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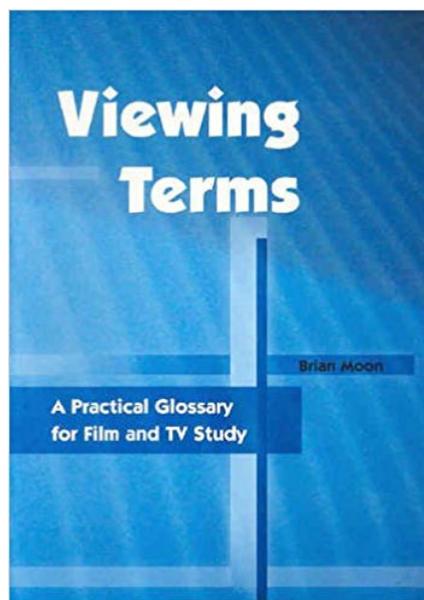
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Reference:

Moon, B. (2008). *Mise en Scene*. In *Viewing terms: A practical glossary for film and TV study* (pp. 108-111). Cottesloe, W.A: Chalkface Press.



Mise en scène

To get you thinking

- Study image 47 on page 114 which comes from Peter Weir's film *Witness* (1985). Underline the option that you think is correct in each of the following statements.

The situation shown in the picture is: formal / informal.

The mood of the picture is: serious / sad / comical / joyous.

The characters' emotions are: controlled / uncontrolled.

The man is: threatening / apologetic / sympathetic / entertaining.

The room belongs to: the man / one of the women.

The people are: in fancy dress / pioneers / a religious community.

The occasion is probably: a wedding / a christening / a funeral / a birth.

- Even viewers who have not seen the movie can 'read' this single shot accurately, because of the way the *elements* in it have been organised.

Which of the following did you use to work out your answers? (Tick your choices.)

- The spacing between people in the scene
- The costumes being worn
- The direction of the light
- The postures of the people
- The camera's distance from the characters
- The visual tones in the image
- The direction characters are facing

- How does the 'structure' in this image differ from a photograph that someone might take at a real social occasion?

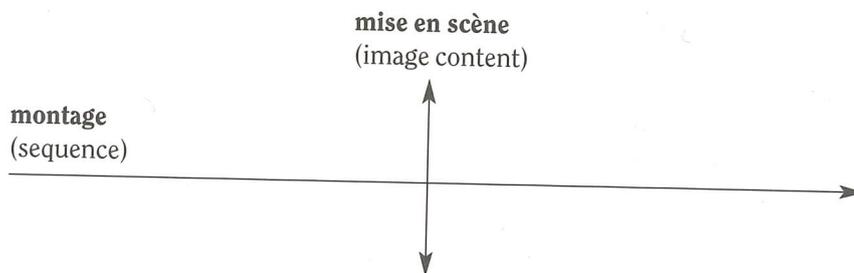
- What other evidence of 'design' can you see in the image?

Theory

Film and television texts are made up of sequences of images presented to the viewer one after another. Stories are created by **editing** these images together through the process of **montage**. However, *individual* images and shots also convey meaning in their own right. Like paintings hanging in an art gallery, each shot is a framed picture. The elements within the picture are carefully *arranged* to suggest an idea and to achieve a particular visual impact. This arrangement is called the *mise en scène* (pronounced *meez on senn*). This French term was originally used in the theatre to describe the arrangement of actors and materials on a stage.

Because a film is a two-dimensional recording of a performance that originally took place in a three-dimensional space, the *mise en scène* that we see on-screen is complex. It combines *physical elements* (such as actors, sets, lighting and performance) and *photographic elements* (such as framing, and composition). These elements are put together by the film-maker to create a particular impression when they are viewed on the cinema or television screen.

Mise en scène has a powerful impact on meaning. Together with **montage** it is one of the major building blocks of a film or television text. The relationship between the two can be represented like this:



The *mise en scène* is produced by selecting and arranging objects that go together in *space*. *Montage* is produced by selecting and arranging shots that follow one another in *time*. (In fact, these two elements interact in complex ways, but it can be useful to think of them like this for study purposes.)

Elements of *mise en scène*

To analyse *mise en scène* we need to consider what is on-screen and how it has been arranged. Knowing this, we can then begin to explore the meaning that results. Some important aspects of *mise en scène* are listed below. (The images on pages 114–116 demonstrate these and other aspects of *mise en scène*.)

Framing:

The edges of the screen provide a frame for the image. Both what is included in the frame and what is left out are significant. People and objects enclosed in the frame appear 'related' in some way, and film-makers can emphasise the relationship by the kind of framing used. In a *closed frame* things look cramped and people may appear cut off from the world outside (see image 46 on page 114). This effect is produced by focusing attention into the frame, through the arrangement of actors and other objects. In extreme cases the effect can be claustrophobic (see image 53 on page 116). In an *open frame* we are aware of the world extending beyond the frame, and the mood is often lighter (see image 54 on page 116). This is achieved by turning attention outside the frame, perhaps by having actors glance off-screen or by having people come and go into and out of shot.

The size and shape of the frame is also important. Wide-screen formats create an impression of space, so that the *mise en scène* appears more open and less intimate. Squarer frames (like the standard television format) are better suited to interiors, where the impression of space is not needed. Film-makers can change the apparent size and shape of the frame by introducing a *frame-within-a-frame*: for example, by filming the action through a window.

Space and staging:

The placement of actors in a shot is always very carefully thought out. Their distance from each other, their postures, the direction of their gazes, and their position within the frame can all create an impact (see image 46 on page 114). Characters who occupy higher spaces on the screen – for example, by standing over others – may appear dominant. Those who occupy lower spaces may appear weaker. These impressions can be strengthened by the use of high or low *camera angles* and by different shooting *distances*. The spaces in which the action takes place are also part of the *mise en scène*. The choice of location or the design of the set, and the use of camera techniques such as *deep focus* or *shallow focus*, can create a sense of depth and space. Depth and distance can be used to suggest either intimacy or remoteness, depending on how the space is used.

Composition:

How elements are arranged or 'composed' within the frame is important. Viewers learn to see some compositions as pleasing and harmonious, others as jarring or unbalanced. These effects are achieved through simple design rules. For example, objects placed close to the centre of the screen generally appear important; those near the edges have less impact. People or objects of similar size, shape or colour placed on different sides of the screen can create a sense of balance (see image 51 on page 115). Differing objects placed haphazardly can create an impression of chaos. The arrangement of objects can also guide the viewer's attention in very specific ways; for example, by making sure the viewer's eye is drawn to one part of an image before another.

Light and colour:

Light and colour can be used to enhance many of the effects described above. A bright region in a dark frame, for example, will catch the viewer's attention and can create a dramatic contrast (see image 52 on page 116). This can be achieved by spotlighting a part of the scene or by using light colours (eg, placing an actor in light-coloured clothing against a darker background). Backlighting can be used to create halo effects or silhouettes, while harsh sidelighting can emphasise profiles and create a sense of mystery. Different film and television genres use lighting in different ways to help build *mise en scène*. In *film noir*, for example, the lighting is low-key and the dark scenes echo the 'dark' actions of characters (see image 44 on page 107). Musical extravaganzas, on the other hand, often use bright lighting and strong colour to eliminate shadows and emphasise the glamour of settings.

The viewer's reading of the *mise en scène* can also be shaped by *sound*. For example:

- dialogue spoken by characters, background noises, music and other sounds can add to the meaning and impact of visual elements
- the use of off-screen sound can also *extend the frame* by hinting at details and actions taking place elsewhere in the world of the film.

Effects of *mise en scène*

In analysing *mise en scène* we need to consider not only *how* an image is presented but *why* it is shown in that way. *Mise en scène* can contribute to the meaning and impact of a film in a variety of ways. The *mise en scène* may:

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- convey *narrative* by revealing to us the main story elements of characters, places, objects and events
- create a sense of *realism* by providing additional details beyond the needs of the narrative (eg, potted plants in an office, or canisters in a kitchen may not be vital to the story, but they help create an illusion of reality)
- help dramatise *ideas* by showing abstract concepts in a concrete visual form (eg, moral decay may be represented as physical decay, in the form of rubbish piled up in alleyways, and grimy buildings)
- create *symbolic or expressionistic impact* (eg, a character may be positioned at the edge of the screen to symbolise his or her isolation or loneliness; darkness and shadow may be introduced to suggest a character's fears)
- create a particular *mood or tone* by either matching or contrasting with the ideas and action of the storyline
- produce a purely *artistic impact*, through pleasing (or jarring) arrangements of elements on the screen.

Film-makers control the *mise en scène* in an effort to make viewers respond in a specific way. Whether the audience accepts this 'preferred response' may depend upon their context and the **viewing practices** they use. For example, the *mise en scène* in *The Matrix* (1999) makes violent fight scenes look very stylish. The costumes, sets and elaborate choreography are designed to make the violence seem 'cool'. Viewers who are familiar with conventions of action comics and Hong Kong gangster movies might have the preferred response. Others might reject this viewing position and instead see the violence as unnecessary, juvenile or objectionable. When analysing *mise en scène* we need to consider the **values** and attitudes that are implied in the visual design, and how different **audiences** might react.

Practice

1. Learning to recognise the *elements of mise en scène* takes practice. Browse through the images in this book and find an interesting example for each of the following. In the spaces provided on the chart below, record the page and image number of each example you choose.

Elements	Page	Image
Dense, cluttered <i>mise en scène</i>		
Open, spacious <i>mise en scène</i>		
A highly-balanced composition		
An unbalanced composition		
Dramatic lighting		
Closed frame		
Open frame		