What matters is the way space is cut up, the precision of what happens within the magical space of the frame, where I refuse to allow the smallest clumsiness.

Federico Fellini

Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) opens with a wedding. Connie (Talia Shire), the daughter of Don Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando), marries Carlo Rizzi (Gianni Russo) at the Corleone estate outside New York City. About halfway through the film, Vito's son Michael (Al Pacino), who is hiding from enemies in Sicily, marries a young woman named Apollonia in the small town of Corleone. Although both scenes depict Corleone family weddings, they look very different. The first scene is a lavish reception held on the lawn of the
imposing Corleone mansion. Connie wears an extravagant wedding gown (fig. 5.1) while hundreds of guests drink copiously and feast on lasagne.

By contrast, in the scene of Michael and Apollonia's wedding, the actual ceremony is shown at the small village church (fig. 5.2). The wedding party parades through the dusty streets of the rustic countryside. The bride and groom circulate among their guests, serving them candy, before dancing together in the town square. This comparison raises a question related to the use of visual details: what significance can be derived from the fact that these two weddings look so different?

Narrative and visual elements work together to establish differences between the two Corleone weddings. Connie’s wedding emphasizes the secular (non-religious) aspects of the event. First, the scene does not depict the marriage ceremony itself. Also, Vito takes care of business matters during the reception, as well-wishers ask him for favors. Costumes and props—including the fancy automobiles parked near by—tell viewers that the guests are affluent. By contrast, the scene of Michael's wedding foregrounds the marriage by showing the priest blessing the couple in the church. A small number of people attend their reception. Everyone is dressed simply, including the groom, who wears a black suit instead of a tuxedo. As they serve their guests, the wedding couple, not the ostentatious display of wealth, takes center stage. These details of setting, costume, and props imply that, in America, wealth and business take precedence over family and community. This conflict between business and family assumes great significance over the course of the Godfather trilogy, becoming one of its major themes.

This chapter explores the way filmmakers carefully orchestrate visual details such as these to develop characters, support themes, and create mood. The chapter focuses on the integrated design program, called mise en scène, by examining four major components: setting, the human figure, lighting, and composition. It then looks at two specific styles of mise en scène: that associated with German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s and the French style of the 1930s known as Poetic Realism. These distinctive approaches suggest different ways in which mise en scène creates fictional worlds that viewers find compelling.

The term mise en scène (pronounced "meez aahn sen") originated in the theater and literally means staging a scene through the artful arrangement of actors, scenery, lighting, and props—everything that the audience sees. In a film, the mise en scène is designed by a production designer, working in collaboration with the film director. In a narrative film, mise en scène creates the look of the world in which the film takes place, controlling the environment and setting the audience's expectations for the story to come. The mise en scène is the filmmaker's means of developing settings, costumes, props, and lighting, providing a visual language that helps to shape the audience's understanding of the film's narrative and themes.
Designing the Look of the Film

The *mise en scène* is determined during pre-production and production and involves the work of many people. The production designer's careful planning contributes greatly to the coherence of the *mise en scène*. The director and production designer make decisions about how the story world will look well before principal photography begins. The art director supervises the construction of scale models and computer graphics to preview possibilities. Location scouts travel to find locations. A construction coordinator directs carpenters who build sets according to the specifications in blueprints drawn up by set designers; set decorators find the appropriate materials to make the space a plausible environment and translate the production designer's themes into visual details. Set dressers work during shooting, arranging the items on the set.

Casting directors audition actors and extras. Costume designers present sketches to the director for approval, and wardrobe supervisors acquire and manage costumes. Makeup artists and hairdressers work with actors to achieved the desired physical appearance for the characters. The property master is responsible for finding and maintaining props. The director runs rehearsals with actors before shooting begins to work on blocking (the plan for actors' movements), choreography (in action sequences or song and dance numbers), and the subtleties of each actor's performance.

world of the story. In documentary films, directors do not usually control their environment, but they can choose which elements to focus on. Avant-garde filmmakers may dispense with a story altogether, yet they still arrange the elements in the frame according to aesthetic principles described in this chapter.

Each element of the *mise en scène*—the setting, the human figure, lighting, and composition—influences the viewer's experience of the story, characters, space, and time. Filmmakers use details in a systematic, integrated manner not only to create a world on screen, but also to indicate character development, present motifs, amplify themes, and establish mood.

Setting

Setting refers to the places where the film's action unfolds. These places may be general or specific locations, real or imaginary places. In *Notorious*, events occur in two cities: Miami, Florida, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In each city there are a number of specific locations as well: the Miami County Courthouse, Alicia Huberman's house, and, in Rio, Alicia's apartment, the race track, the government offices, and Alex Sebastian's house. The change in setting from Miami to Rio marks a turning point in the narrative when Alicia commits to changing her life by becoming a government agent.

Alicia's apartment and Alex's house are sets built on a studio soundstage (a large, warehouse-like structure that houses sets and provides optimum control over lighting and sound when filming). Constructing a set provides filmmakers with the maximum degree of control over their shooting environment. On an indoor set, directors and cinematographers do not have to contend with bad weather, noise, and unreliable lighting conditions. These are precisely the conditions that pose challenges to documentary filmmakers.
A constructed set can be built to the filmmaker’s precise specifications. For Marcel Carné’s *Children of Paradise* (“Les Enfants du Paradis”; 1945), an outdoor set was constructed on a studio back lot to simulate a nineteenth-century Paris street. In order to use the small space to convey the feel of a bustling city block, the builders constructed a line of two-story buildings that diminished in size from the foreground to the background (fig. 5.3). To maintain proportions, Carné had small-scale carriages built and employed dwarves as extras in the distant areas of the shot. This production technique is called **forced perspective**: filmmakers construct and arrange buildings and objects on the set so that they diminish in size dramatically from foreground to background. Because the human eye uses the relative size of objects as a gauge of depth, the large disparity in size between foreground and background objects creates the illusion of greater depth.

Most commercial films contain scenes shot on location; for example, in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) the Bradbury building grounds the film’s futuristic Los Angeles setting in a familiar, present-day structure. Locations may contain recognizable physical landmarks, such as the Grand Canyon in *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott 1991).

Whether shooting on a soundstage or on location, filmmakers may carefully craft a recognizable “storyworld”. They can make reference to familiar, human-made objects to convey the significance of place. One example is director Franklin Schaffner’s use of the Liberty statue in the outdoor setting of the film *Apocalypse Now*. For example, the outdoor set of the Bradbury building grounds the film’s futuristic Los Angeles setting in a familiar, present-day structure. Locations may contain recognizable physical landmarks, such as the Grand Canyon in *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott 1991).

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of the Statue of Liberty in Planet of the Apes (1968; fig 5.4) to reveal for the protagonist George Taylor (Charlton Heston) the fact that human civilization has been eclipsed by the society of the apes. The destruction of this statue, and all it symbolizes, drives home the grim reality of this futuristic dystopia, where human liberty has been buried. Shooting on location does not necessarily mean filming where the story is set. Francis Ford Coppola filmed his Vietnam War epic Apocalypse Now in the Philippine rainforest.

Filmmakers also use computer-generated imagery (CGI) to create settings: the ocean in Titanic (James Cameron 1997) was generated by computers. Scott Ross, of Industrial Light and Magic, says “the role that we need to play, and we really try hard to do so, is that we help define what the director is trying to get across on film” (Arden). Deciding whether to construct sets, to use locations, and/or to take advantage of newer computer technologies is part of the creative challenge of filmmaking. These decisions also relate to the business of filmmaking, as location shooting is often complex, time-consuming, unpredictable, and more expensive than shooting on a set.

**Describing Setting: Visual and Spatial Attributes**

The visual characteristics of a setting evoke responses from the audience. Do events take place inside buildings or outdoors? Are settings living spaces, work places, or public spaces? Are they spacious or cramped, sunny and bright, or dim and shadowy? Are they full of bits and pieces or empty?

At first glance, an open, bright, exterior setting might suggest limitless possibilities, as in the rock climbing scene that opens Mission:Impossible 2 (John Woo 2000), whereas a dark, cramped interior, like that in the opening of Memento, may connote entrapment. But open space can also serve as the site of banality or dread, or both, as it does in the rural Kansas setting of Capote, where writer Truman Capote investigates a shocking murder (fig. 5.5). The contextual use of setting is important to interpreting mise en scène. The context for interpretation includes the actions taking place there as well as the way the setting relates to other settings used throughout the film.

The director or location scout chooses particular spaces for their visual and spatial attributes. Those qualities inevitably transmit cultural meanings as well as emotional implications. The stately but hollow beach house in Interiors (Woody Allen 1978) reflects material wealth and emotional distance. The nondescript apartments in Office Space (Mike Judge 1999) convey the central characters' sterile, homogeneous home environments, which mirror their gray work cubicles. Settings need not be ornately decorated or breathtakingly beautiful to offer insight into the lives of characters.
The Functions of Setting

The primary functions of setting are to establish time and place, to introduce ideas and themes, and to create mood. In a period film, the setting recreates a place and time; visual details are especially important when the time period is essential to the film’s story and themes. Historical research contributed to the meticulous depiction of New York City in the 1870s in Martin Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence* (1993), a film about the struggle between love and obligation in high society. The settings, which speak to the ritualized behavior of this group of people, were integral to the representation of the protagonist’s decision to remain with his wife and suppress his passionate love for another woman—a choice that might be difficult for contemporary audiences to understand. Director Scorsese said, “the setting’s important only to show why this love is impossible” (Cocks and Scorsese, p. vii). Even the most “accurate” representations are subject to creative license. In the case of *The Age of Innocence*, the city of Troy, New York, was used as an exterior location for action set in Manhattan.

*Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash 1990), filmed on location on the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands, accurately depicts the places where the Gullah culture thrived. The ocean setting introduces ideas and themes: it reinforces the connection between the Peazant family and their African ancestors and their separation from the world of the mainland U.S.

Certain genres are linked to settings and time periods. Westerns are located in the American Southwest in the late nineteenth century, whereas gangster films typically evoke a modern, urban environment. Other genres, such as romantic comedies, are less dependent on geography or historical period.

As with any element of filmmaking, directors sometimes choose to use settings that work against expectations. Although musicals can take place anywhere, the singing and dancing that define the genre often take place in stylized, theatrical settings. But musicals such as *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier 2000) and *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry 2000) contain numbers choreographed amid urban neighborhoods (fig. 5.6), factories, and prisons. These films inventively test the genre’s boundaries by emphasizing the incongruity of bleak settings as the backdrop for musical extravaganzas.

Settings need not refer to existing locations or actual historical periods: instead they may evoke a generic sense of place or stand for implicit ideas. The large, bustling, but unspecified city in F.W. Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1927) is important mainly because it provides a contrast to the bucolic countryside where the main characters live. The city is never named. In this film, it is less important to know the specific location of the city than to recognize it as a source of excitement that

5.6 Dancing in the streets in *Billy Elliot*. 

Chapter 5: Mise en Scène
ultimately allows a husband and wife to rediscover their love for one another.

Settings help to determine the mood of a scene or an entire film. In Crash, a film about the damaging effects of racism in the United States, dusty roads and car-clogged freeways set the stage for numerous hostile interactions among residents of Los Angeles (see fig. 6.24).

In Memento, a character named Leonard (Guy Pearce) struggles to remember his own past. Production designer Patti Podesta develops a motif of wavy glass and translucent plastic throughout the film's mise en scène (fig. 5.7). One critic writes that "the ideas behind the question of memory are reflected through her design" (Mottram, p. 137). Leonard's constant confusion is conveyed through visual details of setting.

TECHNIQUES IN PRACTICE

**Same Film, Different Settings**

The significance of any setting derives not only from its visual and spatial qualities, but also from the way it functions in relation to other settings in the film. In Full Metal Jacket, the dramatic contrast between the film's two primary settings generates ideas and develops themes. In the first section, the rigid order of the Parris Island, South Carolina, marine training camp is emphasized by geometrical compositions, including the precise right angles formed by the men when they run in formation and formed by the vertical columns in the barracks. The columns look rigid, upright, and homogeneous—mirroring the appearance of the two lines of men standing in front of them, all wearing identical white underwear (fig. 5.8). This physical parallel compares the men with architecture and suggests at least two ideas. The first is that these men form the structural support of the entire military organization. A second idea hints at the purpose of the rigorous and dehumanizing training: like the blank, faceless columns, the men must sacrifice their individuality to become marines.

This ordered setting contrasts sharply with the settings in Vietnam. The latter suggest the breakdown of military discipline and social order. As the marines move into Hue City, the men are neither geometrical nor precise: they amble in ragged clusters, moving hap-hazardly, not in straight lines (fig. 5.9). The frame is full of diverse objects arranged in a random fashion: soldiers, tanks, trash, and hollowed-out burning buildings.
5.9 (left) In combat, the lines of marines fall into disarray.

5.10 (right) The temporary restoration of order is reflected by the linear formation of the marching marines.

The buildings stand in direct contrast to the pristine interior and supporting columns of the Parris Island barracks. Under fire, in the field, the hierarchical chain of command breaks down, and the marines take actions and make decisions in the heat of the moment. The changing mise en scène reflects and enhances the shifts between order and chaos.

After the battle, the film's final scene shows the soldiers marching toward the river, singing the Mickey Mouse theme song. Private Joker's voice-over tells of his relief at being alive. These closing moments show the soldiers marching toward the same destination. They are not in perfect geometric formation, but they are moving in an orderly way in the same direction (fig. 5.10). Because they are then shown in silhouette, they all look the same. The men are anonymous, as they were in their underwear in the barracks. The sense of a temporary restoration of order comes not only from the cessation of combat and the voice-over, but also from a mise en scène that subtly reintroduces some visual attributes from the first half of the film.

TECHNIQUES IN PRACTICE

Same Setting, Different Film

Another way to evaluate settings is to consider the way that one setting is used to achieve different effects in different movies. Ideas and feelings that viewers associate with a setting in the abstract may not apply to any specific film's use of that setting. For example, the beach may spur associations of light-heartedness, leisure, and freedom. But the significance of that environment in a film depends on the way it functions in the narrative and relates to other visual techniques. Beach settings have played important yet very different roles in the

In *The Piano* (Jane Campion 1993) Scottish settler Stewart (Sam Neill) leaves the piano that his mail-bride Ada (Holly Hunter) has brought with her from Scotland behind on the New Zealand beach after she arrives there with her belongings. When she returns to that spot with Mr. Baines (Harvey Keitel) and her daughter Flora (Anna Pacquin), her joy at being reunited with her beloved instrument (fig. 5.11) is enhanced by the setting. The beach’s bright open space offers a visual contrast to the dense, green forest and the dim, wood-walled interiors of the settlers’ homes (fig. 5.12). Ada smiles and moves fluidly as she plays the piano and Flora dances wildly to the music. Ada and Flora’s movements and smiling facial expressions underscore feelings of openness and provide insight into their emotions. In this film, the beach represents, among other things, the intense pleasure of creative self-expression.

*Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha 1994) also features a beach setting. Its inclusion in the film’s title signals its central importance. The story follows a diverse group of South Asian women as they take a day trip to Bristol, England. In comparison to the cramped bus ride in the opening of the film, the beach offers freedom of movement and privacy (fig. 5.13). These are thematically important because the mature women in the group, who adhere to Indian traditions, often disapprove of the younger women, who have grown up in Britain and have adopted Western behavior.

But the beach is not a space of vast, wild, unspoiled beauty as it is in *The Piano*; alongside expanses of sand, fast food restaurants and a strip club appear. The women exhibit various levels of comfort with the informality of the beach and its tourist attractions, highlighting the theme of the generational and cultural differences that divide the women.

The final scene of *The 400 Blows* finds the troubled young protagonist, Antoine Doinel, running from a juvenile detention center to the beach. The setting seems incongruous after the urban streets that have served as the character’s usual environment. The beach does not promise the unfettered freedom conventionally associated with that setting. Instead, the slowness of Antoine’s movements and a final freeze frame render the scene
ambiguous (fig. 5.14). Will he escape to freedom? Does the ocean signify an opportunity for rebirth, or does it represent yet another boundary? The uncertainty of the final moment on the beach contributes to the film’s non-traditional narrative structure.

In the opening scene of Black Girl (“La Noire de . . .”; Ousmane Sembene 1966), a young Senegalese woman named Diouana (Mbis-sine Thérèse Diop) leaves Senegal, a former French colony, and travels to France by ocean liner to work for a wealthy family. Once in Nice, however, she realizes that her function is not to care for the children, as she had been told, but to serve as maid and cook. The family neglects to pay her salary and their constant demands make her a virtual prisoner in the stifling apartment (fig. 5.15). She has few opportunities to leave the apartment, much less explore the beach. Depressed and desperate, Diouana decides to take her own life.

Under the circumstances, a beach scene depicting carefree vacationers who sun themselves and read newspapers (fig. 5.16) must be interpreted ironically. Only the privileged are permitted to frolic on the beach; their servants remain inside. The scene of the beach highlights Diouana’s exploitation and her invisibility.

In these examples, beach settings produce meaning within a specific context. In Black Girl, the beach represents a dead end rather than a site of transcendence, as it seems to be for Ada in The Piano. In Black Girl and Bhaji on the Beach, the beach setting highlights cultural conflicts. In The 400 Blows, the beach setting and the freeze frame raise more questions about where Antoine is headed than they answer.
The Human Figure

As the above examples suggest, actors' performances contribute a great deal to a film's meaning. Most narrative feature films tell stories about human beings and the conflicts they face. Casting (the selection of actors), acting style, and the placement and movement of figures influence the viewer's response to fictional characters, their strengths and weaknesses, and their hopes and fears.

Casting

Choosing actors is one of the most important decisions a director can make. Usually a casting director organizes auditions, but "A-list" actors are generally cast without the indignity of an audition. Their agents negotiate with directors and studio executives, sometimes discussing the star's wishes regarding the casting of other actors and desired changes in the script.

Well-known stars can earn more than $20 million per film, but they may be worth it because attaching a popular celebrity to a project helps to secure financing. Some prominent actors occasionally work "for scale" (the minimum wage for professional actors) if they like a particular script or because they enjoy the experience of making low-budget films.

Filmmakers may be limited in their casting choices for commercial reasons. Alfonso Cuarón—director of Y Tu Mamá También ("And Your Mother As Well" 2001)—was hired to direct the third Harry Potter film, Prisoner of Azkaban (2004), but was not permitted to hire different actors or alter the production design because that would have risked alienating the fans of the popular Harry Potter series. The practice of typecasting—repeatedly casting an actor in the same kind of role—offers benefits to stars and studios. Stars sometimes prefer roles that will play to their strengths and reinforce their image. At the same time, because actors' fees represent a large percentage of production costs, and because audiences often go to movies to see favorite stars, studio executives prefer to minimize risk and to stick with a "sure thing" in terms of casting.

So, for example, Harrison Ford portrayed an ironic swashbuckler in both the Star Wars and the Indiana Jones series in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hugh Grant became a star playing the upper-class, aloof, but self-deprecating romantic hero in Four Weddings and a Funeral (Mike Newell 1993) and Notting Hill (Roger Michell 1999).

Sometimes actors deliberately choose roles that work against type. This can be a risky proposition, since fans may refuse to accept this shift from their familiar frame of reference. Meg Ryan, who became a household name playing winsome romantic leads in comedies such as When Harry Met Sally (Rob Reiner 1989), Sleepless in Seattle (Nora Ephron 1993), and You've Got Mail (Nora Ephron 1998), found it difficult to depart from that image. Her When a Man Loves a Woman (Luis Mandoki 1994), where she played an alcoholic, Addicted to Love (Griffin Dunne 1997), a black comedy, and Proof of Life (Taylor Hackford 2000), an action-adventure film, were box office failures. This
is not to say that actors are incapable of moving beyond typecasting, but that commercial considerations may limit their opportunities to do so.

Acting Style

Actors bring a public image and their previous roles with them, but they also bring training in a particular acting style. In early cinema, stage acting techniques influenced film acting and a highly emotive, almost pantomime style prevailed. In silent films, facial and bodily expressions were the primary means of conveying the story. Whereas actors on the stage rely on physical presence and projection to a live audience, film actors contain their expressiveness for the camera to pick up.

The most influential school of film acting is method acting, a style based on the theories of Russian theater director Constantin Stanislavski, who brought a new, psychological realism to character depiction in the early twentieth century. “The Method” was further developed by the Group Theatre of the 1930s, committed to presenting plays to promote social awareness and activism. Many Group Theatre practitioners went on to become stage and film actors and directors associated with the Actors’ Studio, founded in New York in 1947 by Lee Strasberg. Method actors inhabit the psychological reality of their characters. They immerse themselves in the feelings of the character and then connect those emotions to their own experiences to realize the performance. Prominent method actors include Marlon Brando, James Dean (fig. 5.17), Julie Harris, and Robert De Niro. Contemporary actors continue to use method acting techniques. In order to prepare for a role as a non-drinking cop in L.A. Confidential (Curtis Hanson 1997), notorious boozer Russell Crowe (fig. 5.18) stopped drinking alcohol for six months. Christian Bale lost 63 pounds to play the role of a man who never sleeps in The Machinist (Brad Anderson 2004), and Hilary Swank reportedly lived as a man to prepare for her role in Boys Don’t Cry (Kimberly Peirce 1999).

Film scholar Barry King identifies several categories of actors, based on the way their performances are perceived by audiences. Impersonation describes the work of actors who seem to disappear into their roles: actors with this ability to transform themselves include Meryl Streep, Sean Penn, and Julianne Moore. Personification refers to the work of actors who remain themselves or always play themselves and may have scripts written specifically to exploit their particular attributes. Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Reese Witherspoon, and Tom Cruise belong in this category. Technical acting refers to the mastery of external details of a character such as an accent or physical trait, as evident in Peter Sellers’ and Jim Carrey’s work.

Actors’ performances also depend on the narrative: protagonists are presented in lead roles; their sidekicks, friends, and other lesser personages are played out in supporting roles. Character actors often play the same supporting roles in many films, but they generally do not achieve the widespread recognition enjoyed by lead actors. Examples of character actors include Franklin Pangborn, Steve Buscemi, Thelma Ritter, Phillip Seymour Hoffman, and Maggie Smith. Extras are hired to appear anonymously, often in crowd scenes (although...
computer graphics allow special effects technicians to create crowd scenes in post-production). Cameos are brief appearances by well-known actors playing themselves. Ensemble acting is based on an equitable distribution of the work and the glory. Directors such as Robert Altman, Woody Allen, Mike Leigh, and Christopher Guest often collaborate with large ensemble casts.

**Acting Brechtian: Distancing the Audience**

An actor's skill in bring a character to life—his ability to make audience members believe in the character—is essential to involving viewers in a realist film. But some filmmakers reject the conventions of realism. Directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Jean-Luc Godard, and Alain Resnais have explored the film medium as a process of representation. Uninterested in the psychological believability of characters, they draw on German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's ideas about acting, which emphasize the artifice, not the authenticity, of performance. Brecht's Epic Theater was an attempt to stimulate the audience's critical thought processes, not their emotions, by calling attention to the aesthetic and political frameworks that produce stories and characters. Brechtian distancing refers to the destruction of the theatrical illusion for the purpose of eliciting an intellectual response in the audience.

An example of a Brechtian approach is David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). The actors' performances are intentionally opaque: they do not reveal their characters' inner thoughts or emotions. Rita (Laura Harring) is a blank slate because a car accident has robbed her of her identity. Betty (Naomi Watts) assumes the role of a Nancy Drew detective to help Rita. Adam (Justin Theroux)
acts the role of a film director as scripted by powerful movie moguls. Ironically, in the one scene where viewers might feel connected to Betty, she is reading for a part in a film. In the audition—a performance—Betty expresses more emotion than she does in the rest of the film. Lynch’s use of anti-realist acting, combined with a fragmented narrative that originates in one character’s dreams, forces viewers to pull away from the story and constantly to ask questions about the “reality” of the characters and events. Even a simple home or office setting is treated like a theater stage (fig. 5.19).

**Actors’ Bodies: Figure Placement**

In rehearsal, directors work with the actors to block the action, establishing movements that change their physical relationships with other actors and with the camera. **Figure placement and movement**—what audiences see on screen—can produce artful compositions, provide information about characters and their relationships, develop motifs, and reinforce themes.

Directors treat actors’ bodies as elements of the visual field. Figures who tower over other characters, for example, may dominate them in some other way in the film, whereas characters who meet each other on the same physical level (high/low) and plane of depth (foreground/background) may exhibit a more equitable relationship. Characters who occupy the foreground gain visual prominence through their apparent proximity to the viewer. They may assume a greater narrative importance as well. The analysis below looks at how figure placement in Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* conveys the ongoing predicament of the film’s central character.

**TECHNIQUES IN PRACTICE**

**Figure Placement in Citizen Kane**

A scene in *Citizen Kane* illustrates the way the careful positioning of actors produces meaning. In the Colorado boarding house scene, characters are positioned in ways that provide insight into their relationships and suggest Charles Foster Kane’s motivations later in his life.

As the Kanes and Mr. Thatcher (George Coulouris) discuss Charles’s future, Mary Kane (Agnes Moorehead) sits very close to the camera. The banker Thatcher is seated behind her, while her husband, Jim Kane (Harry Shannon), moves between the foreground and middle ground of the shot. Charles, who can be heard as he plays outside in the snow, is visible through the window. The prominence of Mary Kane underlines her position of...
author. She makes the decision to send her son Charles away to grow up as Thatcher’s ward, believing that she is acting in his best interests.

Mary and Jim Kane disagree about the decision. Their difference of opinion on this matter is signified by dialogue as well as figure placement. Moving around in the middle ground, Jim mutters his opposition to Mary’s plan. After he learns that the agreement with the bank will provide him with a sum of money, however, he decisively walks away from Mary and Thatcher. He resigns himself to the decision Mary has made with the statement, “It’s all for the best.” His movement is closely linked to his self-serving line of dialogue. He closes the window, severing his relationship with his son Charles, who can no longer be heard.

Mary immediately stands up, moves to the window, and opens it. She calls to Charles as she tells no one in particular that she has had his trunk packed for a week. Opening the window reverses the action Jim has taken, suggesting the tension between them. Mary is troubled by her decision to send the boy away, a fact that becomes evident when she re-establishes the connection to her son. These movements and dialogue contradict her earlier stoicism, providing insight into her mixed feelings. The viewer gains access to Mary’s emotions through her movement and proximity to the camera.

Similarly, Charles’s movements compellingly narrate the early years of his life in visual terms. Even when Charles can be seen through the window, he is positioned between the other characters. When the scene moves outside the boarding house, he moves back and forth between the three adults as each one of them claims his attention (fig. 5.20). Ultimately, after thrusting his “X” sled at Thatcher (an act repeated symbolically throughout the film), Charles ends up in his mother’s arms, but that protection will be short-lived. He will leave with Thatcher that afternoon.

The figure placement and movement convey the idea that Mary is the most powerful figure in the boy’s life. As a child, he has no say in his own future. As an adult, Charles’s desire for power and control is linked to his powerlessness in this life-changing moment. When Charles perceives that others are exerting control over him, he reacts strongly, as he does, for example, when political rival Jim Gettys (Ray Collins), his wife, Emily (Ruth Warrick), and his friend Susan Alexander (Dorothy Comingore) try to convince him to withdraw from the governor’s race. Useful comparisons can be made between the figure
placement in the two scenes, beginning with Charles’s location in the depth of the frame, surrounded by others. Recurring patterns of figure placement visually convey one of the important questions concerning Charles Foster Kane: is he in charge of his life, or are other people making decisions for him?

**Actors’ Bodies: Costumes and Props**

In the Colorado boarding house scene, the clothing that Mary, Jim, Thatcher, and Charles wear helps to define each of them. There are obvious differences between Jim’s homespun vest and trousers and Thatcher’s formal attire and top hat. Costumes provide information about time and place, but, more importantly, they express social milieu and personal style.

Costumes cannot be simply taken at face value, but must be interpreted in the context of the film. In *Bhaji on the Beach*, the older women wear traditional Indian dress and the younger women wear contemporary English garments; thus, clothing visually demarcates the generational divide (see fig. 5.13).

In *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the three Tenenbaum children wear the same clothing as adults as they had when they were growing up, humorously suggesting their arrested development. Ritchie (Luke Wilson), the tennis prodigy, wears tennis sweatbands, and Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow) wears a fur coat. Chaz (Ben Stiller) wears a warm-up suit all the time and dresses his two sons the same way.

Clothing is a highly personal matter. Characters wear their clothes on their bodies; they are literally attached to their wardrobe. In the modern gothic *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder 1950), down-and-out writer Joe Gillis (William Holden) undergoes a sartorial transformation when he meets the Hollywood has-been, Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson). Desmond still dresses the part of a glamorous film star and buys expensive suits for Joe so he can accompany her around Hollywood. Joe’s apparent rise in status occurs at the expense of his integrity, however. His new clothes are a symbol of economic dependence. His costume transition indicates not a sudden stroke of good fortune but a loss of control over his own life. One store clerk treats Joe like a gigolo, snidely telling him to choose the more expensive coat, since the lady is paying for it (fig. 5.21).
Finally, clothing (and the lack thereof) carries cultural implications. Iranian director Tamineh Milani’s films about the effects of the Islamic revolution of the late 1970s depict women wearing the veil (fig. 5.22). While many women at that time wore the veil to show support for the Islamic cause, just as many women preferred to continue wearing Western-style clothing. But Milani could not depict the diversity of the era because government restrictions in place when she made her film prevented filmmakers from showing women without veils.

Like costumes, props establish character and hint at change and development. Props are moveable objects owned or used by characters and range from automobiles to a child’s teddy bear. The degree of narrative or symbolic importance of props varies: six-shooters, parasols, and lassos are standard props for Western films, just as machine guns and getaway cars are central to the gangster genre. None of these items necessarily carries any symbolic weight. Some props are purely functional and do not enrich the exploration of character or contribute to a motif.

But in Vittorio De Sica’s Bicycle Thieves (“Ladri di biciclette”; 1948) (long mistranslated as Bicycle Thief), the bicycle is not only a means of transportation for Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani), but also a symbol of the desperate situation facing the people of postwar Italy. When Ricci’s bicycle is stolen, he loses his job. Similarly, in The Station Agent (Thomas McCarthy 2003), Fin’s (Peter Dinklage) most prized possession—his pocket watch—represents more than simply a functional tool. It symbolizes his slightly old-fashioned affinity for trains as well as his desire for punctuality, predictability, and order (fig. 5.23).
Actors' Bodies: Makeup

Makeup and hairstyles establish time period, reveal character traits, and signal changes in characters. Makeup was used in early cinema simply to make actors' faces visible. But improvements in film stock and lighting mean that makeup is now used to enhance or minimize an actor's prominent features or to simulate youth or advanced age.

Makeup and prostheses (three-dimensional makeup that is attached to actors' faces and bodies) can alter an actor's appearance so that he or she resembles a historical figure and enhance a film's claim to historical accuracy. This was the case when Nicole Kidman played the role of novelist Virginia Woolf in The Hours (Stephen Daldry 2002). Kidman was fitted with a prosthetic nose (fig. 5.24) to evoke Woolf's unique facial characteristics. Woolf's face may be familiar to many viewers because photographs of the writer have been published in books she wrote as well as in books others have written about her (fig. 5.25).

In Monster (2003), Patti Jenkins's drama about serial killer Aileen Wuornos, actress Charlize Theron sat for several hours of makeup application every day. Makeup artist Toni G applied liquid latex to Theron's face to create the look of sun-damaged skin. Theron recreated Wuornos emotionally and physically, and she earned an Academy Award for her performance.

Makeup and prostheses (three-dimensional makeup attached to faces and bodies) may produce comical or frightening effects. For his role in Roxanne (Fred Schepisi 1987), Steve Martin wore a huge prosthetic nose, an essential physical

5.24 (left) In The Hours a prosthetic nose changes Nicole Kidman's face.
5.25 (right) The novelist Virginia Woolf.
feature of his character, C.D. (a reference to Cyrano de Bergerac, the hero of the original play by Edmond Rostand, on which the film is based). In the Austin Powers films, Mike Myers plays several characters (Powers, Dr. Evil, and Fat Bastard) with the help of makeup, costumes, hairstyle, and prostheses (figs. 5.26, 5.27).

Horror film monsters and science fiction creatures pose great challenges for makeup artists and costume designers. To become the monster in Frankenstein (James Whale 1931), Boris Karloff sat for many hours while technicians applied layers of makeup and prostheses; his bulky costume included weights in his shoes, which helped him create the monster's distinctive shuffle (fig. 5.28). In Van Helsing (Stephen Sommers, 2004), Shuler Hensley wore at least fifteen facial prostheses and leg extensions that added more than eight inches to his height to re-create the terrifying image of the Frankenstein monster. In The Grinch (Ron Howard 2000), Jim Carrey not only donned a full-body
Lon Chaney’s physical performance as Alonzo in *The Unknown*. costume that transformed him into a furry green monster, but also wore contact lenses that dramatically changed the color of his eyes.

Digital effects that are added in post-production also modify an actor’s appearance. In *The Mask* (Charles Russell 1994), **morphing** accomplishes Jim Carrey’s grotesque transformation. Images of actors may be altered in a variety of ways using computer graphics programs: for example, an image can be scanned into the computer and unwanted elements digitally “painted out” of the image or the background.

An actor may undertake serious physical changes in order to play a role. Renee Zellweger gained some much-publicized weight to play the title character in two *Bridget Jones* films. Jared Leto lost weight to portray a heroin addict in *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky 2000), as did Adrian Brody when he played a Holocaust survivor in *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski 2002). Silent film star Lon Chaney was known as the “man of a thousand faces”; he earned that reputation because he physically transformed himself for each role. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Wallace Worsley 1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (Rupert Julian 1925), he depicts outcasts with physical disabilities. As Alonzo in *The Unknown* (Tod Browning 1927), he pretends to be armless, then has both arms amputated in an unsuccessful and pitiful attempt to win the love of a fellow circus performer (fig. 5.29).

**TECHNIQUES IN PRACTICE**

**Physicality in Raging Bull and Ali**

When Robert De Niro convinced Martin Scorsese to film *Raging Bull* (1980) and to cast him as boxer Jake La Motta, the actor understood the importance of rendering the psychology and emotions of the character through his physicality. In the film, La Motta is obsessed with maintaining his body at the peak of perfection. The film’s grueling fight scenes required De Niro to train, develop his stamina, and mold his physique: the actor even entered amateur boxing matches. La Motta’s body obsession even extends to experiments with sexual temptation. He asks his wife, Vickie (Cathy Moriarty), to seduce him, but then resists in order to prove he has control over his body.

As he ages, it becomes evident that La Motta’s self-control is a form of narcissism: he uses his powerful physique to control others. He begins to use his body aggressively outside the ring. When jealousy overcomes him, he physically attacks friends, his wife, and his brother. He intentionally destroys an opponent’s face because his wife admired the boxer’s looks. Mary Pat Kelly writes that De Niro’s La Motta is “so unconscious of his own feelings and emotions that he can speak only through violence” (Kelly,
In the later stages of his life, La Motta indulges himself by drinking, smoking, and overeating, all of which contribute to his grossly overweight body. Both his youthful physical perfection and his aging decrepitude are attributable to his complete self-absorption. De Niro's physical transformation has inspired actors ever since. Commenting on his intensive training for his role as Achilles in Troy, Brad Pitt remarked, "Ever since De Niro put on 60 pounds for Raging Bull, that set the course. He screwed us all, really" ("Brad Pitt").

A slightly different challenge faced Will Smith in taking on the role of Muhammad Ali, the former world heavyweight boxing champion. In Ali (2001), director Michael Mann decided to limit the plot events to the ten years leading up to Ali's historic "Rumble in the Jungle"—the challenge match in Zaire where he recaptured his title from George Foreman. Concentrating on a shorter timespan in the boxer's life did not necessarily make Smith's job simpler, however. Like La Motta, Ali's self-expression extended beyond the physical contest inside the ring.

Like De Niro, Smith trained physically for the role, putting on 35 pounds. But just as important as rendering Ali's graceful athleticism was Smith's ability to capture Ali's distinctive manner of speaking and presenting himself in public. Famous for his social consciousness and his rhyming zingers, Ali was a public figure with an intellectual approach and a political perspective on racism and the Vietnam War. Smith paid particular attention to Ali's vocal qualities: the slightly raspy voice, the rhythmic manner of speaking, and the ironic tone. New Yorker film critic David Denby writes that Smith's performance "gets the right Kentucky music in [Ali's] voice" and captures the "slow moving meditativeness of a big bodied man" (Denby, p. 27). De Niro and Smith were successful in their depictions of boxers not only because they undertook physical training, but also because they considered the way each man used his physicality in his boxing career and in his life outside the ring.

Lighting

Light is an essential requirement of filmmaking. Without light entering the camera lens, no image would be recorded. Lighting is an element of mise en scène because it illuminates the set and the actors and can be designed to create certain moods and effects. But it is also related to issues of cinematography, since the photochemical properties of film stock, the use of lenses and filters, and lab processing techniques all affect the look of a film. Lighting furthers the audience's understanding of characters, underscores particular actions, develops themes, and establishes mood.

Light exhibits three attributes: quality (hard or soft), placement (the direction from which the light strikes the subject), and contrast (high or low). Hard light,
Harsh lighting emphasizes the imperfections of Michael Caine’s face.

Soft, diffuse light minimizes details and flatters Jayne Mansfield.

produced by a relatively small light source positioned close to the subject, tends to be unflattering because it creates deep shadows and emphasizes surface imperfections (fig. 5.30). Soft light, from a larger source that is diffused (scattered) over a bigger area or reflected off a surface before it strikes the subject, minimizes facial details, including wrinkles (fig. 5.31). Unless a character is intended to appear plain or unattractive, cinematographers use soft light so that the actors’ faces appear in the most attractive way. Skilled Hollywood cinematographers produce flattering renderings of stars by taking special care with quality and the positioning of light sources.

Available light (or natural light) from the sun can be hard or soft, depending on time of day, time of year, angle of the sun, cloud cover, and geographical location. It may also vary in color. According to Sandi Sissel, Director of Photography for Mira Nair’s Salaam Bombay! (1988), “You can take a lens with absolutely no filtration and point it, and you’ll get footage back from Moscow that will be grayish blue and you will get footage back from India that will be golden” (LoBrutto, p. 175).

One reason why early U.S. filmmakers settled in southern California in the 1910s was the golden-hued quality of the light there. Cinematographers generally agree that the most beautiful light falls during what cinematographer Nestor Almendros has called the “magic hour”: just before sunrise and just after sunset, when the diffusion of the sun’s light produces glowing images (fig. 5.32).

The direction of light (or positioning of lighting sources) also produces a variety of different effects. A light source directly in front of the subject (frontal lighting) creates a flat effect, washing out facial detail and creating shadows directly behind the subject (fig. 5.33). Lighting from either side of the subject produces a sculptural effect, rendering three dimensions by making volume and texture visible (fig. 5.34). Lighting from behind separates the subject from the background (fig. 5.35).

Most filmmakers supplement natural lighting with artificial light for greater control over the illumination of
the image. Documentary and low-budget feature films, however, often favor natural light, their choices partly dictated by consideration of cost and limitations of the shooting environment (particularly important for documentary filmmakers who wish to minimize the disruptiveness of their presence). Independent filmmaker Lenny Lipton pithily sums up the commercial film industry's approach to lighting. He writes, "If you are interested in lighting a bottle of cola so that it glimmers and glistens, or if your concern is to light a starlet's face so that she looks fantastically like a piece of stone, you will go to very nearly insane lengths to control the lighting" (Lipton, p. 218).

In the Hollywood studio era, a system of lighting was developed that would allow cinematographers to do just that. **Three-point lighting** has remained a standard approach to lighting. The method is designed to ensure the
Side lighting sculpts George Clooney's face in Good Night and Good Luck.

Backlighting in Batman Begins (Christopher Nolan 2005) adds drama to Batman's descent down a spiral staircase.

Judy Garland: precise effects of three-point lighting.

Kate Winslet is artfully lit.

Vivien Leigh was known for her characteristic gleaming eyes.

5.34 (left) Side lighting sculpts George Clooney's face in Good Night and Good Luck.

5.35 (right) Backlighting in Batman Begins (Christopher Nolan 2005) adds drama to Batman's descent down a spiral staircase.

5.36 (left) Judy Garland: precise effects of three-point lighting.

5.37 (center) Kate Winslet is artfully lit.

5.38 (right) Vivien Leigh was known for her characteristic gleaming eyes.

Chapter 5: Mise en Scène

appropriate level of illumination and to eliminate shadows (fig. 5.36). The primary source of light is the key light, the frontal lighting source aimed at the subject from a range of positions. The key light can be set up next to the camera or moved away from it on either side, approaching a 45° angle on the camera-subject axis. The closer the key light gets to 45°, the more the subject will be illuminated from the side, which produces sculptural effects (fig. 5.37).

The fill light is a light (or light-reflecting surface) positioned on the opposite side of the subject from the key light. Its purpose is to eliminate the shadows cast by the key light and to regulate the degree of contrast. The back light (aimed at the subject from behind and above) visually separates subject from background. When used with minimal key or fill lighting, the backlight produces a silhouette effect.
In addition to these three sources of light, eye lights are aimed directly into the eyes of an actor to produce a gleam in the eye (fig. 5.38). These are also called obie lights, named for Merle Oberon, the actress for whom they were developed. Side lights or kicker lights model the subject in three dimensions by illuminating it from either side.

Image contrast—one of the most important factors in establishing mood—depends on the relative intensity of the key light to the fill light (key/fill), also known as the lighting ratio. **High-key lighting** refers to a lighting design in which the key to fill ratio is 2:1 or lower. In this configuration, the fill light is nearly as intense as the key light. Thus it eliminates virtually all of the shadows cast by the key light and provides an even illumination of the subject, with most facial details washed out (figs. 5.39, 5.43). High-key lighting tends to create a hopeful mood, appropriate for light comedies and for cheery scenes in musicals such as *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise 1965).

**Natural-key lighting** (or normal lighting) is produced with a ratio of key to fill light between 4:1 and 8:1. Here the key light is somewhat more intense than the fill light, so the fill is no longer able to eliminate every shadow (fig. 5.40).

**Low-key lighting** is produced by increasing the intensity of the key light relative to the fill. In low-key lighting, the lighting ratio (key/fill) is between 16:1 and 32:1. The much greater intensity of the key light makes it impossible for the fill to eliminate shadows, producing an image with a number of shadows (often on characters’ faces) and high contrast (many grades of lightness and darkness; fig. 5.41).

5.39 High-key lighting sets the optimistic mood of *The Sound of Music.*
5.40 (left) Natural-key lighting in Jim Jarmusch’s *Broken Flowers* (2005).
5.41 (right) The somber tone of Clint Eastwood’s *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) is reinforced by low-key lighting.
Low-key lighting often sets an ominous tone in horror films such as Saw (James Wan 2004).

Katharine Hepburn in the center of the frame in Holiday.

Composition

The last aspect of mise en scène examined in this chapter is composition, defined as the visual arrangement of the objects, actors, and space within the frame. A filmmaker’s treatment of composition may reiterate underlying themes and ideas, but may also be chosen to produce a striking visual effect.

Balance and Symmetry

The space of the frame can be thought of as a two-dimensional space, where principles of visual art can be brought to bear. One important principle is to ensure there is balance or symmetry within the frame. The frame can be partitioned horizontally, on a left-right axis, and vertically, from top to bottom. A balanced composition has an equitable distribution of bright and dark areas, striking colors, objects and/or figures. In classical Hollywood films, symmetry was often achieved by centering actors in the shot (see fig. 5.43).

In Holiday, the two figures on either side of Katharine Hepburn, as well as the play of light and dark, balance the frame and suggest both harmony and order.

Although the main character in The Pianist (fig. 5.44) occupies the center of the frame in the scene in which he escapes from the Warsaw apartment where he has been hiding, the symmetrical composition does not imply harmony. In this case, parallel lines lead the viewer’s eye into the depth of the frame to a vanishing point. Thus, the composition emphasizes the overwhelming immensity of the destruction.

By contrast, an unbalanced composition leads the viewer’s eye in a particular direction by giving greater emphasis to a bright or dark area of the frame.
frame, to an object or actor, or to an area of color. Asymmetry may suggest a lack of equilibrium, but, as with all aspects of mise en scène, the composition must be interpreted in context.

The closing shot of Michelangelo Antonioni's L'Avventura (1960) divides the frame into two parts: on the right, a flat wall appears; on the left, a man and woman sit with their backs to the camera and stare into the distance, where a mountain appears (fig. 5.45). This composition creates several contrasts: the wall seems to have only two dimensions, whereas the left side of the frame offers depth. The uniform texture of the wall is at odds with the way the couple's dense, dark clothing distinguishes them from the horizon. The flat surface and right angles of the wall contrast with the diagonal formed by the seated man and the standing woman. These visual tensions result in the viewer repeatedly scanning the image without his eyes coming to rest in any one place, a form of visual open-endedness.

**Lines and Diagonals**

Graphic elements such as lines play a role in composition. The human eye tends to respond to diagonal lines, vertical lines, and horizontal lines in decreasing degrees of emphasis. All three may be used as compositional elements, but a diagonal line carries the most visual weight.

A startling diagonal composition opens Nicholas Ray's Rebel without a Cause. Jim (James Dean) lies sprawled on a street; the camera captures him dramatically at near-eye level (fig. 5.46). Ray, who had studied with the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, drew on Impressionist painter Edouard Manet's Le Toré toré mort ("Dead Bullfighter"; 1864) to create this intimate yet formally composed horizontal shot (fig. 5.47). The painting resonates throughout the film on a thematic level as well: Manet's sense of the bullfighter's romanticism is woven into Ray's portrayal of tempestuous and self-destructive youth. The complex references of this visually arresting shot underscore the fact that the opening and closing shots of a film carry tremendous significance.

In Sergei Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin ("Bronenosets Potyomkin"; 1925), the famous Odessa Steps sequence relies on the opposition between strong
A publicity still restages the opening moments of *Rebel without a Cause*, where James Dean resembles Manet’s bullfighter.

*Edouard Manet: Le Torero mort* ("The Dead Bullfighter"), 1864.

A diagonal line of marching troops in *Battleship Potemkin*.

Townspeople on the steps in *Battleship Potemkin*.

Because the human eye reacts more strongly to diagonals, the composition exaggerates the movement of the troops and diminishes the impact of the people of Odessa relative to the soldiers (see also fig. 7.52). In *Batman*...
Batman's shape, color, and density contrast with the diagonal support beams in this composition.

Begins, the diagonal lines created by the building's support beams frame Batman (Christian Bale; fig. 5.50). The composition emphasizes Batman's organic, rounded, asymmetrical form in the foreground, which opposes the regular, geometrical lines of the building's structure. This visual contrast reminds viewers that Batman is a primal force operating outside the norms of rational society: he draws on primal animalistic energies to carry out his death-defying acts.

**Framing**

When directors place actors in the frame, they make choices regarding the way those actors' bodies will be situated in space. **Loose framing** refers to shots in which figures have a great deal of open space around them—this may suggest freedom or isolation, depending on the narrative context and the other elements in the frame (fig. 5.51). **Tight framing** describes an image in which the lack of space around the subject contributes to a sense of constriction. Tight framing in *Red Desert* ("Il deserto rosso"; Michelangelo Antonioni 1964) depicts physical and psychological confinement and suggests in visual terms the impossibility of escape (fig. 5.52). But tight framing does not always imply entrapment. In *The
Station Agent, as Fin, Olivia, and Joe timidly develop a friendship, their proximity is emphasized because they are framed by the physical structure behind them (fig. 5.53).

**Foreground and Background**

Directors distinguish between the frame’s foreground and background. They may place objects or actors in the foreground in order to highlight their narrative significance—as Welles does with Mary Kane in the boarding house scene. They may also make it possible to distinguish important details in the background, another feature of the Citizen Kane boarding house scene.

They may direct viewer’s attention into the depth of the frame through the use of perspective, as Carné does in Children of Paradise.

In Alfred Hitchcock’s Notorious (1946), Alicia’s husband, Alex, and her mother-in-law discover she is spying on them and they begin to poison her. The poisoning becomes part of the film’s drinking motif, which repeatedly shows Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) drinking substances that harm her (fig. 5.54). The suspenseful series of scenes culminates in a shot whose composition emphasizes the poisoned coffee. Alicia’s cup is granted an exaggerated visual importance in the foreground of the composition: its proximity to the camera and its size make it impossible for the viewer to ignore, although Alicia is still unaware of its danger.

**Light and Dark**

Arranging light and dark areas in the frame is an important aspect of composition. Using contrasting areas of lightness and darkness to create compositional effects is referred to as **chiaroscuro**, after a classical painting technique. In The Third Man (Carol Reed 1949), Harry Lime (Orson Welles) meets his fate in a beautifully lit underground tunnel (fig. 5.55).

**Color**

Production designers develop a color palette, or range of colors, appropriate to the subject matter or the mood of the film. In doing so, they take into account the way audiences respond to the properties of color. When
white light is refracted, it produces colors along a spectrum from red to violet, each with a different wavelength. Because viewers perceive reds, yellows, and oranges as warm (vibrant with energy), and blues and greens as cool (relaxing rather than exciting), filmmakers choose to incorporate colors into sets, costumes, and props according to the effect they are seeking to create.

Like any other visual technique, color in the *mise en scène* may function as a motif. Nicholas Ray repeatedly uses the color red to suggest the fusion of existential anguish and sexual urges of the younger generation in *Rebel without a Cause*. Red appears in Jim’s jacket (fig. 5.56), Judy’s coat and lipstick, and in the simulated explosion of the galaxy at the Observatory. In *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee 1989), the viewer is repeatedly reminded of the heat of the summer’s day by the red and yellow in costumes and in the set (fig. 5.57).
Saturation refers to the strength of a hue (red, green, blue, yellow, etc.). Desaturated colors are less pure; they contain more white than saturated colors and thus they look grayish, pale or washed out. In Lars von Trier's Dancer in the Dark (2000), desaturated color establishes the dreariness of the characters' lives (fig. 5.58).

Wong Kar Wai's In the Mood For Love ("Fa yeung nin wa"; 2000) uses saturated hues to depict the sensual, colorful dresses and neon lights of Hong Kong in the 1960s (fig. 5.59). In doing so, the film makes visual reference to American films about Asia set in that period and filmed in Technicolor, including Love is a Many-Splendored Thing (Henry King 1955) and The World of Suzie Wong (Richard Quine 1960; fig. 5.60).

5.57 (top) Reds and yellows emphasize the summer heat in Do the Right Thing.
5.58 (left) Desaturated color creates a washed-out look in Dancer in the Dark.

5.59 (left) Saturated color in In the Mood for Love evokes earlier Technicolor films about Asia.
5.60 (below) The World of Suzie Wong (1960), filmed in Technicolor.
While conventional cultural associations may attach to certain colors that appear in the *mise en scène*—black for mourning, for example—it is important in forwarding interpretations to consider the contextual use of color in relation to cultural norms, narrative elements, and other visual techniques.

### Two Approaches to *Mise en Scène*

**The Frame in Two Dimensions: *Mise en Scène* in German Expressionism**

Several German films released in the decade immediately following World War I (1918-1928) were so visually distinctive that contemporary critics lauded their merits, making the Weimar Republic's film industry one of the first internationally recognized national cinemas. Robert Wiene's horror classic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) helped make the German film industry Hollywood's most serious competitor. French critics coined the term *Caligarisme* to describe films made in this style, but most film critics and scholars use the term *German Expressionism*, named for the Expressionist movement in painting and sculpture that began in Germany before World War I. Along with *The Golem* ("Der Golem"; Paul Wegener 1920), *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler* ("Dr Mabuse, der Spieler"; Fritz Lang 1922), *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang 1926), *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau 1922), *The Last Laugh* ("Der letzte Mann"; F.W. Murnau 1922), and *Faust* (F.W. Murnau 1926), Wiene's film is recognized as one of the canonical examples of German Expressionist cinema.

Film scholars have debated whether the style was a reflection of German culture and psychology or simply a creative response to financial constraints. Lotte Eisner and Siegfried Kracauer argue that *Caligari* reflects German interests in mysticism and ominously foretells the coming of Hitler, whereas Thomas Elsaesser contends that the German film studio, Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft (UFA), was strapped for cash during production of *Caligari* and opted to build intentionally primitive sets. Some argue that the German film industry used stylized set designs and cinematography to distinguish German art films from more pedestrian Hollywood fare. What no one disputes, however, is that the dramatic use of *mise en scène* is one of the primary reasons German Expressionism was, and is, so visually distinctive and important to film history.

The film's macabre story (which involves a murderous madman and a sleepwalker), chiaroscuro lighting, diagonal lines, and bizarre, artificial sets give the film a distinctive look (fig. 5.61). The combination of...
visual elements conveys a world out of balance and suggests extreme states of subjectivity—that is, states of feeling rather than being. The visual system externalizes characters’ unbalanced perceptions of the world.

The sets in Caligari reflect contemporary experiments in the visual arts, namely the emphasis on distortion, jagged shapes, and irregularity in Expressionist painting, sculpture, and theater. Artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Pechstein, and Käthe Kollwitz explored the ways distorted lines and shapes convey profound emotions in figurative paintings, lithographs, prints, and woodcuts. Hermann Warm, one of the three set designers on Caligari (all of whom were Expressionist artists), felt that “films must be drawings brought to life” (quoted in Ellis and Wexman, p. 54). The emphasis on the frame as a two-dimensional surface appears throughout Caligari, in sets where shadows are actually painted on. This idea is taken to its ultimate extreme in a scene where a deranged character is hounded by text that appears all around him on screen (fig. 5.62). The screen becomes a writing surface.

Since the 1920s, many filmmakers have used mise en scène to depict extreme states of subjectivity, including Neil Jordan, Terry Gilliam, Tim Burton, and Michael Gondry. Jordan’s The Butcher Boy (1997) presents the disturbed inner world of Francis Brady, who grows up in a small village in post-World War II Ireland. In a dream, he witnesses the detonation of a nuclear bomb (whose mushroom cloud rises above a postcard-perfect image of rural Ireland), then roams the gray, charred landscape, encountering bizarre pig carcasses and space aliens. The mise en scène renders Francis’s trauma with startling and surreal immediacy (fig. 5.63). Cinematic expressionism is not always associated with a tragic narrative. In Caligari (1920), Willi Forst’s apocalyptic dream in The Butcher Boy (1997) presents the disturbed inner world of Francis Brady, who grows up in a small village in post-World War II Ireland. In a dream, he witnesses the detonation of a nuclear bomb (whose mushroom cloud rises above a postcard-perfect image of rural Ireland), then roams the gray, charred landscape, encountering bizarre pig carcasses and space aliens. The mise en scène renders Francis’s trauma with startling and surreal immediacy (fig. 5.63). Cinematic expressionism is not always associated with a tragic narrative.
tragically disturbed psyche, however. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), Tim Burton renders the fantastic and childlike world of Willie Wonka’s candy factory through a prism of primary colors, whimsical costumes, and outlandish sets (fig. 5.64).

**Combining Mise en Scène and Camerawork: The Frame in Three Dimensions in French Poetic Realism**

André Bazin, one of the co-founders of the influential French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* ("Cinema Notebooks"), celebrated films that made dramatic use of three-dimensional space. He described this approach as a *mise en scène* aesthetic—one that emphasized movement through choreography within the scene rather than through editing.

Although Bazin focused on the importance of *mise en scène*, he also discussed cinematography. His ideas show that elements of film are inevitably interrelated and that analysis and interpretation must take into account the fact that film techniques work together, combining to produce an overall experience for the viewer. Using Bazin’s ideas to discuss the *mise en scène* aesthetic and French Poetic Realism thus serves as a conclusion to this chapter and an introduction to the next chapter on cinematography.

Bazin celebrated the films of French Poetic Realism because they emphasize the space of the story world: the setting and the arrangement of figures. The films of three of the most important directors of French cinema during the 1930s—Marcel Carné, Julien Duvivier, and Jean Renoir—emphasize the complex interplay between individuals and society. Whereas Hollywood favored stories about individuals transcending social limitations, French Poetic Realist films depicted characters whose fates are determined by their social milieu.

These filmmakers used *mise en scène* to illuminate the possibilities and limitations of characters trapped by social circumstance. In *Pépé le Moko* (Julien Duvivier 1937), the title character, a criminal, finds himself psychologically trapped in the sprawling casbah of Algiers, the very environment that affords him his freedom from the law. Pépé (Jean Gabin) has fallen in love with a traveling socialite; he sacrifices his freedom, and ultimately his life, when he leaves the casbah in order to be with her. A common feature of Poetic Realist films was the depiction of characters such as Pépé, whose desires are at odds with society.
Two visual characteristics of Poetic Realism convey this theme: careful construction of the *mise en scène* and elaborate camera movement. Because these films explore how environment shapes human behavior and destiny, set designers paid attention to minute, yet meaningful, details. Unlike German Expressionism's self-consciously artificial *mise en scène*, that of Poetic Realism depicts realistic and identifiable environments. Poetic Realism's set designs are not distorted or artificial, yet they invest the image with atmosphere. In *The Rules of the Game* ("La Règle du jeu"; 1939), Renoir repeatedly emphasizes the intricately adorned rooms and hallways of a lavish French château (fig. 5.65).

Bazin analyzed *The Grand Illusion* ("La Grande Illusion"; Jean Renoir 1937) in terms of its detailed *mise en scène*: "[The film's] realism is not the result of simple copying from life; rather, it is the product of a careful re-creation of character through the use of *detail which is not only accurate but meaningful as well*" (Bazin, p. 63; emphasis added). Bazin's statement explains how Poetic Realism earned its name. The setting is realistic in that it reproduces the experience of the lived world, and it is poetic because the careful orchestration of visual techniques heightens the characters' psychological reality, making it tangible to viewers.

Technological factors played a role in determining the look of Poetic Realism. Given the movement's emphasis on detailed, realistic, and atmospheric settings, cinematographers were faced with the challenge of capturing the fine details of the *mise en scène* in three-dimensional space. In French films during the 1930s, camera mobility rapidly increased. In 1930, about one shot in ten involved a moving camera, whereas in 1935, one shot in three involved a moving rather than a stationary camera.

Camera movements combine with a carefully constructed set to produce emotional and intellectual depth in Jean Renoir's *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* ("Le Crime de Monsieur Lange"; 1935). Amédée Lange (René Lefèvre) works for a floundering publishing house, whose owner, Batala (Jules Berry), callously seduces women and swindles his workers and investors. When Batala disappears and is presumed dead, Lange transforms the publishing company into a thriving cooperative that treats its workers, investors, and readers with respect. One night, in the midst of a celebratory staff party, Batala suddenly returns to stake his claim on the now prosperous company. Lange, unwilling to allow his
form former boss to ruin the cooperative spirit of the enterprise, shoots him.

What is most striking about the climactic scene is its choreography (fig. 5.66). The episode begins with Batala trying to seduce Lange's new romantic interest, Valentine (Florelle), in a dark, cobble-stoned courtyard, while the staff revelry continues unabated across the way (only Lange and Valentine are aware of Batala's presence). As Batala corners Valentine, the camera cranes up to film Lange in the company office, two flights above the courtyard. He is stunned and distraught over Batala's demands. As Lange resolutely marches out of the office, the camera tracks his movement through the building and down the stairs. When Lange reaches the courtyard, he exits the frame at screen right (fig. 5.67), while the camera moves in the opposite direction, panning to the left. Instead of following Lange's movement, the camera pans across the courtyard (fig. 5.68), nearly completing a circle, until it finds Lange, Batala, and Valentine. Then Lange fires the gun (fig. 5.69).

The scene is a potent example of Poetic Realism's use of a mobile camera to explore the mise en scène in three dimensions and to establish emotional and psychological connections among people and events. The camera's careful attention to Lange's trek heightens the tension by postponing his inevitable confrontation with Batala. The camera's sweep of the courtyard symbolically collects the neighborhood's inhabitants, most notably the workers. This camera movement and the detailed set are crucial to the film's defense of Lange's character. He does not act out of self-interest—instead, Lange acts on behalf of all of his partners. Batala's murder becomes a communal act.

As this comparison of German Expressionism and French Poetic Realism suggests, analyzing a film's mise en scène can be a challenging enterprise, requiring...
attention to details of setting, figure placement, lighting, and composition, as elements of the overall production design. Furthermore, these examples show that visual elements work in concert to produce meaning. Rich interpretations grow out of the serious contemplation of the interaction of aesthetic elements. The next chapter considers another important visual element: cinematography.

Summary

- *Mise en scène* (setting the scene or staging the action) is an integrated design program that establishes the "look" of a film.
- The setting refers to the location of the action, which can be filmed on location or artificially constructed on a soundstage. Sets can be digitally enhanced. The spatial attributes of settings contribute meaning, often by developing characters and their conflicts and suggesting themes.
- The human figure encompasses actors, including casting, acting style, figure placement and movement, and costumes, props, and makeup.
- Lighting can affect not only the look but also the mood of a film. Hollywood’s standard three-point lighting produces bright, clear images with minimal shadows, whereas the low-key lighting characteristic of *film noir* makes use of shadows and contrast to convey intrigue and danger. The dramatic lighting schemes often used in horror films contribute to the audience’s feelings of shock and unease.
- Composition is the art of using graphic elements such as balance, line, foreground and background, light and dark, and color to convey information, emotions, and meaning.
- German Expressionism and French Poetic Realism are different film styles that each depend on a distinctive *mise en scène*.

Film Analysis

The Functions of Space

This analysis focuses on the way a single aspect of *mise en scène* (the use of spatial oppositions) performs two functions: to develop characters and reinforce themes.

Learning how to describe specific details that support interpretive claims makes papers more engaging and convincing. These detailed descriptions must be clearly and logically linked to each of the paper’s major ideas. Study Notes point out the way the author uses detailed descriptive claims to support interpretive claims.

Spatial Oppositions in *Thelma & Louise*

Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* employs spatial oppositions to develop characters and to further one of the film’s primary themes: the women’s increasing independence. Initially, an opposition between settings highlights the
The Functions of Space

1. **This introductory paragraph covers the entirety of the film.** Because of this, the reader expects the author to provide detailed descriptions of scenes throughout the film to support the claim that spatial oppositions develop characters and underscore themes.

2. **The author carefully describes two spaces that provide information about the characters in them.** The author establishes a context for the comparison (film opening, two characters) and provides useful details such as the candy bar and the uniform.

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Film Analysis: The Functions of Space

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The film opens with a contrast between the two protagonists, helping the audience to understand their personalities. Each woman appears in a kitchen. Louise, at work as a waitress in a bright, noisy, commercial kitchen at a diner, calls her friend Thelma. As she talks to Louise on the phone, Thelma paces back and forth in her kitchen at home: a dark, confining, and messy room in the home she shares with her husband, Darryl (Christopher McDonald). The fact that Louise works and Thelma stays at home is made clear in this spatial opposition and is reinforced by two other aspects of mise en scène: costumes and props. Thelma wears a sloppy bathrobe and eats a candy bar while Louise wears a white uniform. Louise is associated with hard work and discipline while Thelma is shown as childish and disorganized.

The scene of the two women packing reinforces the contrast between them. The camera shows Thelma and Louise in their respective domestic spaces: Thelma dashes around the bedroom of her suburban house, packing everything she owns. Louise packs neatly in an apartment filled with light and mirrors, and free of the clutter that overwhelms Thelma's bedroom (figs. 5.70, 5.71).

When the women head out to spend the weekend at the hunting cabin of...