

THE QUICK & DIRECT GUIDE TO

Mise en scène Analysis

Mise en scène Defined: Though originally a theatrical term to describe the arrangement of elements on stage or quite literally – “put into the scene,” for the sake of **film** discussion, let’s approach a definition of ***mise en scène*** (pronounced “meez on sen”) it this way: **The appearance and arrangement of all the visual elements within the given playing area (in this case, the *frame*) to evoke meaning.**

- Unlike theatre, the filmmaker takes a 3-Dimensional Space - an arrangement of characters and objects - and flattens this ***mise en scène*** into a flattened 2-D space. The resulting projection is then shown to an audience in still an additional space, and thus carries an audience to a world and point-of-view far from the theater confines.
- Many elements of ***mise en scène*** can be addressed (and are often best addressed) examining still frames. However, Film is Dynamic – never “still.” Examining individual frames, thus, represents a false and unintended way of looking at film. So don’t let your search for stop-motion meaning trump the intrinsic understanding that comes out of the context of fluid (intended) watching of a film as it moves naturally from shot to shot.
- ***Mise en scène*** analysis considers many elements of the visual language of film. It is never necessary to address all 15 of these approaches for any single shot (though you technically could). More importantly, consider and explore the most apparent elements – those that contribute most heavily to the meaning presented by the shots.

01. The Dominant: What is the eye attracted to first? Why?

- The Dominant stands out in some kind of isolation from the other elements within the image.
- In Black & White films, this is most often achieved through the juxtaposition of light and dark – where the brightest and harshest elements jump out before those with more subdued lighting.
- Color Films generally draw attention to the dominant through a highly contrasting or symbolic color.
- In both, MOVEMENT is a primary attraction to the dominant (especially when other elements are static).
- Dominants may jump out for other reasons: Central Position, Lines of Perspective that lead to an area of the frame, relative size to other objects, or any other characteristic that creates CONTRAST against non-dominants.

02. Subsidiary Contrasts: What are the main eye-stoppers that attract us after taking in *The Dominant*? Why?

- After the dominant, the audience’s eye then “travels” to subsidiary contrasts, which will stand out for the same reasons listed above (only less so than the dominant).
- This is rarely accidental – even though many directors and cinematographers accomplish such a *narrative-en-scène* instinctively without even realizing it.
- ***Intrinsic Interest*** can also be a heavier influence on where our eyes travel. Because we know the story, or recognize the context of objects and people in the frame, our eyes may be drawn to elements that are NOT necessarily jumping out at us for visual reasons. (ex: a set of keys in a car ignition when the driver is locked out)
- Due to this “traveling” from subsidiary to subsidiary, one can thus conclude that movement within the frame is not limited only to objects and people that are literally in motion.

03. Lighting Key & Lighting Quality: Key references the relationship of Light and Shadow (*Evenly Lit* vs. *Higher Contrast* lighting designs). Quality references the fall-off of light as we move from object to object. It concerns the hard vs. soft divisions between areas of light and areas of darkness. Light can be described in the following terms:

- **Realistic Lighting Design:** Sources and Spill patterns seem REAL, as if *practical* (everyday) lights were used.

This study sheet accompanies (and draws heavily from) the Louis Gianetti Text, *Understanding Movies*, 12th Edition, with additional contributions from the ISP IB Film II class of 2011.

Realistic lighting is usually not worth heavy analysis, unless to emphasize the Cinema Verité / Documentary look.

- **Pictorial Lighting Design:** Drawing from the theory of *formalism*. The light is manipulated for mood with less attention to whether it is *likely* (or even *possible*) in the dramatic situation. Painting with light for visual effect.
- The Rig: (1) **Key Light** (strongest), (2) **Fill Light** (less intensity, fills shadows), (3) **Backlight** (rims objects with a “line of light” from behind, separating them from the background, (4) **Background Lighting** (paints the set for mood)
- **The Lighting Key: High Key** - Evenly lit, hit by multiple key lights, a realistic and seemingly un-formalistic approach. Often the case outside, or in comedy, musical, documentary, and seemingly “non-painterly” genres.
- **The Lighting Key: Low Key** – Light is uneven, with ratio of the intensity (brightness) of illuminated objects to shadows of 2:1, 3:1, 5:1, 1:0 [Illuminated objects in complete darkness] etc. Low key is reserved for drama, horror, and thriller genres, or scenes and character depictions designed to evoke mood or tell a story with light.
- Consider describing the light as **Linear** (where line is emphasized) vs. **Painterly** (color, mood, haze are emphasized)
- **The Lighting Quality:** (Contrast and Softness): Does the light have a **Hard Quality** (Harsh, Linear) or **Soft Quality** (Diffused, with more gradual fall-off as the light wraps softly around objects so line is not emphasized.)
- Is there any **Blowout**? Intentional **Overexposure**? What might this mean?
- Has a *filter* or *postproduction* produced a soft **Halo**, known as **Diffusion** around objects. What might this mean?

04. Shot Type / Camera Proxemics: What types of shots are used? What is the distance of the camera (and thus the audience) from the action? Both Shots and characters in films **MOVE**. Note that the meaning may lie in the *shift*.

SHOTS IN REVIEW Sure, you know them, but if you merely “I Spy” them, you are wasting your time. The important necessity is to indicate **WHY** the particular framing serves the purpose of the moment.

- **Long Shot (LS)** A shot that shows all of a fairly large subject (for example, a person) and usually much of the surroundings. This is useful to give a perspective and context for a scene, for example, a long shot of a robot framed in a laboratory would give a different interpretation of events than a shot of the same robot framed in an elderly home.
- **Extreme Long Shot (ELS)** Sometimes used as an establishing shot: In this type of shot the camera is at its furthest distance from the subject, emphasizing the background and reducing the importance of the subject.
- **Establishing Shot (ES)** This is used at the beginning of a sequence to define the location and to give the audience a perspective on the action to come.
- **Master Shot (MS)** Used at the beginning of a sequence as a reference point for the rest of the sequence to follow. It shows the composition and the key relationships between the subjects and enables the audience to contextualize the action before it happens. It tends to establish the 180 Line of Action.
- **Medium Long Shot (MLS)** In the case of a standing actor, the lower frame line cuts off feet and ankles. When used, character gestures and movements and relations with other characters are still the focus (over facial expressions).
- **Medium Shot (MS)** In such a shot the subject and its setting occupy roughly equal areas in the frame. In the case of the standing actor, the lower frame passes around the waist. More body language can be seen as the face, chest and hands are in frame – but facial expression is not lost.
- **Close-Up (CU)** A picture, which shows a fairly small part of the scene, such as a character's face and neck on the top of the shoulders, in great detail so that it fills the screen. It extracts the subject from the context (so **WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT?**) and asks that the audience focus on the delivery or receipt of ideas/dialogue/emotion. This is all about character, emotional response, and **REACTION** to the dramatic situation. In any case, all close-ups focus on emotions or reactions and emphasize the human experience, not the actions or surroundings that stimulate that experience.
- **Point-of-View Shot (POV)** A shot made from a camera position close to the line of sight of a subject, to imply that the camera is 'looking with their eyes'. This can be effective in putting us into the shoes of the character, and is especially useful in showing us a defenseless position, where we can see, but cannot act.

THE SHOT IN MOTION Note that movement is often not a pure element of mise-en-scene analysis, but it makes sense to include these noteworthy camera moves here, as they commonly serve as the bridge between one shot and another (and thus the filmmaker's way of relating the character to the audience, transitioned to another.)

- **Zoom** When zooming in the camera does not move; the lens is focused down from a long shot to a close-up while recording. The subject grows in the frame, and attention is concentrated on details previously invisible as the shot tightens. It may be used to surprise the viewer. Reverse zoom reveals more of the scene (perhaps where a character is, or to whom he or she is speaking) as the shot widens. Zooming is unusual (and less visually stimulating than pushes/pulls) because there is no realistic sense of perspective (parallax) and we feel less "moved" by the camera.
- **Tracking / Dollying** When tracking, the camera itself moves (smoothly) towards, away, or laterally to the subject while the focus remains constant. Tracking in (a **PUSH**) draws the audience into a closer relationship with the subject; moving away (**PULL**) tends to create emotional distance. Tracking back tends to divert attention to the edges of the screen. The speed of tracking may affect the Viewer's mood. Fast tracking (especially when tracking in) is exciting; tracking back eases tension. Tracking in can force the audience to focus on something such as the expression of a contestant. During chase sequences the camera will often 'track' with the action to emphasize the sense of speed.
- **Pan** The camera moves from right to left or left to right to follow a moving subject. A space is left in front of the subject to ensure that the pan 'leads' rather than 'trails'. A pan usually begins and ends with a few seconds of still picture to give greater impact. The speed of a pan across a subject creates a particular mood as well as establishing the viewer's relationship with the subject. A very rapid panning shot is called a **zip** or **whip pan**.
- **Surveying Pan** The camera slowly searches the scene: may build to a climax or anticlimax. Combined with a POV, this can create a strong sense of tension.
- **Tilt** A vertical movement of the camera - up or down- while the camera mounting stays fixed. For example a tilt is used in *Gladiator*, to reflect the impact the Coliseum has on the novice gladiators as they first come to Rome. As they stand in front of this immense building the tilt effectively conveys its immensity to the audience.
- **Roll** The camera tilts on the third axis (into a "Dutch" or canted angle, such that horizon lines are no longer stable and horizontal. The sensation is one of imbalance, nausea, danger, or confusion.
- **Hand-Held** A hand-held camera can produce jerky, bouncy, unsteady image, which may create a sense of immediacy or chaos. The handheld cameras all the stage during confrontations on the Jerry Springer show add to the tension being built with unsteady images.
- **Crane / Boom / Steadicam** The Steadicam is a handheld camera brace worn as a kind of harness by the (highly skilled) cameraman. It uses a gyroscope system to ensure the camera remains perfectly level and smooth as the cameraman moves. Cranes and Booms allow the floating camera (attached to the end of a multi-directional **jib arm** to move in any direction while panning and tilting – essentially creating a **flying camera** and allowing many creative shot options. In both cases, these shots do not directly emulate normal human perception... the feeling is one of a surreal reality, a super-human perspective on the scene – the audience is a godly, omniscient presence.

05. Angle: From what angle are we viewing the subject? What does this mean?

Angle of The Shot (**High** looks down, **Low** looks up!) Conventionally, in 'factual' (trustworthy, matter-of-fact) scenes, the subjects should be framed at eye-level only. In a high angle the camera looks down, making the viewer feel more powerful than those on screen, or (when objective in its positioning) suggesting an air of detachment. A low angle shot places the camera below the subject, exaggerating his or her importance.

When the camera is tilted on its axis so that normally vertical or horizontal lines **Tilted / Canted Angle** Lines appear slanted to the left or right, and the ordinary expectations of the audience are frustrated. Such shots are often used in mystery and suspense films to create a sense of unease in the viewer, This effect is to suggest the disorientation felt by the characters at certain points.

06. Color Values: What hues and levels of saturation are used in the scene? Are these merely casual uses, are colors

employed to call attention or camouflage, or is their symbolism in the color choices?

- **Hue:** Red, Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Purple – what messages do these convey about places and people?
- **Saturation:** How INTENSE and BOLD are the colors?
- Intense and rich (**HIGHLY saturated**) colors are strong and meaningful by their dominant hues.
- On the contrary, **bleached** and **unsaturated** (faded) images show “numbed” emotion and less significance by their chosen hue, but may convey a realistic, retro, or matter-of-fact take on the subject matter simply by the fact that the scene is literally drained of it’s color symbolism. War, brutality, and documentary – all with their “ugly truths” are often portrayed with an unsaturated look at the situation.
- NOTE: An excellent resource to check out is the text ***If It’s Purple, Someone’s Gonna Die***, by Patti Bellantoni

07. Lenses, Filters, Film Stocks: How do these enhance, distort, or inject meaning into the subject matter?

- **Hundreds of Filters and Gradients** exist to color, distort, haze, shade, or otherwise enhance (or degrade) the image before it is recorded to film or video medium.

Lenses are generally classified in three general categories:

- **Standard Lenses:** Used by realist filmmakers to produce minimum distortion. They see the world as the human eye does, without manipulation and with a deep depth-of-field.
- **Long or Telephoto Lenses:** Sometimes used just as a safety precaution, or to be discrete in filming situations. However, it is generally accepted that the long lens, with it’s SHALLOW DEPTH OF FIELD and very precise framing and focusing on particular objects within the scene makes for a more filmic and motivated dominant element in the shot. 1) Long lenses also compress layers from various depths... thus lending a more congested and flatter image without great depth. 2) Finally, Long Lenses tend to be more flattering to the human face by not exaggerating any features. 3) These are NOT optimal for high action, as any movement within a telephoto image will require an experienced camera operator to frame and track objects without noticeable shake or poor composition.
- **Short or Wide Angle Lenses:** These lend a wide angle-of-view to capture all of the action and surroundings, as well as a shallow depth-of-field that makes action visible in many planes throughout the depth of the shot. The visual manipulations by wide angle lenses include: 1) Exaggerated depth through the shot; items close together seem further apart. Distances (from camera to infinity) are stretched and augmented. 2) Any motion seems super-human. (Great for action – these lenses capture it well, make it seem quick and powerful, and more easily frame and focus on objects being tracked). 3) Wide Angle Lenses – especially FISH EYE lenses, greatly distort the lines at the perimeter, rounding out otherwise straight lines and caricaturing facial features to look grotesque, powerful, and ruthless.

Film Stock is a technical term, referring to exposure and recording qualities of the medium used to capture film. It is high specialized, and we will not focus on this topic too much here. If you discover, through research, that a particular film stock was used, you might want to do your own investigation of the “look” rendered to film by that choice.

- **Fast Film Stocks** are used for documentary and less painterly films (such as documentary and cinema verite – they require less light. The resulting images are high contrast, less saturated in their colors, often gritty, and less sensitive to fine detail (but MUCH easier to shoot with).
- **Slow Film Stocks** require a great deal of light but are sensitive to color and the detailed gradients between light and dark – a wider “gray range.”
- Some specialized film stocks by major manufacturers have become famous for their particular color casts (more green, more red, more gritty, more diffused), sensitivities to light, color saturations, etc. The choice of Kodak vs Fuji, for example is more than just a matter of names. Filmmakers (and particularly cinematographers) become highly experienced with the “look” rendered by particular brands, recipes, and sensitivities of film stock.

08. Density: How much visual info is packed into the image? Is the Texture stark, moderate, or highly detailed?

09. Composition: How is the 2-Dimensional space within the frame segmented or organized? What does this mean?

- **WEIGHT** is a term used to describe the variations in density within areas of the frame. Where we place objects and characters (increase the relative weight) can tell us a lot about their narrative situation and character.
- Placement of the **horizon line** can have dramatic effects on an image. It is rare to place it at the center (as the sky would seem too powerfully dominating over most of the action). Traditional film approaches place most of the weight at the bottom of the frame, with objects being appropriately grounded beneath a present, but non-obtrusive sky. For visual effect, many epics and westerns employ the opposite effect – keeping the horizon line low and allowing the vast sky and nature to excerpt their power over the earth's stage and its players.
- We expect dominant visual elements to be centered (and the realist approach to filmmaking often keeps this as the norm), but formalists often intentionally place subjects within the frame to invoke a higher meaning.
- When **Up's and Down's** matter (and they don't always matter!)... The top area of the frame suggests power, authority, and aspiration. People here control the elements below. This is also true of objects (a hill-top castle, a religious relic hung high on a wall). The areas near the bottom of the frame suggest subservience, vulnerability, and powerlessness. Elements here are exploited symbolically to suggest inferiority.
- Objects and figures on the edges of the frame are closest to the darkness, to the outside. They are deliberately peripheral, anonymous, unnoticed, and perhaps dangerous or otherwise in danger. There is insecurity at the edges (as if they run the risk of falling out of the film, or being dominated by that which holds the central ground.)
- And don't forget another important region – that which is OUT-OF-FRAME. For objects occupying this territory, we are aware of their presence but cannot see their actions, thus making the character or element all the more dangerous, impending.
- Finally – What about shapes and lines in the blocking of characters or objects? Both **Horizontal Lines** (safety, rest) and **Vertical Lines** (Power, Authority, Strength) represent stability, while **Diagonal Lines** imply movement and insecurity – a dynamic shift in the situation. A **Circle** of people would represent Unity, whereas linear or widespread staging of characters might suggest personal disassociation.

10. Form: Is the form *Open* or *Closed*? Does the image suggest a window that arbitrarily isolates a fragment of the scene? Or a proscenium arch, in which the visual elements are carefully arranged and held in balance?

Open Form	Closed Form
More Realist – The shot is not composed / “framed”	More Formalist - Conceived, Designed, Artsy
Spontaneous, Unbalanced, Stylistically Recessive	Self-Conscious and Visually Appealing
Imply freedom of choice (the sky is the limit)	Imply enclosure – destiny and futility of will
Overly used – they seem sloppy	Overly Used – seems pretentious and controlling

11. Framing: Is the framing *Tight* or *Loose*? Can characters move freely without impediments? Or are they constrained by the frame and/or accompanying elements within the frame?

12. Depth: On how many levels is the composition constructed? Does positioning in the *Foreground*, *Background*, and *Midground* mean something and how do these depths comment on each other?

13. Character Placement: What part of the frame do characters occupy (*Center*, *Top*, *Bottom*, *Edges*) and why?

14. Staging Positions: Which way do the characters look in relation to the camera? What does this imply?

There are five basic positions, frequently suggesting corresponding visual cues.

- **Full Frontal** (Facing the Camera): The most intimate. The character invites are sympathy. But this can be uncomfortable to the audience – as we are force into the scene. This stance vis-à-vis the camera can also be highly *confrontational*. A character seems most powerful and threatening.

- **The Quarter Turn** (between Full Frontal and Profile): The favored angle of most shots. It still provides a high degree of intimacy without the emotional involvement of our being brought into the scene.
- **Profile:** Our attachment is more remote. The character seems unaware of being observed, and is lost in his/her own thoughts. Here, action and relation to the scene or other characters is emphasized over any emotional state (after all – we can't see the eyes... the window to the soul and the revealer of inner thoughts).
- **The Three-Quarter Turn** (between Profile and Back-To-Camera): More Anonymous. Useful for showing a character's unfriendly or antisocial feelings. The character rejects our interests as an audience, and shuts us out somewhat.
- **Back-To-Camera:** We can only guess what is taking place, so it conveys a sense of concealment and mystery – a total detachment from the audience. We want to see more, but we can't.

15. Character Proxemics: How much (or little) space exists between characters? How does this define relationships?

- **Intimate:** From skin contact to about 8 inches away. Love, comfort, tenderness. However it can also imply the opposite when an INTRUDER maintains an intimate proximity to the central character. That's just creepy.
- **Personal:** 1 to 4 feet away. Friends, Family, Acquaintances. Here, personal distances preserve the privacy between individuals, but they do not suggest exclusion of outsiders (as intimate proxemics do).
- **Social:** 4 feet to 12 feet away. Business and Social Gatherings. A friendly range, but with somewhat more formality. Note how these relationships are often discussed as relative to each other – for example, Intimate proxemics between two characters in a "social" scene come across as standoffish – exclusionary.
- **Public:** 12 feet - ? This is more about the LACK of relationship than the relationship. Characters may have common interest in needs, but no real personal relationship to others in the scene. (Think separate tables at a restaurant.) Displays of high emotion are considered bad form at these distances. People generally must exaggerate their gestures and raise their voices to be understood clearly.