

## Introducing Mis-en-scene

The meaning of this term of French origin (pronounced “meez-on-sen”) is “put into the scene” and was first used in theatre in the direction of stage plays.

In the context of the moving image, it describes both the content of what is filmed and the way in which it has been filmed and signifies the director’s control over what appears in the film frame. The use of camera is regarded by some as one aspect of mise-en-scene but we have devoted a separate section and lesson to it on this site. Similarly, we will deal in detail with cinematography.

When studying a film’s Mis-En-Scene the key elements to look at are:

Setting & Props

Costume, Hair and Make-Up

Movement, Positioning and Performance

Lighting and Cinematography

Within the context of the Classical Hollywood style, each of the above aspects must be considered in relation to its significance and function with regards to characterisation and narrative.

### Setting and Props

Settings used in films are rarely just backgrounds but are integral to creating atmosphere and building narrative within a film. In some cases a particular location or building can even be regarded as a character within the film itself. Famous examples of this feature in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) and The Shining (1980).

Prop is a term given to objects which are seen and used within the world of a film (originally referring to the “properties” of characters). Props, like settings, also contribute significantly to characterisation and atmosphere but also form an integral part in the action of the film. Props can often play a very important role in the cause-effect logic of a film’s narrative. They may also carry symbolic meaning. An example of such symbolism might be the famous last dying word of Charles Foster Kane in Citizen Kane (1941) and what it refers to taken in the context of his great wealth of material possessions.

### Costume and Make-Up

Costume and make-up play a large part in mis-en-scene because they can give you a very immediate sense not only of a character's personality but also of their status in the film and how they function within the world around them. They also give you an instant idea of what period a film is set in and the culture it is centred around.

### **Movement, Positioning and Performance**

The positioning and movement of characters within a frame is also very significant for both characterisation and narrative within a film. A filmmaker can successfully draw an audience's attention to an important character merely through placing them in the foreground of the frame. Likewise placing a moving body in a stationary background or vice versa has the same effect. Positioning can also be used to indicate relationships between people; for example, creating physical distance between two characters in a frame can indicate emotional distance that they might be experiencing at that point in the film.

Performance in film includes an actor's facial expressions and body language. With film's ability to create a close-up of an actor's face, for example, there is a much wider and subtler range of emotions and feelings that can be conveyed and expressed through the medium by means of performance. Eyes give particularly important signals when trying to read someone's expression. Likewise movement and the way in which actors hold and move their bodies shows how they are thinking and feeling.

### **Lighting and Cinematography (see Lesson on Cinematography, painting and film noir)**