. Mise-en-scène concerns the shot, though we need to keep in the back of our minds that editing—putting two shots together—affects not only how a film's narrative is structured but how the shots are subsequently understood by viewers.

The term "mise-en-scène" developed in the theater, where it literally meant "put into the scene" and referred to the design and direction of the entire production, or, as "metteur-en-scène," to the director's work. The term was brought into film by a group of French film critics in the 1950s, many of whom would become directors and constitute the French New Wave in the 1960s. One of these critics-turned-directors, François Truffaut, used the term negatively to describe the directors of the French "Tradition of Quality," the rather stodgy French films that appeared after World War II. New Wave theorists felt that these films merely translated novels into movies. André Bazin, perhaps the most influential film critic since Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) (the revolutionary Russian filmmaker who, despite his theoretical focus on a particular form of editing called montage, was a master of mise-en-scène), was much more positive in his use of the phrase, and the discussion of mise-en-scène here flows from his observations.

ELEMENTS OF MIS-EN-SCENE

Mise-en-scène is generated by the construction of shots and the ways that they lead to visual coherence, across the edits from shot to shot. It includes all the elements in front of the camera that compose a shot: lighting; use of black and white or color; placement of characters in the scene; design of elements within the shot (part of the process of production design); placement of camera vis-à-vis characters in the set; movement of camera and/or actors; composition of the shot as a whole—how it is framed and what is in the frame. Even music may be considered part of mise-en-scène. While not seen, at its best music enhances the visual and narrative construction of the shot.

Cinematic mise-en-scène refers to how directors, working in concert with their cinematographers and production designers, articulate—indeed, create—the spatial elements and coordinates in the shot and succeed in composing well-defined, coherent, fictional worlds. Composition and the articulation of space within a film carry as much narrative power and meaning as its characters' dialogue. Mise-en-scène is thus part of a film's narrative, but it can tell a larger story, indicating things about the events and characters that go beyond any words they utter.

Mise-en-scène can also be an evaluative term. Critics may claim a film does or does not possess mise-en-scène. For example, if a film depends entirely on dialogue to tell its story, if its visual structure is made up primarily of a static camera held at eye level on characters who are speaking in any given scene, if its lighting is bright, even, and shadowless, it lacks mise-en-scène. On a more subjective level, if a viewer's eyes drift away from the screen because there isn't much of interest to look at, the film lacks mise-en-scène. Such a film may succeed on other levels, but not visually; it is constructed not in the camera but in the editing room, where the process is much cheaper because actors are absent. Films with good dialogue, well-constructed narrative, and scant mise-en-scène can still be quite effective. But these are rare—as rare as well-written films.

Journalistic reviewers may care little about mise-en-scène. They are rarely concerned with the look of films and focus mostly on whether or not the story or characters seem "real." They may term visually centered works "arty" or say they have interesting "camera angles." Filmgoers may simply want to be entertained and not care about how a film is constructed. But dedicated filmmakers and filmgoers, like talented novelists and readers, want complete, self-contained, detailed cinematic worlds that are at the time open to the viewers' own worlds and experiences. Such people will find satisfaction in the visual complexity of mise-en-scène.

FILMMAKERS AND MISE-EN-SCÈNE

Mise-en-scène has preoccupied filmmakers in several countries and periods. German expressionism developed immediately following World War I. In painting, writing, and filmmaking, expressionism was a mise-en-scène cinema, expressing the psychological turmoil of the characters in terms of the space inhabited by its characters. Major representatives of German expressionism in film include Robert Wiene's *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920) and F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, the first Dracula movie (1922). These and many others created a dark and anxious visual field, uneasy and frightening. German expressionism had enormous influence when its practitioners moved to the United States: Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927); Universal Studio's horror films of the early 1930s such as *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931), and their sequels; *Citizen Kane* (1941); the film noir genre of the 1940s; *Psycho* (1960); and *Taxi Driver* (1976). These, among others, borrowed their idea of mise-en-scène from German expressionism, though it was not the only influence on these films.

Later directors developed highly individualized mise-en-scènes. Michelangelo Antonioni (b. 1912), for example, created an extremely intricate and eloquent mise-en-scène in films such as *Il Grido* (*The Cry*, 1957), *L'Avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960), *La Notte* (*The Night*, 1961), *L'eclisse* (*The Eclipse*, 1962), *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, 1964), *Blow-Up* (1966), and *Professione: reporter* (*The Passenger*, 1975). As Rosalind Krauss has noted in *The Optical Unconscious*, Antonioni, like the American abstract expressionist painters of the time (Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, for example) reversed the usual conventions of foregrounding the human figure against a background (pp. 2–27). Antonioni believed that the background—or, in his case, the character's environment—should be foregrounded, the characters constituting

only one part of the *mise-en-scène*, which defined them by where they were, what was around them, and how they were observed by the camera.

Architecture is Antonioni's essential point of reference; the themes of his films were not reducible to plot but rather explore how the spaces inhabited by his characters explain their predicaments—something they themselves cannot adequately do in words. Antonioni framed characters in windows and often composed them among buildings that loomed strangely over them. In his color films, color itself defined situations. The belching yellow smoke from factories in *Red Desert*, the camera that unexpectedly drifts away from a character to follow a blue line running along the ceiling in the same film, create moods that allow viewers to understand the characters visually in ways that they don't understand themselves. Like an abstract expressionist painter, Antonioni worked to rid his work of the individual human figure. At the end of *The Eclipse*, the two central characters promise to meet at a certain location. They do not, and the last ten minutes of the film are composed of a collage of almost abstract cityscapes peopled, when at all, by anonymous faces. The camera's attention, however, focuses on things: water dripping from a drain; sprinklers watering a field; a horse-drawn sulky carrying a man across the street; a building wrapped completely in mats. This is an abstract vision of unexplained, anxiety-producing images. A hint is offered in a newspaper headline that reads "Atomic Bomb." Free-floating anxieties of the post-atomic world diminish the human figure in light of events not under the control of individuals.

LATER USES OF MISE-EN-SCÈNE

Mise-en-scène remains somewhat rare in Hollywood filmmaking, because it is expensive, and worst of all (in the studio's eyes), it calls attention to itself rather than allowing the screen to become a transparent space in which a story gets told. But some contemporary directors are emerging with a recognizable visual style that is all but synonymous with *mise-en-scène*. David Fincher (b. 1962) is one. *Se7en* (*Seven*, 1995), *The Game* (1997), and *Fight Club* (1999) set up consistent visual palettes and compositional structures for their fictional worlds. *Seven* was filmed in color, but Fincher and his cinematographer, Darius Khondji, manipulated it so that almost every shot is washed with a yellow-green tint—an unpleasant look that, along with the darkness and unending rain, express the grimness of the film's universe. Fincher also used a pattern to control his *mise-en-scène*: here and in other of his films, he constructed his shots along a horizontal line to complement the wide-screen format he used. As in *Psycho*, everything was bound: composition and camera movements occur along the line that set boundaries for an otherwise unlocalized world. *Seven* is set in an unnamed city, gray and always raining. At the end of the film, after a relatively short drive, the characters find themselves in a desert strung with power lines. Like an expressionist film, *Seven* creates a state of mind, but not an individual one. Instead, like *Psycho*, its mood is one of universal anxiety.

The most important reason to emphasize *mise-en-scène* was and remains a director's sense of opposition to the largely anonymous style of Hollywood filmmaking and its rapid, invisible editing. The creation of a coherent and articulate *mise-en-scène* is a means to personal expression. From the quiet domestic spaces of the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (1903–1963), who defines his characters by what surrounds them, to the vertiginous, shadowy spaces of the worlds

created by Orson Welles, to the abstract cityscapes of Antonioni and the imprisoning interiors of the German filmmaker Werner Rainer Fassbinder (1945–1982), to the expressive compositions and camera movements created by Martin Scorsese (who uses Fassbinder's cinematographer, Michael Ballhaus), creative filmmakers have developed alternatives to Hollywood's illusory realism through mise-en-scène. The technique, like other modernist ones, foregrounds rather than hides the medium's processes. Choosing angles, moving a camera, deciding how the camera should be positioned and the scene dressed and lighted are among the things that cinema, and no other single art, can do. These cumulative aesthetic decisions are the marks of great filmmakers as they create complete and coherent fictional worlds.

ELEMENTS OF MIS EN SCENE

Casting and performance

Production Design

Costumes

Make-up and Hair

Cinematography (Lighting, Camera movement and placement in relation to the other elements in the frame)

Sound

Music

Editing

TOOLS

Casting and performance – interpretation of the role, actor's choice of expression and movement

Production Design – Set design, set dressing and props, locations

Costumes – costume design and choice

Make-up and Hair design

Cinematography - lighting, camera movement [grip], film vs. digital, lens choice

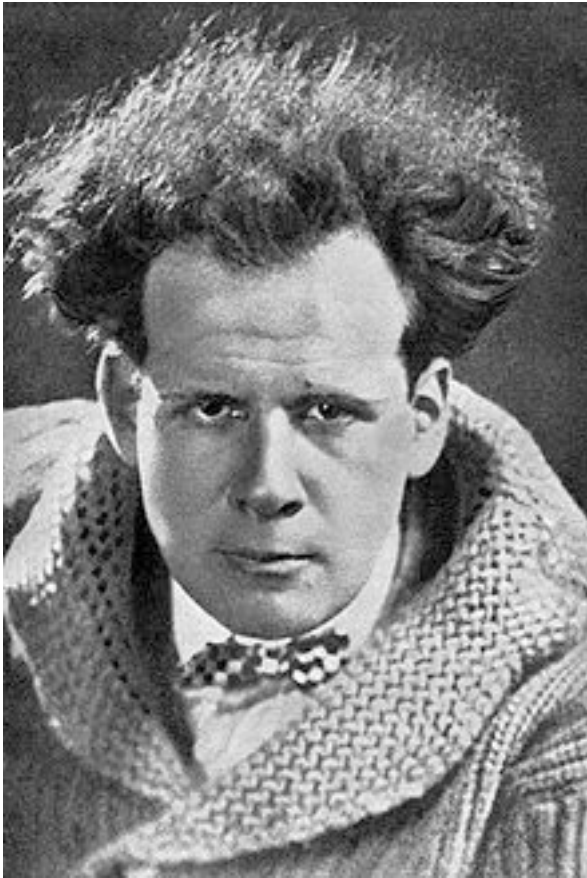
Sound – sound design, editing of dialogue and effects

Music

Editing

Sergei Eisenstein

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



	Sergei Mikhailovich Eizenshtein
Born	January 23, 1898 Riga, Russian Empire
Died	February 11, 1948 (aged 50) Moscow, Soviet Union
Years active	1923-1946
Spouse	Pera Atasheva (1934-1948)
Awards	Stalin prizes (1941, 1946)

Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein ([Russian](#): Сергей Михайлович Эйзенштейн *Sergej Mihajlovič Ejzenštejn*; January 23, 1898 – February 11, 1948) was a pioneering [Soviet Russian film director](#) and [film theorist](#), often considered to be the "Father of Montage." He is noted in particular for his [silent films](#) *Strike* (1924), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1927), as well as the [historical epics](#) *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1958). His work profoundly influenced early filmmakers owing to his innovative use of and writings about [montage](#).