

Mise-en-scène

By Gabe Moura

The arrangement of everything that appears in the framing – *actors, lighting, décor, props, costume* – is called **mise-en-scène** [pronounced: *mēz ˌän ˈsen*], a French term that means “placing on stage.” The frame and camerawork are also considered part of the mise-en-scène of a movie. In cinema, placing on the stage really means placing on the *screen*, and the director is in charge of deciding what goes where, when, and how. David A. Cook, in his book [A History of Narrative Film](#), points out how a mise-en-scène is formed by all the elements that appear “within the [shot](#) itself, as opposed to the effects created by [cutting](#).” In other words, if it's on the screen and if it's a physical object recorded by the camera, then it's part of the mise-en-scène.

Academically Speaking

Don't be confused. Mise-en-scène isn't a production term. Directors don't walk around saying “Let's change the mise-en-scène today.” Not at all.

From the craftsmen who build bookcases to the cinematographer who chooses where the lights will go, the mise-en-scène is the result of the *collaboration* of many professionals. Thus in the production environment, the director is more specific with his requests and orders. Is he talking to the prop master, the set designer, the actors, the make-up artists? All of them are part of different departments. But all of them, in the end, have influence in the mise-en-scène.

In the academic realm, the term mise-en-scène is often used when the overall look and feel of a movie is under discussion. Students taking Film Analysis courses should be quite familiar with the term.

Even though many professionals are involved in its creation, the director is the one who oversees the entire mise-en-scène and all of its elements. Not just that, but during the early stages of **pre-production**, the director or his AD sits down with set designers, prop masters, location managers, costume designers, and scenic artists to determine the look and feel intended.

In some instances, the mise-en-scène is designed to evoke emotions that permeate the whole movie. For example in the German expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), distorted shapes and claustrophobic scenery are implemented to disturb the audience and enhance the horror.

Mike Nichols' [The Graduate](#) (1967) has been praised by its amazing, colorful, and multi-layered visual design. For this reason, the following segments will shed light on many scenes from *The Graduate* but also from other pictures.

Set Design

The set design refers to the decor of the set, or how it's *dressed*, comprising mainly of the furniture, props, and the set itself. Instead of just placing objects here and there, the director must be savvy to fathom how these elements may bear significance in a deeper level, while also emphasizing themes, creating meanings, and provoking thoughts.

The **Production Designer** is the professional responsible for building and dressing the set. She works with the Art Director, the Set Designer, and the Prop Master to create and add these physical elements to the filmic space. The Production Designer reports to the Director, and together they conceptualize the look of the film well before cameras start rolling.

Lighting

Unarguably one of the film elements that has the greatest power to evoke emotions, [lighting](#) must be manipulated by the director to accommodate his or her desires for the movie. In broad terms, the two types of lighting approaches are: low-key lighting and high-key lighting.

High-key lighting is often seen in romantic comedies and musicals, encompassing an even lighting pattern and avoiding dark areas in the frame. Everything looks bright with little to no shadow at all. High-key lighting has little dramatic effect itself.

Low-key lighting is often seen in horror movies and thrillers, comprising of a lighting pattern that has both bright and dark areas in the frame. The *chiaroscuro* (Italian: bright-dark) technique, long used by painters, is characterized by strong contrast, often employed to unnerve the audience.

Note that this terminology is counter-intuitive as low-key lighting is high contrast and high-key lighting is low contrast.

Costume

The obvious purpose of costuming is to dress an actor according to his character. Lawyers wear suits, nurses wear scrubs, and a drifter could wear worn out shoes, ragged shirt, and baggy pants.

But, more than that, costuming can also be used to establish someone's hierarchic level. Regimentals, for instance, bear the status of the person who wears it. And even the color may distinguish an enemy from a friend. In [The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](#) (1966), a comic situation arises when Blondie (Clint Eastwood) heads toward the enemy cavalry that was covered in dust. When the enemy general dusts off his sleeve, his apparently gray uniform turns blue, making it obvious that our beloved protagonist was going into the shark's mouth.

Costuming may also be used to emphasize a [theme](#). In the first scene at the Taft Hotel in *The Graduate*, Mrs. Robinson wears a fur coat that makes her look like a predator hunting for her prey. Her coat bears a pattern that resembles the fur of a cheetah. Or could it be a cougar?

Location

As the name suggests, it refers to the place where a part or an entirety of a film is shot; that is outside of a film studio.

NOTE: This is a modified version of material sourced here: <http://www.elementsofcinema.com/directing/mise-en-scene-in-films/>