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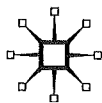From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art

Mise en Scène and Film Style

From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art

Adrian Martin
Monash University, Australia

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For Cristina Álvarez López, who knows all the moves

Prologue: At the Ballet Ruse

Establishing shot: the exterior of a theatre. The music of Debussy begins on the soundtrack for the sake of a smooth transition to inside the hall: the ballet *Afternoon of a Faun*, choreographed by Jerome Robbins, is beginning, and Isabelle (Noomi Rapace) is sitting expectantly in the audience. Light hits the stage and a transparent screen rises to reveal a male dancer (Ibrahim Öykü Önal) lying still on the floor. To emphasise Isabelle's act of spectatorship, the camera starts from a position behind her head, racks focus from her to the stage, then slowly moves past her, toward the spectacle.

The music continues – as does the forward-tracking camera movement – but now we are elsewhere; the singular scene has become a sequence, knit from different, simultaneous actions in several places. Dirk (Paul Anderson) stumbles, drunk and obnoxious, into the end of a dinner party held by his sometime lover, Christine (Rachel McAdams); she rejects his fumbling advances. Most of this interplay between them is played out in one, unbroken shot along the garden path at the side of Christine's ultra-modern apartment – the sound of their predictable argument eventually faded out in favour of Debussy.

But now something formally startling literally enters the picture: an extreme close-up of Isabelle's eyes, staring straight ahead, slowly 'shoves out', in a sideways motion, the image of Dirk and Christine walking and arguing – until we arrive at a 50/50, split-screen arrangement (Figure P.1)

On the left-hand screen, we witness a classical alternation of shot and reverse shot: Isabelle's gaze, and the ballet in progress – a performance in which the dancers (Polina Semionova has also joined the stage) look, for the most part, directly into the camera (or at their theatre audience), even when in the throes of an intense clinch – the idea of Robbins' choreography being that they are looking into a rehearsal mirror.[1] On the right-hand screen, the long take continues (Christine sending Dirk out into the street, back home) until the two-minute mark, when another shot/reverse shot volley begins: Christine finds an unsigned note stuck to her front door, instructing her to shower and prepare for bed … which is just the sort of surprise, game-playing, sexual assignation we know (from earlier in the story) that she likes.

Now we are witnessing, across the two screens, a mixture of rhythms and temporal structures: as the ballet keeps playing out in the continuity of real time on the left (with the film carefully disguising its compression of the original choreography), time leaps forward in ellipses on the right: Dirk drives off, bashes his car into a road sign, and returns to the apartment; while Christine follows her mysterious partner's instructions. There are rhymes, or echoes, from one side of the screen to the other: the dancing woman's amorous ecstasy is matched by Christine's sensual elation under the shower. When the close-up image of Isabelle's eyes returns for the third time, it completes the shoving gesture began earlier, taking over the entire screen, as do the counter-shots of the stage. The reverse also happens: Christine's screen shoves out Isabelle's, in what could almost be a visual pun on their volatile power dynamics throughout the narrative.

The decisive break in the sequence occurs when, after a long, mysterious, prowling Steadicam POV (point of view) movement discovers Christine, the split-screen aligns two similar medium close-ups: female dancer on the left, Christine with her mysterious partner's hand caressing her face on the right (Figure P.2). Suddenly, there is a quick, full-frame zoom into a masked face (Debussy abruptly replaced by *Psycho*-style screeching strings), and then the gruesome spectacle of a knife slashing Christine's throat, splashing blood on the camera lens – quickly followed by another shock cut to the subsequent scene: Isabelle waking up, frightened, in bed. Did she dream what we have just seen?

This six and three-quarter minute sequence is the central, virtuoso set-piece of Brian De Palma's *Passion* (2012). How far could we get with analysing it if we used the time-honoured tools of *mise en scène* analysis – put simply, looking closely at the individual images, their composition, content and staging? Certainly, we could isolate many germane elements: the movement of bodies (De Palma stresses his debt to the art of choreography) and of the camera; the use of décor (white and minimal on both halves or zones of the screen), lighting, colour; the underlining of specific postures and gestures in the performances …

But such observations would need to be incorporated, sooner or later, into two, overarching aspects of the sequence. First, the fact that it uses a split, dual screen – a way of interrelating two distinct scenes without recourse to cross-cutting, except for those moments when De Palma chooses, for impact, an edit in full-screen format. And second,

Figures P.1–P.2   Passion (Brian De Palma, 2012)

more significantly for the aims of this particular film, the fact that the entire sequence exists for the sake of a gigantic *ruse*, a trick shamelessly played on its spectator: even though Isabelle is on the left-hand screen, and even though the shot/reverse shot syntax 'tells' us that she is present in the theatre audience throughout the ballet, there has in fact been a submerged ellipsis between the shot of her sitting in the crowd and her eventual location – which is, as we will learn later,

precisely inside the right-hand screen, waiting and ready to murder Christine.

While De Palma has been exploring split-screen techniques since *Dionysus in 69* (1970) – the documentation of a wild, experimental, theatrical event which shows both the performance and its audience simultaneously – and even though his first use of it within the mystery-thriller genre came as early as *Sisters* (1973), *Passion*'s vigorous deployment of the device cannot but make us think of much multimedia, installation art within gallery spaces today, in the 21st century. De Palma provides the 'essential cinema' – pure cinema Hitchcock-style, he would say – which contemporary, digital art abstracts further: a constant play on off-screen spaces, on the different kinds of looking (characters look at each other and into the camera), and on the polyphonic interplay between multiple screens, *spatialised* across the walls or constructed zones of a gallery. We can find this kind of spatialised cinema everywhere at present, in elaborate installations by Chantal Akerman, Isaac Julien, Agnès Varda, Harun Farocki (1944–2014)...

A word – now a popular word – for such artworks is *dispositif*: an apparatus, arrangement or set-up of interrelated pieces or elements. *Passion*, in its very 21st century way, offers us, in this set-piece, a version of a gallery-like installation, but brought back into cinema and co-ordinated on a single screen: a game with multiple images and soundtracks, premised on the pulling-apart and exhibiting of a certain, recognisably Hitchcockian syntax of gazes, objects, camera movements and so on. But – to start with my conclusion – has not the cinema always been, in some crucial senses, a *dispositif*? Has it not always been a game with a multiplicity of spaces, looks and sounds? Has it not always been the sum – or, rather, the face-off – between the different media that comprise it: theatre, novel, radio, music, painting, architecture? De Palma today restores to hitherto smooth, generic, cinematic fiction (as, in fact, he has always done) some of the evident formal fragmentation, the tension between displayed parts and levels, that we experience in modernist and postmodernist artworks.

Yet, for all its dazzling, virtuosic brio, I believe that what De Palma achieves in *Passion* (and in his other best work) is still worth describing as *mise en scène* – a new kind of *mise en scène*, a *mise en scène* beyond the sum of operations we have conventionally regarded as gathering under the rubric of this term. *Mise en scène* is, in my opinion and experience, still a productive way to approach the exploration of *style*, or aesthetic form, in cinema – and I am far from being the only critic today

who is trying to hold onto and redefine the term, despite its conceptual limitations or historic baggage.

But the spectacle of *Passion* prompts a question: did we collectively take a wrong turn in film studies by grasping the work of *mise en scène* or style in cinema as a matter – at least, in the first instance – of wholeness and fluidity, of organic coherence and singular fictional worlds, of a certain 'transparency' or invisibility? And what would it mean, now, to shift gears and retrace our steps over the ground of *mise en scène*, trying to reconfigure its classic moves in a new and different way? That is the central aim of my book.

Talking *mise en scène* is also a matter, for criticism and pedagogy, of perspective – of whichever tradition, or nation, or intellectual history you happen to participate in, or identify with. Many centres of film culture around the world are overly fixated on the famous example of *Cahiers du cinéma* in Paris which, in the 1950s, provided one major orientation for the exploration and celebration of *mise en scène*. But I was raised, as it were, with a particular, British tradition or loose school of stylistic analysis firmly in my mind as an idea – even though I was a teenager growing up in suburban Melbourne, Australia, greedily reading the bound volumes of film magazines in my local library. This tradition is associated with towering figures such as V.F. Perkins, Andrew Britton (1952–1994), Deborah Thomas and Robin Wood (1931–2009), and magazine publications like *Movie* (UK) and, later, *CineAction* (Canada). And what I came to categorise as this *expressive* school of critical analysis found its counterparts elsewhere: in some of the finest critics at *Positif* magazine in France, or in the work of Tom Ryan, my teacher in late 1970s Australia.

Yet, we do well to remind ourselves – or to discover for the first time – that *mise en scène* did not always mean the same thing to those people around the world who used the term, even simultaneously, even to champion the same films and filmmakers. It took some time for me to realise that, from the 1950s to the 1970s, what *mise en scène* meant to Farocki, Frieda Grafe (1934–2002) or Helmut Färber at *Filmkritik* magazine in Germany was not always compatible with what it meant to Edgardo Cozarinsky in Argentina, to José Luis Guarner (1937–1993) in Spain, to Dirk Lauwaert in Belgium, to Shigehiko Hasumi in Japan or to Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1929–2005) in Cuba – or to the regularly changing crew at *Cahiers* which, after the 1950s, arrived at several, successive, radically altered notions of the concept, as Luiz Carlos Oliveira Jr has shown in his important book *A Mise en Scène no Cinema – do Clássico ao Cinema de Fluxo* (2013).

So, when the globe of film culture at last opened to me in this way, I discovered that *mise en scène* was not the simple, expressive tool of filmmaking that I had once taken it to be. It became plenty of other things as well, in different times and places, for different people – including the sometimes vociferous critique or rejection of it. There is a history, largely written, to all this *mise en scène* multiplicity. And it is a history that has never stopped metamorphosing itself.

Therefore, another aim of this book is to give (at least, within the limit of the languages I can access) a sense of the history and diversity of traditions in international film criticism, as it has addressed matters of style in cinema. And my conviction concerning the need to take this type of inclusive view no doubt reflects my own place of cultural origin: Australia, a country usually – at least, until the Internet age at the dawn of the 21st century – left off the global (and especially Anglo-European) map of film criticism's achievements. But it is the case that my sense of what is possible in film analysis and criticism, as it evolved throughout my adult life, owes a great deal to tutelary figures in my local, Australian scene – brilliant writers, teachers, speakers and essayists such as John Flaus, Meaghan Morris, Edward Colless, Lesley Stern, Ross Gibson, Sylvia Lawson, Philip Brophy and Bill Routt. Like every small cinephile nation, Australia has its names and works that now need to be inserted into a global history.

What did I learn, or imbibe, from this heady cocktail of influences both local and exotic? Perhaps it boils down to this principle intuition or sensibility: that before it conjures a world, conveys a story or elaborates a theme, what we think of as *mise en scène*, in its primary sense and effect, *shows* us something; it is a means of *display*. I am no great fan of the works of Peter Greenaway (either in film, art or discourse), but he did once ask a good, provocative question along these lines: 'Isn't cinema an exhibition?' (Greenaway, 1995, p. 24) In this, I am following up the hunch of Michel Mourlet of *Présence du cinéma* magazine, in the essays first collected in his 1965 book *Sur un art ignoré* ('on an ignored art', later retitled in 1987 as '*Mise en scène* as language') – who, as Geneviève Puertas points out, insisted on the presence of the *screen*, the site on which things are seen, and from which things are heard, rather than the abstract 'ideas' or 'encrypted messages of a somehow Platonic thematic' that, by the late 1950s, characterised a certain strand of film criticism in *Cahiers*. 'It is on this screen, object of fascination, that everything must *happen*' (Puertas, 1987, p. 20).

It sometimes helps (and sometimes hinders) to recall the origins of the term in theatre: on stage, *mise en scène* is about, in the first place,

arranging figures in a pleasing or expedient way, revealing them or concealing them in the set, 'blocking' the action for the eyes in the audience. Elia Kazan, when lecturing on his directing for theatre, often told an amusing anecdote about an actor he instructed to pace from one side of the stage to the other during a particular passage in a play; when the puzzled actor asked 'why?', Kazan supplied a no-nonsense explanation: 'It gets cold on the left, so you move to the right where it's warmer. But then it get too warm, so you move left again. And so on'. Kazan simply wanted – *needed*, through whatever intuitive sense informing his craft and art – to have that actor on the move throughout that scene. If probed as to any deeper purpose, Kazan might well have responded along the lines of what De Palma regularly trots out to inter-viewers – 'I like filming beautiful women in motion' – or what Vincente Minnelli once notoriously replied to the editors of *Movie* magazine about an ostentatious camera movement in his *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1962):

> *Why does the camera go up now?*
>
> Because he's watching the sky.
>
> <div align="right">Cameron (1972, p. 12)</div>

It is instructive, today, to briefly return to *Movie* co-editor Ian Cameron (1937–2010) and his defence of the publication of this exchange in the early 1960s, which so many people in the journalistic film world of the time found obvious and ridiculous – a sure sign of all that was wrong and pretentious in the campaign for serious, intellectual cinema criticism. Cameron offered four possible justifications for the camera craning up as the character played by Glenn Ford cries over the dead man in his arms. There is an *emotional* aspect (the actor is rendered small and cowering in the frame); a *symbolic* level (the camera looks down in moral judgment); a *transitional* or linking function (the next shot shows those mythic Horsemen in the sky); and a matter of *orchestration*, in the sense that this shot adopts and extends the style of other camera move-ments in the film.

The twinning of a camera movement with an actor's gesture is thus part and parcel of an entire approach, on Minnelli's part, to *film style*, and to the craft of pleasurable, effective stylisation. The director's approach is, on inspection, logical and coherent – 'neither inevitable nor foolish', in Cameron's concluding words on the issue (Cameron, 1972, p. 12). It takes in the full gamut from practical purposes (to clearly position and view an actor's expression) to those we associate with interpretation,

such as symbolism and dramatic metaphor. It is worth keeping all these options and levels – and remembering to pay as much attention to nuts-and-bolts craft as to what moments in film can *mean* – as we proceed through a reconsideration of the legacy of *mise en scène*.

So, we could define a film director as the person who – at one level of their profession – prompts, arranges, pictures and captures (in the camera) a certain type of *spectacle*, some event great or small. Then he or she continues to deal with the moment captured – finding the right place, balance and tone for it – at all subsequent levels of production (editing, grading, scoring, sound mixing and so on). Or, to use a more idiomatic terminology proposed by the American film critic/painter Manny Farber (1917–2008) and his French-born, filmmaker colleague Jean-Pierre Gorin: directors are constantly *manœuvring* things into place (a process that begins with scripting), in order to make things happen before the camera; and then they must *work* that material to extract its maximum use-value within the film as a completed whole (Gorin, 2004, p. 36).

Of course, as critics or students of cinema, we are not obliged to stop at that immediate, surface level – the gestures, the moves, the rhythms, the colours – of what constitutes any filmic *mise en scène*. By the same token, we should not forget it, either. We should be careful not to depart, too brusquely, for the 'higher order abstractions' that we regularly translate the evidence of our senses into: meanings, symbols, metaphors, allego-ries, directorial intentions, 'world views'. When the now prematurely retired Hungarian director Béla Tarr is asked by audience members after a screening of one of his films, such as the eight-hour *Sátántangó* (1994) – and he is *always* asked – 'what did the cat/storm/bird/bottle/whatever *mean*?', he tends to roar back: 'There is no symbolism, no allegory, no metaphor! There is just what you see and hear on screen!' The French master Robert Bresson put it a little more mildly, but no less concretely, in 1966: 'Even when one makes the [voice-over] commentary of a film, this commentary is seen, felt, at first as a rhythm. Then it is a colour (it can be cold or warm); then it has a meaning. But the meaning arrives last' (Bresson, 1998, p. 462). Part of the argument of this book is a plea to always attend closely and full-bloodedly to this type of *materiality* in cinema – a materiality that works on the double register of *textuality* (concrete properties of the constructed, composed work) and the *specta-tor's emotions* (the affects that films create in us, the experiences we have of them).

In a sense, this book is about two parallel, overlapping but never exactly aligning histories, both of which (confusingly) are regularly conflated

under the same, general name of *mise en scène*. There is *mise en scène* as the global history – still to be fully, comprehensively written – of how film-makers made their films, what structures and effects of style they created in their work; this could be called a *history of forms* in cinema. Then there is *mise en scène* as the history (again, global) of what critics, theorists and commentators have said, written and thought in their quest to define and use tools to understand the films they see, study, analyse and transmit to others. We often like to assume that these two histories are one, that they proceed in lockstep together: cinema moves and changes, and critical/analytical language goes with that flow. Sometimes, this is indeed the case – although perhaps we will not grasp the fact that some critic, toiling somewhere in the world, 'nailed' a significant moment of change in cinema, until years later. And such a *décalage* – Jacques Rancière (2012) would call it an inevitable but enabling *gap* – between cinema and the writing about cinema is par for the course. Sometimes our analytical tools are stuck in the past while the cinema has marched far beyond us; at other times the latest, new-fangled tools happen to prove their worth when suddenly levering open a forgotten chest of film history from long ago, never properly attended to.

This book gives equal weight to these dual histories of film and criticism – because the idea of *mise en scène*, if it is anything, is the attempt to build a bridge across the gap between them, to marry the movement of a critical thought with the vivid details of those (to use the title of Gilberto Perez's 1998 book) 'material ghosts' we call films.

Note

1. Intriguingly, in the 1950s television version of this ballet (viewable on YouTube) which De Palma himself consulted, the director clearly does everything to *avoid* having the dancers look directly into the camera/mirror: they are filmed from the side, from slightly above, any way except frontally. Since the international release of *Passion*, there have appeared many contemporary stagings of this dance on YouTube, some recorded from simultaneous, multiple cameras; but none that I have seen use De Palma's bold, frontal – and perfectly logical – into-the-lens technique.

1
A Term That Means Everything, and Nothing Very Specific

When it comes to the hallowed, foundational terms that shape the field of film studies – words like *montage* or *cinephilia* or *auteur* or *genre*, words that have launched a million books and articles – I have come to believe it is wise to take heed of the warning of Paul Willemen (1944–2012), as voiced in the 1990s (Willemen, 1994, p. 226). For him, such cherished words have rarely defined anything precise in cinema; rather, they mark a confusion, a fumbling attempt to pinpoint some murky confluence of wildly diverse factors. We need such terms, he agreed, but we should not *believe* or trust in them too fervently. Rather, they present a smokescreen (or, in the psychoanalytic terms used by Willemen, a 'neurotic knot' or displacement): for some commentators, tantalising as a mystery that can prompt further work into their meaning and origin; or, for those who obediently trot them out as rote learning, simply asphyxiating. Has anyone ever involved in teaching film not experienced, at some time or other, that horrible, crunching sensation when, once a strict definition of something has been uttered in the classroom – no matter how provisionally, no matter how quickly freighted with numerous qualifications – you know that, all the same, you have just helped to further perpetuate that smokescreen of *faux* certainty?

Willemen, as it happens, was not too fond of the concept or buzzword of *mise en scène*, either – when he did refer to it (which was not often), it was prefixed with a withering 'so-called' – implying that it was either a bad term for the specific thing in cinema it was trying to describe, or that what it was trying to describe was a much vaster phenomenon than anything countenanced by the term. More recently, Jacques Rancière has respectfully but categorically defined the concept of *mise en scène* as a 'coarse phenomenology'. Speaking primarily of cinephilia and

cinephiles – the mad love (and lovers) of the filmic medium – Rancière declares:

> [Cinephilia] asserted that cinema's greatness did not lie in the metaphysical loftiness of its subject matter nor in the visibility of its plastic effects, but in the imperceptible difference in the way it puts traditional stories and emotions into images. Cinephiles named this difference *mise-en-scène* without really knowing what it meant. [...] Cinephilia explains its loves only by relying on a rather coarse phenomenology of *mise-en-scène* as the establishment of a 'relation with the world'. (Rancière, 2012)

The accusations of Willemen and Rancière – ardent cinephiles both, let it be said – have more than a little truth to them. But *mise en scène*, it seems to me, is worth persevering with – not least because it already constitutes a historic object, a body of exploratory thought into cinema that can be productively revisited today. Even better, as I hope to show, it can still be used to animate much-needed explorations into cinema's materiality.

So, what is *mise en scène* exactly – or inexactly? Any attempt to arrive at a workable definition needs to go down several different, discursive paths.

A clever film critic

It is sometimes useful to start an investigation into the meaning of a word or term by heading right out into the big, wide, vulgar world – far from the academic cloisters where we debate fine distinctions and micro-histories. *Mise en scène* is not as well known or popularised a term as auteur or genre or even montage; nonetheless, it gets around. In the early 1990s, I conducted an informal survey of occurrences of the term in mainstream media reporting of film, television and show business. Many media journalists, after all, harbour a sliver of academic film studies training in their dark past – and, if so, they like to both boast about it and disown it in the same, dazzling manoeuvre.

Matt Groening, brilliant creator of *The Simpsons*, penned a comic strip in 1985 titled 'How to Be a Clever Film Critic' as part of his *Life in Hell* series (1977–2012); it contains a challenge 'For Advanced Clever Film Critics Only!', which is: 'Can you use *mise-en-scène* in a review that anyone will finish reading?'. The American celebrity gossip magazine *Spy* mounted an exposé of the wicked ways of Jerry Lewis

(whose 'sloppy, uneven filmmaking', we are authoritatively told, was confused by silly, French critics with 'Godardian antiformalism' – strong stuff for *Spy* readers), hunted down those few, special individuals (including Harry Shearer from *The Simpsons*) who had seen Lewis' unreleased *The Day the Clown Cried* from the early 1970s, and drolly enquired: 'The *mise-en-scène* was problematic?' (Handy, 1992, p. 45). *Spy* long ago went the way of the dinosaur, but another glossy American showbiz magazine, *Premiere*, is still with us today, mainly in online form; a typical opinion piece from those years began: 'Film theorists endlessly debate the influence of Renoiresque *mise-en-scène* versus Eisensteinian montage. We say: Get a *life!*' (Gelman-Waxner, 1991, p. 61).

To those merry journalists and entertainers, *mise en scène* is a pretentious term – concerned with something at best secondary but largely inessential to the filmmaking process. It would seem, to draw out the spirit of these parodies, that style – which, in the broadest sense, means the ways in which the narrative material of a film is treated, shaped and delivered to the viewer – is an afterthought in cinema, for the delectation of only the most esoteric specialists. (I can still hear ringing in my ears, from two decades ago, the voice of a newspaper sub-editor who answered my query about why he had cut my finely wrought paragraph on the camera angles in Jane Campion with the immortal words: 'Camera angles? Who gives a damn about camera angles?'). Indeed, comments such as these take us directly back to the era when critics first felt compelled to coin (or appropriate) and fight for the term *mise en scène*.

Within the popular media, this *mise en scène* pendulum can also swing to the other extreme. Staying within my early 1990s survey, I recall hearing the Australian reviewer Peter Castaldi, reporting for radio on the Cannes Film Festival screening of Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), make the following claim: 'It has what the French call *mise en scène*, which is direction – with a special touch'. This effectively flips the popular assumption that *mise en scène* is essentially about ornamentation or sheer decoration – the special touch of colour, finery or glamour added to a scene or project – into a positive rather than negative valuation: Luhrmann is certainly a well-chosen man for that job, as he has proved in all his subsequent films, such as *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and *The Great Gatsby* (2013).

Leaving aside, for the moment, that enigmatic and ineffable 'touch', note the direct equation that Castaldi casually made on air: *mise en scène* is direction, direction is *mise en scène*. In a more recent

journalistic quip concerning Lena Dunham's TV series *Girls* (2012–), Australian humourist Helen Razer (2014) waxes even more absolute: 'Nudity becomes *mise en scène*'. Such stark vacillation within media discourses – *mise en scène* is nothing, or it is everything – is echoed all the way up and down the history of film criticism and theoretically informed analysis.

So let us return, now, not to the theatrical origins of *mise en scène* or its very first mentions in the global literature on film, but to a particularly significant primal scene of *mise en scène* talk: the 1950s.

Style matters

In Europe in the 1950s, and in the English-speaking world in the early 1960s, the idea of *mise en scène* was a critical spearhead designed to fight entrenched, impoverished, casual notions about cinema inherited from other artistic fields, such as theatre and literature. André Bazin (1918–1958) at the head of the *Cahiers* team in France, Andrew Sarris (1928–2012) in *Film Culture* and other US publications, José Luis Guarner (1937–1993) at *Film Ideal* in Spain: all found themselves faced with the need to combat the idea that a film is essentially its *screenplay* – the prejudice that *this* is, common sensically, where its theme, structure and meaning reside – and that the work of style in cinema is basically mere technique, simple decoration, 'information delivery' or at best an efficient *illustration* of pre-set artistry. (The battle still rages today in many industrial debates over the director's 'possessory credit' as author of a film – a legal triumph vociferously challenged by many screenwriters.) *Form* was something of a dirty word, in those days, to many: if a director's technique was too evident, too visible – if the ornamentation was too extreme – it was seen as a betrayal of the content, in excess of the duty to tell a story well and clearly ... and thus an indulgent formalism.

Early attempts by sympathetic cinephile-critics to define the elements of *mise en scène* were, to be blunt, pretty vague – gestures toward an aesthetic, rather than a careful or patient inventory of its component parts. No wonder that, in the early 1970s, Brian Henderson labelled *mise en scène* the 'grand undefined term' of film studies (Henderson, 1980, p. 49) – since he was looking back, for example, to Alexandre Astruc's reflection from 1959, 'What is *mise en scène*?', a lyrical piece which answers its titular question only with the broadest and most suggestive formulations, such as 'a way of extending states of mind into movements of the body', 'that mysterious distance between the author

and his characters' or 'a particular way of needing to see and to show' (Astruc, 1985, pp. 267–68).

Much the same can be said of the formulations in Michel Mourlet's 1959 manifesto 'On an Ignored Art' – written by a today still active expert practitioner of *belles lettres* who eschews close, formal analysis in favour of a (far from dishonourable) vision of criticism based on 'awakening in the reader, by means of poetic communication, the feeling that a work arouses in us' (Mourlet, 1987, p. 21). Thus, for Mourlet, the attempt to summarily define *mise en scène* calls forth another flurry of fairly abstract terms, elements and elevated emotional states under the telling subheading 'Everything is in the *Mise en scène*':

> The curtains open. The house goes dark. A rectangle of light presently vibrates before our eyes. Soon it is invaded by gestures and sounds. Here we are absorbed by that unreal space and time. More or less absorbed. The mysterious energy which sustains with varying felicities the swirl of shadow and light and their foam of sounds is called *mise en scène*. It is on *mise en scène* that our attention is set, organising a universe, covering the screen – *mise en scène*, and nothing else. (qtd in Hillier, 1985, pp. 223–24)

According to Sam Rohdie's retrospective account in 2006 of the rise of stylistic criticism in the 1950s:

> In general, *mise en scène* denotes a new attitude to the cinema opposed to the literary cinema of the 1930s that turned scripts into images [...] *Mise en scène*, as used by the Nouvelle Vague critics, referred to a specifically 'cinematic' and natural, realistic rendering of emotion and expression conveyed less by dialogue and the script, than by décor, performance, expression linked to the actor, to his movements and gestures, also to settings and the use of the camera and lighting. (Rohdie, 2006)

There are problems with this formulation, such as the assertion that, in Nicholas Ray's films, 'it is what you see and the way you see it, not what is said, that is crucial' – but the main point still holds good: *style matters*. It is, in fact, crucial and decisive, as well as determining over our experiences as film viewers and listeners. The challenge today is not to get caught in the old, received traps and biases and, accordingly, to expand our sense of what constitutes style or form in cinema – including its action upon us as spectators.

Pure *mise en scène?*

Critics in the 1950s sometimes, no doubt, erred too far in the direction of asserting that a film is not its screenplay (or the novel or play from which that screenplay is derived). A cult of *pure style* was the inevitable outcome of this – and many argumentative convolutions based on spurious assumptions arose to back it up. In 1957, for example, the celebrated Cuban novelist G. Cabrera Infante concluded his review of *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) by Vincente Minnelli – a director of whose work he was particularly fond – by citing 'two transitions that are poetic instants' raising themselves far above the theatrical source (by Robert Anderson) that is merely 'as successful as it is mediocre'. Here is his description of the first of these instants:

> The woman has attempted futilely to hold back the boy from going to his date with the waitress because she knows that he is going to prove his manliness by destroying love. She appears at the window and looks towards the patio of the school, where, through some hedges and trees and the rain, there shines, in an inciting and malignant redness, the luminous sign of the café where the waitress works. The scene dissolves to another rain-streaked window where another woman, the waitress, closes the blind to initiate, once more almost in a mechanical caricature, the act of love which the conventions forbid to the first woman. (Cabrera Infante, 1991, p. 115)

Cabrera Infante concludes – how accurately, I am not sure – that such moments are 'of course, not in the play. They could not have been. Not only because they are images of pure cinema, but because they prove that the true poet is named Minnelli' (Cabrera Infante, 1991, p. 115). He assumes that his chosen moments are superior to anything in the original stage material (even though he still needs recourse to the scripted plot to evoke their particular, poetic pathos) and that, implicitly, Minnelli devised and added them.

Within the divided film culture scene of Paris in the 1950s, where the editors of *Présence du cinéma* (including Mourlet, Pierre Rissient and Jacques Lourcelles) tended to a 'style for style's sake' position, some critics within *Cahiers du cinéma* groped toward a workable combination or interrelation of style and subject. In the late 1990s, the Iranian political diplomat and former *Cahiers* contributor Fereydoun Hoyveda (1924–2006) fondly looked back in his website postings on the polemics of that time, amplifying (under the heading 'What is Mise en scene

[sic]?') what he first wrote in a programmatic article of 1960 titled 'Sunspots':

> In our Parisian group of the 1950s and 1960s we deemed that the 'thought' of a filmmaker appears through his 'mise-en-scene' [sic]. Indeed what matters in a film is the desire for order, composition, harmony, the placing of actors and objects, the choice of settings, the movements within the frame, the capturing of a gesture or a look; in short, the intellectual operation which has put an initial emotion and a general idea to work. 'Mise en-Scene' [sic] is nothing other than the 'technique' invented by each author-director to express the idea and establish the specific quality of his work. (Hoyveda, 1999; see also Hoyveda, 1986, p. 142)

José Luis Guarner, in his no-less programmatic essay of 1962, 'Parmenides' Glasses: Some Reflections on Criticism and its Practice' (2013), fought much the same battle against rearguard notions all around him. Influenced by Bazin, Guarner argues that *mise en scène* (in Spanish: *la puesta en escena*) is not mere technique, but a way of *regarding*, of expressing and embodying an attitude toward human beings and their relation to the world. He offers another Vincente Minnelli example, this time from the family melodrama *Home from the Hill* (1960).

The scene involves a gruff patriarch, Wade (Robert Mitchum), running verbal rings around Albert (Everett Sloane), a local citizen hoping to slyly marry his pregnant daughter off to Wade's son, Theron (George Hamilton) – who, unbeknownst to both discussants, is actually the child's father. Suitably humiliated and sent packing, Albert slinks out the door, down the driveway and all the way to the large front gate of the Wade residence. The film intercuts his sad journey with the action of Wade who, unnoticed by Albert, steps out onto the porch and – in a surprising gesture of civility – turns on the lights at the gate, so that Albert is no longer in total darkness. Albert waves his farewell thanks to Wade before exiting – and suffering the added humiliation of being noticed by a gossip-prone passer-by. Without going so far as Cabrera Infante in claiming that the lights detail 'could not have been' in the script, Guarner nonetheless seizes on this dialogue-less gesture by Wade as the essential element of the scene: 'This small action is enough to give an extraordinarily human dignity to the scene, at the same time revealing the director's profound respect for his characters' (Guarner, 2013).

It is intriguing that Guarner's post-film recall did not retain what is, for me, an even more striking instance, in this scene, of what critics in

the 1950s (and sometimes beyond) liked to call 'pure *mise en scène*'. After the lights go on and he has waved goodbye, the shamed Albert disappears, for a moment, into the pure darkness cast by the shadow of the gate's pillar – a fine example of the type of touch that Cabrera Infante regarded as a 'poetic instant'.

Yet this instant is also one that we could easily connect to larger, systematic *patterns* of meaning in the film involving light and dark, visibility and invisibility, shame and respectability, power and impotence, and so on. This was the type of interpretive mode followed up (sometimes only in a sketchy gesture toward the type of full-scale analysis that *could* be done, if only one had the time, means and opportunity) by the *Movie* and *Positif* critics in the 1960s. They went in search of pattern: motifs unfolding, articulated across the entire length of a film. This method, based more on logical structures than the sometimes purely lyrical effusions of the 1950s critics, has been mocked as the 'contrast and compare' school of critical analysis, faulted for 'the kind of mundane and myopic descriptiveness that has given close analysis such a bad run in the recent past' (Verhoeven, 2000) – thus assimilating it to the type of dreary, mechanical literary interpretation dutifully taught to young teenagers in dreary classrooms. But the notion of pattern remains an indispensable tool for any form of film analysis.

The landmark 1965 book *Hitchcock's Films* by Robin Wood offered, for its time, one of the boldest, pioneering illustrations of this approach (Wood 'revisited' it for a 1989 edition, again revised in 2002). Critics of this ilk were inexorably moving toward a more *holistic* appreciation of the interplay between screenwriting and *mise en scène* – especially when research uncovered the fact (as it did in relation to Nicholas Ray, for example, thanks to Bernard Eisenschitz's 1993 biography) that the director, although uncredited as writer (particularly in the Hollywood system), often had a crucial role in shaping the shooting script whether before or during production.

How is what

By the 1970s, critics and scholars including V.F. Perkins of *Movie* and Gérard Legrand of *Positif* had arrived at composing their major, book-length propositions on cinema aesthetics – distilling and refining the insights gained in the criticism practiced, month in and month out, within their respective magazines and related public forums. Faced with the sharp dissociation between form and content that most journalists,

non-cinephilic commentators and many filmgoers assumed as common sense reality – and also with the style-for-style's-sake excesses of the 1950s and 1960s – they fought this cultural combat in a new way. Their motto was (to use a chapter title from Perkins' lucid 1972 book *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*) *how is what* – and their mission was to demonstrate it, conclusively, in critical action. This was also the approach in Australia of the influential educationalist John C. Murray, author in the 1960s and early 1970s of two valuable pamphlets (1972, 1974) on film and television pedagogy.

I discuss aspects of Perkins' well-known book in the next chapter; here I would like to emphasise, for an overlapping but slightly different perspective, *Cinémanie*, Legrand's remarkable 1979 tome on film aesthetics – long out-of-print and ignored by virtually all contemporary commentators. Legrand (1927–1999), a remarkable figure, was involved with *Positif* magazine for 47 years as a monthly contributor and member of its editorial board; he was, as well, a close associate of and collaborator with André Breton in the Surrealist movement, an accomplished poet, art historian, and a philosopher by profession. He was also – and this is all too rare in the often insular milieu of French intellectual culture – a diligent reader of English-language criticism; his book contains several respectful nods toward *Film as Film* specifically.

For Legrand – as, simultaneously in Germany, for Frieda Grafe – cinema's relation to the pictorial arts (especially painting) and architecture are foregrounded in the way he views, grasps and analyses a film; his *iconological* inspiration, in this regard, derives essentially from the work in art history by Erwin Panofsky (1983). Strong sequences in film, for him, are less discrete *scenes* than physical *events*, in which a director seizes a space or place (whether nominally real or wholly invented), animates it with action and invests it with intensity and meaning through deploying all the expressive resources of film (resources that he is at pains to enumerate). These located, physical events – adding up to the total sequence of scenes that comprise a film – then enter into various sorts of poetic correspondence: uncanny similarity, ironic inversion, magical reinvention, parodic recall, and so on.

Equally wary of both the 'montage cult' issuing from Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) and his epigones, and of Bazin's (over)emphasis on the long take (or what Barrett Hodsdon [1992] later reformulated as 'open image stylistics'), Legrand develops an approach that is at once dialectical and holistic. He broadly agrees with Perkins' view that, in narrative cinema, 'to design an effect involves devising the means to make it credible by

locating it within the film's world [...] the maintenance of credibility acts as a necessary discipline' (Perkins, 1972, pp. 96–97). But he also emphasises a more primary level of what could be called the *cinematic signifier*, a concept I explore further in the following chapter.

Although Legrand insists that 'the narrative nature of film nowhere enters into direct (a priori) conflict with its plastic nature' (p. 76), his grounding in the visuality of the iconological and iconographic leads him to an intense valuation of this plastic aspect – that is, the (in the first place) purely aesthetic or spectacular attributes of film – which distinguishes him from the central focus on a film's *dramatic* values characteristic of Perkins, Wood and many others in their wake. Legrand draws upon a film-philosophy source so far unmined in English-language cultures: the Italian philosopher Guido Calogero, who wrote in his 1947 *Lezioni di filosofia* ('Philosophy Lessons') that:

> In the cinematograph, the substantial figuration, which is *asemantic*, utilises means other than those of literary semanticity [...] The actor is called upon to exhaust, thanks to the external technique of his living person, the entire asemantic vision of the author [...] The mass public follows a film like a novel, but the film is an asemantic narrative, a texture of tableaux that face front and reflect life [...] The director works to place in movement and harmonise the figures and gestures of his actors, exactly as a painter works at moving and arranging, according to his whims, the living images of his painting. (qtd in Legrand, 1979, pp. 76–77)

For Legrand, the *shot* is the crucial unit of film stylistics – with the editing between shots playing a subtle, transitional, non-determining, often purely technical role. Where the shot allows that particular unfolding of *screen spectacle* which is, for him, the essence of cinema – note the resonance here with the *Présence du cinéma* writers, who would broadly agree with Legrand's characterisation of the filmic medium as a 'text without language' or a 'spectacle-text' – obvious editing effects strike him as too external to the represented action, too obviously manipulative of it and too crude in their stylistic action. Without fetishising the long take per se, Legrand accords a major stylistic role to the mobile camera's progressive *reframings* of whatever scene it films – indeed, for him, it is essentially reframing that articulates connections between elements and creates the possibility of comparing different pictorial arrangements or compositions (thus creating multiple images or 'shots', loosely defined, within a single shot).

Legrand is concerned to establish a workable approach to analysing style in cinema, and a categorisation of the basic, different styles (which he nominates as *closed*, *open* and *composite*). His angle of attack here is unusual and disarming. Unlike so many analysts past and present, he does not proceed, in the first place, via a counting or breakdown of shots and angles; rather, he attempts to seize the simultaneous interplay of three, decisive levels. These are: the multiple *rhythms* of a film (multiple because they are formed from the simultaneous interaction of shot duration, the rhythm of the dramatic action, and the 'more or less discontinuous rhythm of exchanges of looks, gestures, relations of the actor with the objects around him'); the pictorial *framings* and their content; and lastly the *surface* elements that include, for him, the actors' performances and their 'photogenic' quality, the visual aspects of the cinematography, and the film's range of colours (in which he includes the shadings of black-and-white).

The most detailed example of stylistic analysis offered in *Cinémanie* concerns a sequence from a film today little known outside Italy (and possibly not very much inside it, either): Luigi Comencini's *Infanzia, vocazione e prime esperienze di Giacomo Casanova Veneziano* (aka *Casanova: His Youthful Years*, 1969). Legrand describes a scene in which young Casanova (Leonard Whiting) plays a violin serenade, flanked by adoring women at his feet; after the breakdown of this initial tableau into closer, detail shots, an 'admirable camera movement' ascends to frame, in the distance, the character of Angela (Cristina Comencini) behind a window, also singing. The camera descends, and a cut takes us to another angle on Casanova: his body tends to the left (where Angela is situated, off-screen) while the other women's bodies tend to the right, thus 'separating' him from the object of his desire. Night falls as the music, and the scene, ends.

'The meaning of the scene', suggests Legrand, 'is multiple, without recourse to any symbol foreign to the film' – a position very similar to *Film as Film*'s insistence on 'credibility' as a necessary artistic discipline. The *Casanova* scene is:

> [...] at once 'moral', social (the hero 'rises' towards the chateau's summit, but must choose between a romantic singer and the far more appetising 'cousins' who are at his feet), and ontological (the 'flight of time' banishes the moment of dream and uncertain pleasures, but art – the 'success of a life' according to the historical Casanova, the 'portrait of an era' according to Comencini – sublimates it and fixes its contradictions). (Legrand, 1979, pp. 90–91)

Legrand also notes the pattern of echoes that springs from the scene: the situation of Casanova 'between two women' will be replayed in the film's 'final parodic ballet', and inverted (in terms of gender) in the depiction of his mother 'between two libertines' (p. 91).

Here we can see at work the fused approach that Legrand takes to the interweavings and interconnections that comprise his chosen scene. He opposes the isolating of formal elements, or the defining of coded 'minimal units' associated with linguistics-based semiotic analysis of cinema (against which his book wages a sustained polemic); rather, as he asserts, 'neither objects in the décor nor the actors' gestures are as he asserts, 'neither objects in the décor nor the actors' gestures are "minimal" and indivisible unities on screen, they are not even always "minimal" and indivisible unities on screen, they are not even always "isolatable" unities' (Legrand, 1979, p. 87). In relation to Comencini's *Casanova*, Legrand evokes, in words, an unfolding *swirl* of expressive movements (of, variously, the camera, the bodies and the music) and the 'unpacking' of the initial tableau with its bodily postures (a pictorial and theatrical arrangement, at first static and then gradually animated within the carefully arranged architectural space) in order to arrive at a cluster of meanings involving fixity and flight, art and life, desire and romance. As he asserts, good films (marked, as for Perkins, by a high degree of 'internal coherence') manage to travel (almost miraculously) from an initially asemantic magma of material and sensory elements to a specifically wrought '"philosophy" of space and its contents, a philosophy not reducible to an ideology' (*Cinémanie*, 1979, p. 94). This approach is taken up with even greater rigour by Legrand's colleague at *Positif*, Alain Masson, in his critical practice and his 1994 book, *Le Récit au cinéma*.

Where does *mise en scène* enter, as a term, into Legrand's system? Where Perkins' book pointedly avoids giving it a primary role (he uses a wider and more specific range of plain-language functions such as camera viewpoint, gesture and so on), *Cinémanie* proposes its own eccentric, typographical rendering of *mise en scène* as MISE-EN-SCENE (at least for the first few pages that he estimates his readers can bear it). This is in order to indicate the more inclusive range of functions that his term carries in comparison with *mise en scène* as traditionally wielded in film criticism. For Legrand, *mise en scène* (I, too, shall now drop the capitalisation and dashes) is an activity which is 'receivable by the spectator and blessed with diverse "powers"'; it can appear only via a 'network of mechanisms' and unities of *visual-sonorous reception* (Legrand, 1979, p. 22).

Thus, *mise en scène* comes to function in *Cinémanie* as a stand-in for the multi-faceted creature which is film style itself – but in a particular,

restricted definition which Legrand views as appropriate to the cinematic medium, namely *style as spectacle*, style as display. This is very different from some of the more mystified trends in 1960s criticism, such as Andrew Sarris' appeal to an enigmatic 'interior meaning' in a director's work (the 'ultimate glory of the cinema as an art', it is 'extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material', 1963) or Jean Douchet's insistence on the spookily 'occult', hidden dimension of a cherished auteur such as Alfred Hitchcock (Douchet, 2003). Legrand could well have adopted Perkins' formulation of 1990 that meanings in cinema are not hidden – rather, they are staged and filmed, shown and unfolded for us, if we are able to intuit the 'structure of understandings' that the film has built.

In the strict sense

From the very start of the campaign on behalf of detailed, appreciative film criticism, we can detect this inexorable sliding from a specific term, *mise en scène*, to the larger matter of film style – and then further still, until it encompasses something as grand as film creation or cinematic artistry itself. This is a mixed blessing: good, because it has inspired a lot of passionate work and offered some tools (albeit fragmentary and partial) for carrying it out; bad, because it creates confusions and blockages.

Look back at Hoyveda's list: it leaps from very particular, material tropes, such as 'the placing of actors and objects', all the way to 'the idea' and the quality of a director's work. This confusion was inevitable in 1960, because much was at stake, in cultural terms: not only the correct valuing of the contribution of film directors, but also rescuing from almost instant oblivion many of the actual films they had made, especially if in little-respected popular genres such as the costume-adventure film (Fritz Lang, Jacques Tourneur and Max Ophüls all went there), the Western, the gangster movie or the musical comedy.

Many subsequent deployments of the term, however, including some I have already surveyed in this chapter, will be haunted by this historic ambiguity. On the one hand, the term seems to mean (a little mystically) *everything*, cinema as an expressive art form becoming synonymous with *mise en scène*; on the other hand – as Rohdie so casually remarked in his 2006 survey – '*mise en scène* is nothing very specific'.

Many attempts have, however, been made to specify it – and these, too, present problems. On the one hand, strict definitions spring from a laudably rational, empirical, scientific turn of mind: I do believe that

we need to be able, in certain circumstances, to *constrain* or specify what we take *mise en scène* to mean or cover in reference to all the operations and levels at play in the construction of a film. Editing, for instance, enters into many significant relations with *mise en scène* – a frequently overlooked notion, which I will be at pains to stress later – but is not reducible to it. On the other hand, and inevitably, rationally circum-scribed definitions tend to brutally amputate the naive, once-upon-a-time excitement which comes with claiming that *mise en scène* is some magic key to the intricacies of film style.

Let us cite a classroom favourite: the strict definition of *mise en scène* from an early edition of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's well-known textbook *Film Art: An Introduction*, which refers back to the stage origin of the term.

> In the original French, the term means 'having been put into the scene', and it was first applied to the practice of stage direction. Film scholars, extending the term to film direction as well, use the term to signify the director's control over what appears in the film frame. As you would expect from the term's theatrical origins, mise-en-scene includes those aspects that overlap with the art of the theatre: setting, lighting, costume, and the behaviour of the figures. In controlling the mise-en-scene, the director *stages the event* for the camera. (Bordwell and Thompson, 1979, p. 75)

Thus, for Bordwell and Thompson, *mise en scène* denotes a specific ensemble of formal elements, and definitely does not include the 'cutting or the camera movements, the dissolves, or offscreen sound' of a film (p. 75). This formulation is more ambiguous and slippery than it might, at first, appear: *mise en scène* is staged for the camera, but does not itself include the work of the camera, beyond the rather static notion of pictorial composition. But, at least in fictional cinema, there is never (or very rarely) a discrete, purely theatrical level in the actual practice of filmmaking: everything that is designed, staged, lit, dressed and so forth, is done with a particular vantage point, a particular angle – or rather, a concatenation of various perspectives and angles – in mind. (It is common practice, for example, for only so much of a set to be built as will be included within the camera's purview.) In a sense, Bordwell and Thompson are using a methodological couplet I will explore later – Étienne Souriau's distinction (1953) between the *profilmic* and the *filmic* – but in a way that is not truly just, or entirely helpful to stylistic analysis.

Staging, a term that Bordwell foregrounds in his later work (1997, 2005a), is one I will also use. It, too, has a theatrical ring; but when Bordwell speaks, for example, of staging in depth, he is referring to the combined action of the perspective taken by the camera (and often designed into the set) and the actions, figures and objects arranged before it. If we ever need a decent, English translation for *mise en scène*, staging is not bad. At the very least, it focuses an important element of the concept that I want to preserve throughout the argument of this book: *mise en scène* is indeed the art of arranging, choreographing and displaying – and an essential part of this, in many films of many different kinds, happens in what is staged (predominantly, actors in an environment) for a camera.

The time-space continuum

To take a contemporary use of the term which responds to a quite different, 'pioneering' spirit, rather than to the sober need for a limited definition, we can turn to John Gibbs' invaluable 2002 book *Mise-en-scène: Film Style and Interpretation* – although I already have a problem with the immediate coupling of style with interpretation! In his text, Gibbs enthusiastically endorses the widest possible definition and appli-cation of the term as first suggested in a breathless 1961 text by Robin Wood:

> A director is about to make a film. He has before him a script, camera, lights, décor, actors. What he does with them is mise-en-scène, and it is precisely here that the artistic significance of the film, if any, lies. The director's business is to get the actors (with their co-operation and advice) to move, speak, gesture, register expressions in a certain manner, with certain inflections, at a certain tempo [...] It is his busi-ness to place the actors significantly within the décor, so that the décor itself becomes an actor; with the advice and co-operation of the cameraman, to compose and frame the shots; regulate the tempo and rhythm of movement within the frame and the movement of the camera; to determine the lighting of the scene. In all this the direc-tor's decision is final. All this is mise-en-scène.
>
> The movement of the film from shot to shot, the relation of one shot to all the other shots already taken or not, which will make up the finished film, cutting, montage, all this is mise-en-scène. [...] It is also what fuses all these into one organic unity [...] the tone and atmos-phere of the film, visual metaphor, the establishment of relationships

between characters, the relation of all parts to the whole: all this is mise-en-scène. [...] One can sum up by defining mise-en-scène, with Doniol-Valcroze, quite simply as 'the organisation of time and space'. (qtd in Gibbs, 2002, pp. 56–57)

Somewhere between the strict (Bordwell and Thompson) and the loose (Wood) we find, today, various positions on *mise en scène* that equate it – as Legrand does – with some specific aspect of aesthetic style, or a particular bundle of stylistic components and operations. Thus, Barrett Hodsdon's move from a 'basic definition' ('the staging of action before the camera in a fictive context') to a 'more elaborate working definition' which is: 'the precise placement of actors and objects before the camera in various spatial, pictorial and rhythmic combinations' (Hodsdon, 1992, p. 74). Or Thomas Elsaesser's useful shorthand: *mise en scène* equals 'visual rhetoric' (Elsaesser, 1981, p. 10), a concept that has the virtue of evoking the ways in which not only each image is arranged (staged) expressively – which tends to be the focus of much *mise en scène* criticism – but also how diverse images are arranged in relation to each other, thus bringing in editing, overall treatments of the image (such as colour grading, sepia, saturation, etc.) and the large area of special effects, both in the digital and pre-digital eras.

All that auteurism allowed

Bound up in the historic description or inflation of *mise en scène* as the height – indeed, the very definition – of film style is a special kind of myth, or what Hodsdon calls a *mystique*, which has become an acute part of cinephile culture. In this myth, *mise en scène* is more than merely a special touch or magic ingredient stirred into the soup; rather, it comes to designate a particular *moment* or *stage* in filmmaking which is the highest, quintessential moment of cinematic creation. Wood expresses the drama of this decisive moment in a nutshell: 'He has before him a script, camera, lights, décor, actors ...'. There is a kind of primal scene in play here: the auteur weaving his or her *mise en scène* right on the spot, on the set, during filming. This is a theory of *production*, in the industrial sense – not pre-production planning or post-production treatments but what is known as principal photography or, more colloquially, 'the shoot'. It privileges what the director captures on film – the staged pro-filmic – and how the camera frames and apprehends it. Even a commentator such as Hodsdon momentarily betrays this reductive, fantasising tendency when he speaks lovingly of 'the mobile camera

[that] could almost imperceptibly shift a narrative from a prosaic to a poetic mode (Max Ophüls, Orson Welles, Vincente Minnelli, Samuel Fuller)' (Hodsdon, 1992, p. 81).

Of course, the moment of shooting, the production phase, is important – but only (I will argue) as important as every other level and stage in the art and craft of film direction. If we seek a holistic and authentic appreciation of film style, we need to give up the myth of the divinely inspired director on the set, conjuring movie magic with an inspired camera movement, a clever rearrangement of décor, the tweaking of a lighting pattern, or the welcoming of a spontaneous gesture from an actor. Not completely, of course: movie lore is full of tales which convince us that this type of inspired moment of creation does indeed happen, and perhaps often – although not always solely because of the director! But we need to have done with the dream that 'creation on set' is the *only* or *primary* site where a film is made, or where it becomes art.

Why did we ever fall for this myth? Auteurism deserves some of the blame. Not for its essential, irrefutable premise – that the director, while rarely working or inventing alone, is nonetheless the central, organising point of the creative process, the one who can implement a cohering, systematic vision – but for some of the baggage that, historically, has become attached to it. Since the notion of *mise en scène* arose, in no small part, from the attempt in the 1950s to artistically valorise Hollywood products of the studio era, the director was usually pictured as someone surrounded by constraints and interventions – particularly at the pre- and post-production stages. The script was pre-set, the actors were already cast, the contract set designers and costumiers were wheeled in to provide their usual contribution, the editing was often out of the director's hands... There is no doubt some reality in this picture; after all, an auteur such as Josef von Sternberg delighted in boasting – however disingenuously – that he came onto the set in order to weave arabesques of light and shadow around whatever awful script to which he had been assigned (Sternberg, 1988).

Critics were, however, a little too eager to accept this scenario as the basis for their analytical practice. Even the sophisticated attempt by Peter Wollen, in the late 1960s, to redefine auteurism in a hopefully scientific manner fell prey to the myth: for him, a director's 'core thematic' is to be deciphered by the critical mind 'screening out the noise' (in an information-systems sense) added by the studio system, genre, collaborators, screenplay conventions, and so on (Wollen, 2013). It is little wonder, then, that in this fanciful imagining of what it is that a director does and how he or she communicates via the medium of film, the moment

of shooting would become *the* decisive moment of creation – because, logically, it can be construed (and this, too, is something of a fantasy) as the virginal, untouchable stage of that process. Yet the powers and resources of expressivity in any art form cannot be reduced to a sole stage or moment when a set of given materials is 'transcended' – a truly Romantic notion.

Apart from its role in one cultural war or another, *mise en scène* as a bandied-about term in the 1950s and 1960s was also linked to a particular kind of experience: cinephile experience. Hodsdon relates it to 'critical euphoria' – the delight in discovering films and sharing their most dazzling, virtuosic moments – and an era of 'phenomenological criticism' (coarse or otherwise) before the rise of a more systematic, rigorous, hard-line theoretical approach in the 1970s. Yes, he admits, the term was vague – but, precisely because of that, intoxicating; it allowed cinephiles to gesture to something that set their cinema experience apart from, on the one hand, 'the obvious and basic trademarks of filmic storytelling that normally ensnared the public' and, on the other, the encroachment of television, which, on a daily basis, cheapened the resources of visual rhetoric in its programs and, indeed, in its broadcast schedules, brutally 'assimilated, downgraded and fractured' the movies of the past (Hodsdon, 1992, p. 73). No wonder there was a lust in the air for a little transcendence – as well as a particular type of charged nostalgia.

In the mood

In recent years, some scholars and critics have revived the concept of *mise en scène* in the context of a general engagement with *affect* – the spectator's emotional states triggered by a film – over and above the literary or dramatic niceties of thematic meaning. This has had important consequences for the current conceptualisation of form and its action in cinema. The Australian scholar Anne Rutherford, for instance, eschews use of the word *style* because of its connotation (in many minds) of something extraneous or merely decorative, while proposing *mise en scène* to be usefully synonymous with 'energetic process [...] that organic unity, that elusive quality of flow and energy that moves a film and moves us as spectators with it' (Rutherford, 2012, p. 305; see also Rutherford, 2011).

This, at first glance, seems not too far removed from Mourlet's or Astruc's rhapsodies circa 1959; but the definition comes into its own

when Rutherford analyses (in films by Wong Kar-wai, Quentin Tarantino, Lee Myung-se and others) 'the setting-in-motion of spatio-temporal relationships' (Rutherford, 2012, p. 302). In this account, the dynamism of movement and the often highly artificial means that cinema uses to incite emotion become more crucial to a theory of film than notions of the photographic index, that 'piece of reality' caught by a camera. Here, cinema – while never entirely giving up its indexical connection to flesh-and-blood elements, such as actors – moves closer to animation and to abstraction.

What we might today call an energetic or dynamic approach to film style has its roots in the type of theoretical approaches to cinema that came to prominence during the 1970s. Jean-François Lyotard (1978), Stephen Heath (1981) and Claudine Eizykman (1976) all gestured to this type of understanding, using Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis as their model for introducing the action of psychic *drives* into both the making of films and their reception. Within a quite different critical tradition, Raymond Durgnat (1932–2002) also insisted on a complex, dynamic model of film structure: 'Structure must be functional, it exists to transfer loads and stresses in exactly the same way as an engineering structure exists to diffuse or to concentrate or to reorganise pressures which are exerted at particular points' (Durgnat, 1974, p. 262).

Some filmmakers – particular those of a reflective bent – would agree to this. For Chilean-born Raúl Ruiz, what Sigmund Freud outlined as the mechanisms of the *dream-work* – the condensations, displacements and overdeterminations that create what we see, hear and feel in our dreams – are the very operations of *mise en scène* itself. In a striking formulation, Ruiz called these Freudian mechanisms 'the *mise en scène* of the dream'. Hence, transposing this concept directly to cinema, all *mise en scène*, no matter whether it is working on the most obviously dreamlike or the most seemingly naturalistic material, has the function of 'producing displacements of intensity, and condensations' (Ruiz, 1999, p. 84). It warps and stresses the scene, twisting it potentially into a strange shape, or an unforeseen direction.

For my part, at the outset of this book, I want to hold onto Ruiz's sense of *mise en scène* as always potentially *transformative* – but transformative in ways that refer to the entire materiality of cinema, not solely the inspiration of a director on set or the phenomenological subjectivity of enraptured viewers. Transformation is not transcendence. *Mise en scène* can transform the elements of a given scene; it can transform a narrative's destination; it can transform our mood or our understanding as

we experience the film. Style is not a supplement to content; it *makes* content – and remakes it, too, in flight. Rutherford is at least partly right when she suggests that *mise en scène* 'is the only concept we have' (Rutherford, 2012, p. 305) that can help us capture this very material practice of magic. By the end of this book, I hope to have added a few more concepts.

2
Aesthetic Economies: The Expressive and the Excessive

What is involved in film style – or, to put it another way, what constitutes the aesthetics of the cinematic medium? What are the elements that comprise the stylistic ensemble of any given film, or of film as a medium in general? The basic inventory of stylistic elements in cinema can be uncontroversially listed: properties of the image (*mise en scène*, here including the pictorial elements of camera framing and production design); properties of the soundtrack; acting performance; and editing. More difficult is the task of deciding on the aesthetic *economy* of these elements in relation to each other, and to their narrative and thematic contexts; as well as in relation to their intended or actual effect on the cinema spectator. Aesthetic economy, a concept overlooked in much film studies, is the central subject of this chapter.

If we look at the history of aesthetic analysis of cinema since the 1950s, two broad, influential schools can be discerned, each of which posits its own preferred economy of how films work: the classical and the post-structural, which I call, respectively, the *expressive* and the *excessive*.

Style and subject

The academic study of cinema, in its relatively brief history, has been marked by a seismic changeover between a classical aesthetics, on one hand, and the various modernist and postmodernist movements that have followed and contested it, on the other – in particular, the intellectual movement that can loosely be described as poststructuralism. In public commentary and reflection on cinema, one can date this changeover fairly precisely around the mid-1960s, once the various 'new cinema' movements around the globe had spread the modernist innovations wrought by the Nouvelle Vague in France and post neorealist filmmakers

In this inquiry there is ultimately neither criminal nor crime. Our goal will simply be to raise a few hypotheses to cast light on the way that a film 'speaks' to us and what it 'speaks' about.

A film is a system, not of meanings, but of signifiers. We must go in search of these signifiers [...] and we can do this only by means of a non-intentional method; for in cinema, that art that fixes rhythms, substances, forms, figures and all kinds of other things onto a single support, the signifier can sit anywhere.

At the same time we must watch the film as though continually redis-covering it; we must retain the traces of our very first impressions, of all that was charming, intriguing or boring at first sight, while also never censoring what we have understood or not understood first time round. (Chion, 2002, pp. 37–38)

3
What Was *Mise en scène*?

One afternoon, when I was 15 years old – a precocious cinephile – I saw Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) for the first time, on a humble, domestic, black-and-white television set. Although Preminger was already a name on the lists (compiled from the standard coffee-table guide books of the era) of filmmakers and films I had convinced myself I needed to catch up with, I had no real notion, back then, of the kinds of intense cults of cinephilic adoration, situated all over the world at diverse moments of film criticism's history, that had been (and were still to be) inspired by his work from the 1940s through the 1960s.

But I shall never forget the emotion that I experienced that day – and on every subsequent viewing – when confronted with a particular moment 86 minutes into this great film. It was a moment of initiation for me – initiation into the mystique or cult of cinephilia. And that is a cult intimately connected with a certain apprehension of *mise en scène*.

The moment in question is part of a courtroom scene in which the lawyer Biegler (James Stewart) manages to finally introduce evidence of a rape into his defense of a soldier (Ben Gazzara). A scene of dynamic theat-ricality: both prosecution attorney Lodwick (Brooks West) and Biegler play to the crowd (the jury) in their very different ways. Preminger, who began his career as director in theatre, likes to play out scenes in what dramaturgs refer to as steps or beats, which break up, structure and mark out the stages of an event. Even more intricately, Preminger lays out, in a wide-angle, one-minute take, the back-and-forth of the tussle of power and persuasion between these two, clever men. First, Lodwick speaks while Biegler sits (Figure 3.1); then the latter stands and draws level with his opponent in order to deliver a monologue before Judge

Weaver (Joseph N. Welch) that ends with the line 'I *beg* the court...'; then he takes another step – now positioned quite close to the camera (Figure 3.2) – and lowers his voice into a dramatic whisper to repeat, 'I *beg* the court...to let me cut into the apple.' This is an instance where scripted dialogue and its delivery are an absolutely integral, superbly timed part of the *mise en scène* thrill. After the Judge deliberates for a few agonising shots and seconds, the tension breaks; the trial can continue

Figures 3.1–3.2 Anatomy of a Murder (Otto Preminger, 1959)

along this new line. In the parlance of screenwriters, the film has just reached a turning point, and swung itself up to a new level of intrigue.

How to explain the tearful euphoria that this moment unfailingly produces in me – and in so many faithful, multi-time viewers of *Anatomy of a Murder* – beyond the elementary fact that it signals an important breakthrough in the story? The effects of Preminger's *mise en scène* – and, indeed, of an entire era and ethos of *mise en scène* criticism – are caught in Brian Henderson's description of a similarly staged scene in Orson Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* (1966): 'a sequence of actions and movements', he writes, detailing the ever-changing relationship between the actors and the camera within long-held shots, 'in turn realizes a delicate and precise sequence of emotions' (Henderson, 1980, p. 61). This is the process that critics of the 1950s gave an even more condensed formulation: *mise en scène* as the movement of *bodies in space* – a space constantly defined and redefined by the camera.

Those were the days, my friend

In the same, Preminger-like spirit, when the Italian director Sergio Leone died in 1989, his one-time screenwriter Bernardo Bertolucci handily summed up an entire era of cinema – as well as critics' favourite way of speaking about it – by offering the following evocation of what *mise en scène* entailed: 'the relationship between the camera, the bodies of the people in front of it, and the landscape' (Bertolucci, 1989, p. 78) – and, although he was thinking primarily of the rocky deserts in Leone's Westerns, let us take the liberty of conceiving landscape, more inclusively, as *environment* to take in built as well as natural settings.

Bertolucci encapsulated here the classical, time-honoured way we imagine that *mise en scène* happens in practice: in a set or on location, the director sizes everything up, guides actors into their spots, finds a position for the camera (or a 'zone' for it, if there is to be movement)...and after various trials and amendments, *voila!*, it happens: movie magic – the kind of magic incarnated by James Stewart for Preminger when he leans forward, close to the camera, and whispers about that metaphoric apple. A chemistry of bodies and spaces, gestures and movements caught on film, irrefutably, no matter what was in the script beforehand, or whatever is to happen in the editing and soundtrack rooms later.

And this magic did happen, often. Before the films of Mizoguchi or Renoir, Preminger or Welles, Nicholas Ray or Satyajit Ray – or, indeed, Bertolucci – cinephiles rightly gasp at the expressive eloquence and power of that three-point relation of camera-actor-environment as it

clicks into place with precision. Recall Astruc's evocation: *mise en scène* is 'a way of extending states of mind into movements of the body' (Astruc, 1985, p. 267).

This is, on many levels, what I have described as a classical vision of *mise en scène*, what it is and how it works. And also something of a nostalgic vision, given that it tends to enshrine a particular period of cinema (roughly from the mid-1920s through to the mid-1960s) as *the* greatest period of filmic art and craft – judging later developments in film style as decadent aberrations or signs of a sloppy decline in standards. The directors' names I have listed above encapsulate not just a critical agenda, but also a certain *taste* in film. Raymond Bellour (2000a) looks back upon this classical vision of *mise en scène* – which he predominantly associates with a founding father of the notion, Astruc – as a precise, particular *culture*, an ideal, dream or 'cause' born of a certain time and place (in his account, France of the 1940s and 1950s). He describes this culture as corresponding 'to both an age and a vision of cinema, a certain kind of belief in the story and the shot' (Bellour, 2003, p. 29). Its rituals (viewing, writing, editing and publishing magazines or books, collecting stills, posters and soundtrack albums) tend to make a considered fetish of particular portions of world cinema – classical Hollywood, Japan in the 1950s, French cinema of the 1930s (especially by Renoir) among them – and quietly exclude the rest of global film history. We can see the ledger of this 1950s taste preserved in aspic, as it were, in the clips chosen and reworked by Jean-Luc Godard in his monumental *Histoire(s) du cinéma* series (1988–1998).

The orientation of this brand of *mise en scène* criticism, furthermore, is overwhelmingly towards *fiction* – with the particular 'belief in the story' or investment in the fictional world it allows; documentary, animation and experimental film – to name only the three most glaring absences – rarely got much of a look-in at *Cahiers* (some notable, exceptional articles aside) during the 1950s and well into the 1960s. Why not? The answer is simple: they did not match the lineaments of this particular dream-vision of what cinema was, what it did best.

Like Legrand, Bellour (2000a) even gives the very name of *mise en scène* a tweak. With a certain smile, he calls this nostalgic film culture *la-mise-en-scène* ('the' *mise en scène*), so as to distinguish it from other, potential conceptualisations of the term as a theory or method. But *la-mise-en-scène* is at once a circumscribed piece of cultural history, and a way of looking – and of making – that persists into our present day. There have been, and continue to be, many fine, sensitive commentaries by fans and scholars who have devoted their life to this particular

cause of classical *mise en scène* – indeed, it has somewhat returned to a position of intellectual favour today, for some very good reasons, after having been eclipsed for several decades (for examples, see Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002; Klevan, 2005; Keathley, 2011).

The classical conception of *mise en scène* is important not only because it has given birth to both marvellous, poetic films and impassioned, precise criticism, but because it still exists in contemporary cinema. It may not be the dominant style of our current period, but it is still *available*, at any moment, to any filmmaker, as a tradition, as a set of resources or strategies. We see *la-mise-en-scène*, often in strikingly unadulterated forms, in works by Stanley Kwan (*Rouge*, 1988), Todd Haynes (*Far From Heaven*, 2002, a homage to Sirk), Terence Davies (*The House of Mirth*, 2000), Christian Petzold (*Jerichow*, 2008) and many others. In this sense, *mise en scène* is not – and is never likely to be – entirely dead. Any filmmaker, in any audiovisual medium that allows the three-point interplay of body, space and environment, can still produce a moment as intense and effective as Preminger did in *Anatomy of a Murder*.

Film criticism is, beyond the evidence of words and images on pages (or online), also the story of personal allegiances, identifications, strong emotional investments – some of which take place publicly and socially, others which occur only within the deep recesses of the imaginary, part of the legendary solitude of the life-long cinephile personality type. As my little Preminger story shows, I cut my teeth as a young cinephile on *la-mise-en-scène*. I also felt the need, a little later, to rebel against it, to overthrow what I felt to be its constraining influence on me – to embrace what I saw as an opposing view or theory (i.e., poststructuralism) and a totally different culture of cinema. But, today, in this book, my overall aim is not to play favourites, choose sides or stage some imaginary Oedipal war of the generations; my goal is to synthesise diverse tools and approaches, wherever and however I can. So I will start by considering *mise en scène*, as it was once classically conceived, as one of these useful and worthy tools.

What did we have that we don't have now?

So what was this *mise en scène* of yesteryear – and still, if sometimes unfashionably, of today? Before departing far from the classical conception, I want to immerse us, for this chapter, right in it – to be certain about what is at stake when we evoke and explore this area, and not merely dismiss it with a glib caricature, as too often happens. As Terry Smith wisely noted – and we could map his comment about the current,

fierce debate between Art History and Visual Studies onto the historic split between classicism and poststructuralism in film studies – 'It is a false move to trumpet the value of one discipline by contrasting the productivity of a radical innovation within that discipline to the most conservative tendency in another, while at the same time taking those partialities to be representative of the whole discipline' (Smith, 2013, p. 198).

My Preminger example came from the end of the 1950s: a period that many cinephiles identify as a special age of maturity in those works informed by classical principles of *mise en scène*. After all, 1959 was the year of Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo*, Minnelli's *Some Came Running*, Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, Lang's Indian diptych ... as it also marked what was soon to be noted as a historic threshold: just before the 1960s and the Vietnam war, before the many New Wave film movements around the world, before the TV era of pop consumption that we see today both glorified and criticised in the series *Mad Men* (2007–2014) – in short, as journalists love to say, the end of a certain innocence.

My next example, however, comes from a strange film that arrived – with an evident sense of strain – at the end of that turbulent decade of the 1960s, when 'Hollywood' itself no longer seemed to signify what it once did as system or as a dream: Vincente Minnelli's 'paranormal' musical *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970). And yet it is a film where, once every few scenes, the heroic ethos of *mise en scène* asserts itself and shines through.

An extremely troubled production that underwent major revision in editing, *On a Clear Day* was not a success on its initial release, and few cinephiles have bothered to reclaim it since – even from within the ranks of the director's most devoted fans and specialist commentators. But, glowing like jewels amidst the uncertainties of its making are the purest instances of *mise en scène* that any critic could ever wish to discover. Here is one of them.

A large set, Minnelli behind the camera, and a rising star: Barbra Streisand. The solo number 'What Did I Have That I Don't Have' (music by Burton Lane, lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner) occurs around 90 minutes into *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*. It is simpler, in its range and scope of elements, than many of the anthological musical sequences for which the public at large remembers this director, from films like *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) or *The Pirate* (1948) – and yet its mastery of space and gesture is total, its use of significant props (such as a large, *très moderne* chair for psychoanalytic patients) unflaggingly inventive, its

accelerating and decelerating rhythms precise. As Joe McElhaney (2003) has observed, in Minnelli it is less the virtuosity or pictorial beauty of the *shot* itself that matters, but rather what that shot allows him to do, dynamically, with the *frame*.

The scene is a soliloquy, a woman singing to herself (and about herself) in an expansive office space – a set upon which Minnelli is able to ring many changes of mood and aspect throughout the film. Streisand brings much, as a performer, to this scene: in particular, a way of playing with *exhaustion*. She frequently gives the impression of being about to collapse, on the verge of implosion – and how fitting this is for the weak-willed character she plays here. But, just as she is crumpling up and sinking to the ground – her shoulders falling, her head drooping, her arms listless – she mimics the finding or mining of some indomitable energy within: she swells up, takes a step, begins to possess the frame and, indeed, the entire space of the décor. And then she wilts again, and flowers again – so fitting, once more, for a film with so many supernaturally blooming plants – over and over. Even her character name cues us to this: Daisy.

The song (including a spoken-word break and Daisy's end of a telephone call) is staged within a series of only three shots, totalling six and a half minutes. The first shot begins with Daisy's reaction to the tape recordings of her sessions, which she has accidentally discovered, with her less-than-friendly hypno-psycho-therapist, Marc (Yves Montand); it runs for three-and-a-half minutes. Daisy's dilemma is unusual, and the song she performs is devoted to cataloguing all its ramifications: Marc has fallen in love with a former self or incarnation of Daisy, from another time and place (England), emerging under hypnosis – a gregarious, scandalous, free-loving, *nouveau riche* aristocrat named Melinda.

Daisy begins the song while she leans against an open window; she begins to walk along one side of the room during her second line, the camera tracking back, in front of her:

> I don't know why they redesigned me
>
> He likes the way he used to find me
>
> He likes the girl I left behind me ...

The camera stops and reframes her static, for a moment, in front of a wide view of the room (bookcases, a spiral staircase), as she flounders, flails her arms, and experiences what Daffy Duck once called (in a truly

psychoanalytic moment) 'pronoun trouble', the musical score under-
lining and punctuating her exclamations:

> I mean he…I mean me…

Now she flops down into the chair which we may not have realised was
just below the frame line – the usual position for her sessions with Marc
(she also falls, in this movement, into a pool of light: an ironic comment
on Marc's rather unsuccessful mode of psychoanalytic treatment!). The
song continues in its slow, ballad phase; Minnelli's camera performs
an equally slow movement into Daisy, matching the lilting rhythm of
Nelson Riddle's arrangement. Daisy delivers her next line with a delight-
fully comic, Jewish inflection (as if to smooth the alternation between
speech and song) before returning to pathos:

> What did I have that I don't have?
>
> What did he like that I lost track of?
>
> What did I do that I don't do the way I did before?

Then she leans forward in the chair:

> What isn't there that once was there?
>
> What have I got a great big lack of?

Daisy rises from the chair and begins the same tired, robotic walking
as before; the camera tracks with her as she sings (I am including here
only a selection of the lyrics). After stopping at a different window, she
walks (a little faster now, in time with the music's intensification) along
a bank of flowers and plants (Daisy's contribution to the interior design
of Marc's office), idly touching them, as we have already seen her do
often in the film, as she passes. Coming to the provisional conclusion,
in the song, that she is 'outclassed…by my past', she sits down, again,
now at a (third) window ledge. The camera begins a slow movement
into a medium close-up her in this spot:

> What did he love that there's none of?
>
> What did I lose the sweet, warm knack of?
>
> Wouldn't I be the late great me if I knew how?

Between the long-held notes that constitute the last two words of this
part of the song – 'oh, what did I have I don't…have…now?' – Minnelli

finds an unobtrusive spot to cut to his second set-up: a reframing of
Daisy, same pose, in mid-shot, but with the camera swiftly tracking
back and slightly overhead, into the centre of the room, as her voice
and the final chords die away. Daisy now appears small in the frame
(Figure 3.3).

But the scene and the song are far from over. Daisy wanders in the
room once again, more exhausted/imploded than ever. During this 54
second shot, Daisy alternates between agitation and exhaustion as she
talks to herself in a soliloquy; music continues as underscore, but the
song itself does not yet return.

> I thought he kinda liked me. But all the time he was thinking of
> someone else – me! Oh, these questions! He wasn't interested in *me*.
> He was interested in *me*! Oh God, why did I have to come along?

A visual cut on movement – a variation on the preceding cut within a
sung phrase – gets us to the third shot, which lasts two minutes. Daisy's
transitional gesture has a precise narrative resonance within the total
context of the story: she turns her head to the phone and readies to
pick up the receiver, telepathically knowing it is about to ring. With
telephone in hand, she vents her anger, throwing supposedly high-class,
British phrases at him like 'Tally ho, Doctor' and 'kippered herring'.

The slamming down of the receiver back in its place is the percussive cue
that announces a mood change and picks up the scene's energy. Now the
song is back full-force in an up-tempo arrangement, and Barbra launches
straight in, this time, without need of a semi-spoken transition:

> What did I have that I don't have?
>
> What do I need a big supply of?
>
> What was the trick I did particularly well before?

On the word 'well', Daisy is off, too: she launches herself into frenzied
motion, and the camera keeps pace with her (Figure 3.4). She struggles
with putting on her coat and then histrionically takes a few strides and
throws it down; she retraces virtually her entire previous path around
the room – to the window, along the flowers – all the while frantically
gesticulating with her arms.

> Where can I go to repair
>
> All the wear and the tear?
>
> Till I'm once again the previous me.
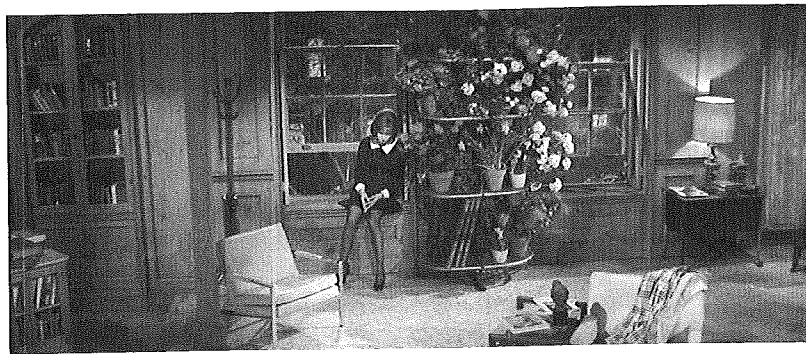
Figures 3.3–3.4   On a Clear Day You Can See Forever (Vincente Minnelli, 1970)

The confusion and desperation expressed in the line 'where can I go?' is literally visualised in Daisy's frantic exploration of the set, which now offers no points of rest. An especially resonant gesture at the end of that verse – Daisy giving the psychoanalytic chair an angry spin – cues a fast camera movement into her. More agitated walking and more arm waving follow – with, this time, Daisy grabbing onto wood beams, if to support herself. The song reaches its grand, self-inquisitorial finale:

Oh, what did I know?

Tell me where did it go!

What, oh, what did I have...

The *mise en scène* here reaches its expressive peak: Streisand's arms, stretched out on each side of her body completely fill the widescreen frame, which she utterly commands in this moment; Minnelli has manoeuvred the top half of her body into a mid-shot – and this has the force of a conventional close-up, since he has filmed most of the preceding action with her entire body in frame. But when she finishes singing the word 'have', the music stops, her clenched fists go to her sides, below frame – and the mood snaps. Daisy can hardly breathe; depression has returned. The last words take her a full 35 seconds to expel as she gathers her things and limps out the door, the music coming to its melancholic, diminuendo conclusion:

...I...don't...have...now.

The camera has held back in this final phase of the scene, no longer following her movements, only shifting to reframe the action of her exit – the final musical note accompanied by Daisy's plaintive, defeated sigh, audible when she is almost entirely off-screen. The last frames, in pure silence, show an empty set.

What a scene! A cinephile like me can happily watch it forever. It contains so many dramatic or comic beats (à la Preminger), so many expert spatial modulations and mood changes, so much entrancing camerawork – and my description, brutally selective as all such literary descriptions must necessarily, unavoidably be, leaves out many of its felicitous micro-moves. Watching *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* helps us to realise why so many cinephiles who venerate *mise en scène* are also diehard fans of the musical genre, as well as of opera and the more experimental forms of 'cine-dance' – and why discussions of directorial and stylistic technique in film so often take recourse to an analogy with dance choreography: not merely bodies in space, but the dynamic principles of attraction and repulsion that govern their proximity or distance. Godard described the musicals of Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen as the 'idealisation of cinema' (Godard, 1972, p. 87) – which meant not only that they tapped into and expressed realms of dream, fantasy and longing, but also that they explored an ideal type of heightened, lyrical film style; a style that will find its apotheosis in cinema history in a tradition ranging from Murnau and Boris Barnet through Powell and Pressburger and on to Dario Argento and Tim Burton.

At the beginning of that tradition we find Murnau, in the 1920s, writing a pre-manifesto for an ethos of *mise en scène* which did not yet bear that hallowed name – for him, it was simply a matter of defining

the aesthetic potentialities of cinema as a moving-image medium. His chosen analogy happens to be architecture – he speaks of 'architectural film' – rather than dance:

> What I refer to is the fluid architecture of bodies with blood in their veins moving through mobile space; the interplay of lines rising, falling, disappearing; the encounter of surfaces, stimulation and its opposite, calm; construction and collapse; the formation and destruction of a hitherto unsuspected life; all of this adds up to a symphony made up of the harmony of bodies and the rhythm of space; the play of pure movements, vigorous and abundant. (qtd in Eyman, 1990, p. 79)

Fine care

Film criticism has uselessly exhausted itself over many years pitting the magic of *mise en scène* against other levels of technique in the craft of filmmaking: against obvious effects of montage, on one hand; against merely conventional 'shot breakdowns' or *découpage*, on another hand.

But there has always been a line through the discontinuous, global histories of film analysis which has stressed the interdependence and interpenetration of these various levels. Without going to the extreme of once more claiming that *mise en scène* is the name for everything involved in creating a film, can we, at least, expand the classical notion to include a more holistic view of its process?

In 1956, a great gift to criticism was offered by Jean-Luc Godard in his short text 'Montage, My Fine Care'; it provides an early intuition of a possible rapprochement between what were already being posed, at the time, as the mutually exclusive notions of montage cinema (films essentially structured and formed in editing) and *mise en scène* cinema (films essentially created on set or in an environment, in expansive long takes). Like Robin Wood, Godard first asks us to imagine the drama, internal to the director, of cinematic creation:

> Suppose you see an attractive girl in the street. You hesitate to follow her. A quarter of a second. How to convey this hesitation? The question: 'How to approach her?' will be answered for you by *mise en scène*. But in order to make explicit this other question, 'Am I going to love her?', you will have to grant importance to the quarter of a second during which both arise. (Godard, 1968, pp. 47–48)[1]

The lesson he draws from this:

> If to direct is a glance, to edit is a beating of the heart. To anticipate is the characteristic of both. But what one seeks to foresee in space, the other seeks in time. (Godard, 1968, p. 47)

Godard stresses the overlap between the phases of on-set direction and editing: 'One improvises, one invents in front of the Moviola just as one does on the set' (Godard, 1968, p. 48). What he is after, ultimately, is an integrated mode of grasping filmic creativity – especially for filmmakers:

> Editing, therefore, at the same time that it denies, announces and prepares the way for the *mise en scène*; they are interdependent on each other. To direct is to plot, and one speaks of a plot as well- or poorly-knit. (Godard, 1968, p. 49)

Let me add a simple but crucial terminological point here, in the spirit of the young Godard: rather than wrap ourselves in knots over the multiple, contested meanings of words like *montage* or *découpage* (see Keathley, 2011; Barnard, 2014) – and to help loosen the grip that ties *mise en scène* exclusively to the majesty of autonomous, long takes – we can simply assert that *cutting*, conceived in numerous ways, is absolutely crucial to the workings of *mise en scène*. As often as, in the course of my examples in this book, I will admire the dexterity of a single shot orchestrated and sustained over one, three, five or ten minutes and preserved as such in the flow of a sequence, I will just as often draw breath at the expressive rightness, beauty, poetry or audacity of a cut – which is something that filmmakers work long and hard to achieve. (Agnès Guillemot, Godard's film editor throughout the 1960s, once put this perfectly: 'The fewer cuts there are, the more important they become' [Jousse and Strauss, 1991, p. 62].)

As far as many practitioners are concerned, the grand debate of *mise en scène* vs. *découpage*/montage is strictly a non-issue: whether they plan for 'coverage' (deciding on how many angles or set-ups they will shoot a scene from, with specific cuts to be figured out later in editing), work from a detailed storyboard of individual shots already broken down, or make use of a more or less elaborate 'master' shot (all or most of the action covered in one shot), cutting is almost always part of the style equation. In film criticism, Jonathan Rosenbaum has long militated

for this sort of rapprochement, for example in relation to the case of Chantal Akerman:

> It is misleading to talk merely about Akerman's *mise en scène* in spite of her close attention to framing, because from that vantage point, many of her movies look rather anemic. It's her *découpage* that matters – that is, not only what happens in her shots but what happens between them, among them, across them, and through them. (The same thing applies to practically all of the most important filmmakers in the history of movies: Robert Bresson, Carl Dreyer, Sergei Eisenstein, Alfred Hitchcock, Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujiro Ozu, Jean Renoir, Andrei Tarkovsky and Orson Welles may be known to us as master directors, but their art is ultimately the art of *découpage* rather than simply *mise en scène*.) (Rosenbaum, 2012)

In his remarkable 1971 text on 'The Long Take' – like so many of the best texts in film criticism history, one never taken up as comprehensively as it could have been – Brian Henderson explores and extends Godard's sense of the complex relations between *mise en scène* and other stylistic processes. He gestures toward what he calls 'a comprehensive *descriptive rhetoric* of filmic figures' (Henderson, 1980, p. 8). For instance, he discusses the *intrasequence cut* as functioning in a mixed realm between *mise en scène* and editing – indeed, giving rise to what he dares call 'mise-en-scène cutting':

> An entire category of long-take or intrasequence cutting concerns the relation of camera to script and dialogue. A director may cut frequently, even on every line, and if he does so the result is a kind of montage, though one bound in its rhythm to the rhythm of the dialogue, not itself an independent rhythm. At the other extreme he may, as Mizoguchi often does, cut only once or twice within a long dialogue sequence. If he does the latter, then his cut must be carefully mediated and placed in relation to the dramatic progress of the scene, coming at just that point at which the relationships at stake in the scene have ripened into qualitative change – a change reflected in the new or altered mise-en-scène. (Henderson, 1980, p. 55)

These passages from Godard and Henderson give a good sense of the kinds of complex decision making processes that are part and parcel of narrative filmmaking (see Bacher, 1976 and 1996). In his valuable 1981 article 'Moments of Choice', V.F. Perkins argues that Hollywood

directors were not nearly so hamstrung artistically as we like to imagine them, heroically, to have been:

> Old Hollywood was well aware of how much its product stood to gain, as entertainment, from a style that rendered its drama effectively and made it look, move and sound as if it had a *sense of direction*. [...] It valued and rewarded the ability to control performance, image and editing so as to create moods and viewpoints through which the story could grip and persuade the audience. Very seldom would a director's career suffer from a noisy insistence on getting a particular fabric for the set, a particular lens for the camera or a particular casting for an apparently insignificant role. Directors were paid to believe that every little thing mattered – and to prove it by their results. (Perkins, 2006)

Perkins' account is increasingly borne out by the emerging documentation – within the area of research known as genetic criticism, that is, tracing the making of a film from its initial idea to its conclusion, through all its stages of elaboration – of the actual work that Hollywood directors did.

A map and a dream

There are many fine studies in the annals of critical literature devoted to the *mise en scène* strategies of directors including Preminger, Minnelli, Sirk, Ray and Ophüls. However, if pushed to nominate one of the clearest, purest examples of this art operating at its highest point of sophistication and articulation within the 1950s 'golden age', I would choose a section of Luchino Visconti's *Le notti bianche* (*White Nights*, 1957) – a film which was a particular source of inspiration for the highly artificial and lyrical style of Jacques Demy in the 1960s (*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, 1964) and beyond. Furthermore, the scene allows me to propose some systematic principles at work in classical *mise en scène* – principles that can guide analysis of many, diverse examples of this particular aspect of filmic art.

Sixty-six minutes into *Le notti bianche* comes an exhilarating dance sequence. It is impossible, within the flow of the narrative action, to separate my segment cleanly from what immediately follows it, but I will arbitrarily define it in terms of place: from the entrance of Mario (Marcello Mastroianni) and Natalia (Maria Schell) to the dancing room of the Nuovo Bar (like all the film's sets, meticulously built at Cinecittà)

to their sudden exit from it, as Natalia flees in the hope of meeting her lover at a nearby bridge, and Mario gives chase. It is a comparatively long block of action – 11 and a half minutes – although it flows quickly and engagingly, because Visconti (as we shall see) is a master at modulating and varying atmosphere, thematic structure and storytelling point-of-view.

Let us begin with the matter of place. An inventive *mise en scène* can propose many lively, surprising ways of discovering and experiencing a locale – not only its architectural layout, but also in terms of its changing aspects and moods as it is seen in successively different lights (which is literally the case here) and in different ways, from various angles. Visconti begins the sequence as Mario and Natalia enter a particular, inner room of the bar – pointedly, he does not trace their entrance through the front door. The facade of this place is something we will see only in the final shots, 11 minutes later.

So, for most of the sequence, the film inhabits this one, large room. It is a square space with three doorways (all of them used in the scene, marking its various phases) and no windows. Visconti maps the space in stages – especially using the cue of Natalia's looking around the room – allowing us to gradually notice certain of its fixtures: a large poster on one wall; a piano, jukebox and drum kit along another. Small tables line the space, but its centre is empty – left for dancing, as we shall soon discover. Visconti deliberately delays anything resembling an overall, establishing shot until well into the scene; likewise, he deploys master shots (a substantial part of the action covered without a cut) for purely expressive, rather than functionally informative, purposes. Richard T. Jameson's remark that 'it has always been one of the special pleasures of movies that they dream worlds and map them at the same time' (Jameson, 1990, p. 32) fits Visconti's style perfectly.

If *mise en scène* is bodies in space, dance scenes are (as we have already observed) prime candidates for pure cinema. But what can a director actually do with these dancing bodies in a space? Alexandre Astruc (who cast Maria Schell a year after *Le notti bianche* in his own feature, *Une vie*) expressed the matter in an abstract and absolute way that is not entirely helpful to us here: 'What is caught by the lens is the movement of the body – an immediate revelation, like all that is physical: the dance, a woman's look, the change of rhythm in a walk, beauty, truth, etc.' (Astruc, 1985, p. 266). But this question, in practice, is never abstract; each director must work out a response in material terms, in the context of the particular story they are telling. Recalling Murnau's description of the architectural art of film, we can propose that a filmmaker *thins out* or

thickens a scene through the precise way that he or she *fills* and *empties* a frame with a mass of bodies. This is, all at once, a matter of rhythm, texture and mood – as well as dramatic and thematic intent.

Filling and emptying a frame, using bodies and objects as significant props, is also a matter of establishing and playing on what Alain Bergala identifies as *intervals* – the changing distances, close or far, installed between the major, physical points in a scene (such as its principal characters). One aspect of this *elasticity* – a key feature of cinema's plastic, dynamic form – should be noted from the outset, as Visconti uses it so prominently and artfully: what Bergala (2000, p. 30) amusingly names the *electric conductor* principle, which visibly marks the interval between two points via the physical intermediary of a serial chain: examples include a crowd of people separating two lovers (frequently used in cinema, for instance in the finale of Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*, 1954) and the tense space between static characters filled up by such objects as the pickets in a fence (Bergala notices this in Hitchcock's *The Birds*, 1963) or a line of suitcases (in Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*, 2001).

One way of appreciating classical *mise en scène* is to gauge how a director uses the basic verisimilitude of a given situation for expressive purposes – a core tenet, as we have seen, of the aesthetic models offered by Perkins and Legrand. I refer here to the essential 'givens' of a scene, if they have been established (which is not always the case, especially in weakly directed films): the weather, temperature, precise time of day or night, the lighting conditions that can realistically belong to such a place, its architectural layout. Visconti is attune to all these available factors; he confidently establishes them and then creatively uses them as the scene progresses.

For instance, it is a hot night (as many gestures of fanning, drinking, etc., indicate). The scene precisely marks how promptly Natalia removes her coat (and then strokes it in her lap, still constrained by shyness), as distinct from Mario who only discards some of his obviously too warm garments later, in the midst of dancing. This is itself a *mise en scène* principle: differentiating the personalities and functions of characters via the diverse, distinct ways they respond (consciously or unconsciously) to the shared conditions of their environment.

Thematically, the film is about a man and woman at cross-purposes: Natalia longs for another, absent guy and, while waiting for him, spends time with Mario, who instantly falls in love with her. In the lead-up to this sequence – and during much of the story – Mario tries to engineer some intimacy between them, a private space where they can concentrate only on each other; he hopes, in this way, to spark reciprocal

affection from her. So, the *mise en scène* tackles what is, historically, one of its richest fields: the interrelation of private (intimate) and public (social life) – the latter, usually, impinging on the former. (Remember, for instance, the spotlight trained mercilessly on the teenage couple at a dance hall in *American Graffiti*, 1973.) Depending on where the scene needs to go dramatically, the director – just as much as the characters – can structure it almost as an active *pursuit* of the longed-for moment of intimacy: when and how can it happen? On the level of the film's style (integrated with the action as scripted), it might occur, for instance, by way of a very close two-shot that excludes all surroundings; or a use of differentiated focus in the shot (lovers in focus, crowd out of focus); or a manipulation of the soundtrack (diegetic, incidental music giving way to scored, soundtrack music). Visconti proves himself well aware of the full gamut of such devices here.

To dig deeper into the thematics of this particular film, a constant and consistent irony can be observed: the opposition between (private) couple and (public) mass with which the scene works is also a choice between two different lifestyles, one old-fashioned and the other modern. Where Mario and Natalia dream of one-to-one romantic fusion (albeit with different objects of adoration!), the dancers – as well as the song 'Thirteen Women (and Only One Man in Town)' soon to make its appearance – express the fun option of more casual and multiple attachments. Not even the principal dancer in the crowd sticks with the same partner, once the music changes!

The sequence deftly works its way through five phases. In its first phase, Mario and Natalia sit at a table; there is only some scattered, languorous slow-dancing happening around the room, and an Italian ballad playing very softly. Mario tries to engage Natalia in conversation, but she immediately starts looking around the room, commenting on the dancers ('I can't dance', she confesses). One minute into the sequence a loud, rock'n'roll song (presumably from the jukebox glimpsed in the corner) is triggered: the aforementioned 'Thirteen Women' by Bill Haley and the Comets, first released three years before Visconti's film. Let us note a subtle trick of craft here: the song runs for just under three minutes, but a clever sound edit extends the track and gives the director the full five minutes and 15 seconds he needs to fully develop the action! This song gets almost everyone in the room up dancing, and hence immediately alters both the space and the general mood, as well as the relation between private and public for our central couple: their area is instantly impinged upon by lunging, kicking, swinging dancers and, as Natalia becomes intoxicated by the general

mood, Mario is more bothered, knowing his play for her attention is fast disappearing (Figure 3.5).

This second phase of the sequence introduces new elements that create a particular type of intrigue. Visconti features two skilled rock dancers (one of whom, Dirk Sanders, also worked with the director in opera and has a role in Godard's *Pierrot le fou* [1965]). The camera executes a slow movement towards this second couple as they dance, exuberantly claiming the space; simultaneously, they approach the camera in a tango-like step. When they reach the point of almost a two-shot close-up (Figure 3.6) – the man pointedly staring off-frame, goadingly, at Mario and Natalia (this spatial relation has been implicitly constructed in preceding shots) – Visconti introduces a bold stylistic move. His dancers fling each other (while still holding hands) right outside the left and right edges of the frame! And they 'snap back' together, twice over. Literally, the elastic principle of *mise en scène* in action. That Visconti means us to compare the two couples is clinched in the match-cut engineered at this shot's end: the dancers exit screen right and in the next shot enter screen left – introducing a parallel slow camera movement into Mario and Natalia.

The sequence's third phase is cued ingeniously by Visconti: in the course of a semi-circular tracking shot around the table where Mario and Natalia sit, we pass from the high point of the dancing crowd interrupting the couple (much to Mario's chagrin and discomfort), filling and emptying pockets of the frame; to a reframing that shows both Mario's persistence at trying to hold Natalia's attention, as well as her increasing sense of abandon as she focuses on the commotion around them; and finally to a composition where the couple are squashed into the right-hand edge of the frame, as multiple revellers go wild. Yet this is where the scene tips, because Mario makes a surprise move, in both the literal and metaphorical senses: he stands up, takes the centre of the frame, and invites Natalia to dance (Figure 3.7). If he cannot beat them, he will join them!

In the continuation of this same, complex shot (which runs a little over two minutes) another move occurs, which presents the comparison of the two couples in a different way: they change partners, and the less inhibited dancers lead our main characters into different zones of the crowded space. This is where the electric conductor principle kicks in, during the subsequent shots: Mario, disturbed, tries to look above (he jumps) and through the bodies moving in the crowd to find his beloved (Figure 3.8). Simultaneously, Visconti extends this effect to our vantage point as spectators: the foreground of the frames is increasingly clogged

with bodies in blurred motion. Visconti often plays such hide-and-seek games with the viewer in terms of what can be seen clearly only for fleeting seconds, and for this he employs (in turn or in varying combinations) several *mise en scène* resources: framing, choreography, the set's architecture, lighting.

Mario finally makes it across the room back to Natalia, but not before the scene adopts a new, fresh perspective: a high angle covering around two-thirds of the entire room space (Figure 3.9). Films often engineer (as Bergala notes, 2000, p. 29) this kind of perspectival switch: we have hitherto been 'with' the characters and their interactions, literally at their level, following the unfolding of the scene gesture by gesture – and suddenly we see the totality of the event. When Visconti cuts to a reprise of this high angle, the fourth and most spectacular phase of the scene is inaugurated: a circle clears for the star dancer, Sanders, to perform solo. In a flush of exhibitionistic triumph, he makes an appeal with his eyes for Natalia to join him in the centre – thus prompting Mario, eventually, to take the stage himself, dancing in a crazy, ungainly but inspired way. This is the simplest, least stylised, most directly theatrical part of the *mise en scène*: all the camera needs is a good spot from which to record Mastroianni's expert display of his character's touching clumsiness. Visconti knows when to stop showing off, style-wise, and let his male star show off instead.

When this contest is over and the song finally ends, our central couple embrace, and the frame is immediately emptied of all bodies except theirs – the instant mood change is brutally masterful. Now, to enhance this moment but also to prepare the next phase of the scene, Visconti engineers another perspectival switch – utilising the prominent, frosted, lit-up, swinging double-doorway we have spotted in the background throughout. An extra from the previous commotion exits this door into an adjoining room; as the doors swing, we glimpse (another hide-and-seek effect) our would-be lovers still standing alone, a little dazed (Figure 3.10). From here the scene passes to a view behind the window near where the couple return to sit. A romantic ballad from the jukebox begins, and couples (notably fewer than before) begin slow dancing.

The alteration of the *mise en scène*'s co-ordinates for this fifth phase is total. The mood of the music is completely different. Most strikingly, Visconti uses a bold lighting effect which is grounded, semi-realistically, in a detail that is revealed later: the lights suspended over the street outside swing wildly in the wind (another crucial weather element of which Visconti makes maximum use). So, inside, once internal lighting is extinguished, the darkness is broken by a mobile spotlight that creates

an elaborate masking effect – rendering especially poignant the almost-but-never-quite-there nature of the intimate moment that Mario seeks with Natalia. When the couple joins the other slow-dancers, Visconti stages another complex series of shots: although the couple is framed in a tight two-shot, the frame is still under siege from neighbouring dancers, intruding with their own faces and body parts – and furthermore, Mario and Natalia are often plunged, for seconds at a time, into pitch darkness, frustrating our view of them while abruptly shifting our attention to others (Figure 3.11). With the woman who earlier exited through the frosted doors, Visconti creates another comparative couple, as she re-enters and shimmies seductively towards a soldier on leave – the same solider into which Natalia will collide as she flees.

What triggers Natalia's flight? The scene shifts perspective once more, with a different extra exiting a different door of the room, to escape from the heat; from this spot on a balcony, the camera can observe a middle-aged woman calling from a nearby window, angrily telling someone that it is 'well after 10.00'. Natalia realises, in a panic, that she may miss the rendezvous with the man she loves. As she runs out, and we see the front part of the bar that we have not previously glimpsed, the soundtrack also metamorphoses: for the first time in the scene, Nino Rota's score is used to underline the drama. (Fellini could never have

Figures 3.5–3.11 Continued
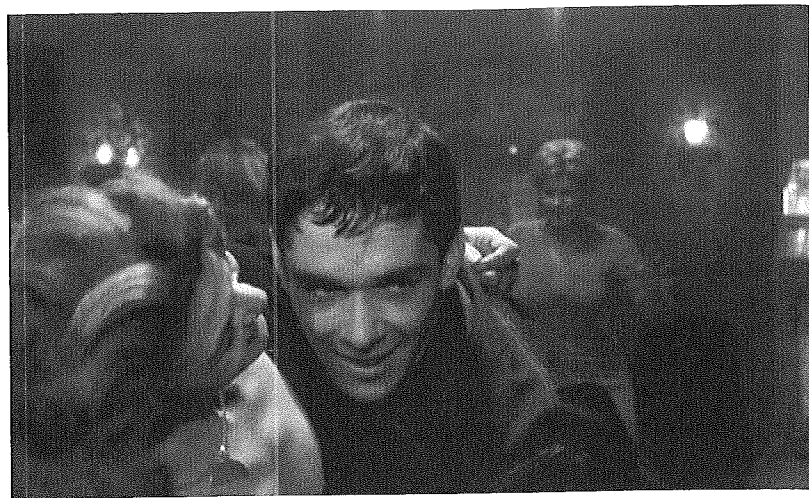
Figures 3.5–3.11   Continued

Figures 3.5–3.11   Continued

Figures 3.5–3.11   Le notti bianche (Luchino Visconti, 1957)

kept his beloved composer out of the picture for so long!) With both central characters disappearing from view, one after another, down the street, we are left with the memory of their poignant dialogue couplet on the dance floor:

> N: Now, too, I can say that I've been dancing.
>
> M: Now I, too, can say that I've been happy.

Astruc may not have been terribly precise in his description of the component elements of *mise en scène*, but his poetic evocation fits the task here: 'Some strange seductive force makes it seem that, quite naturally, all that is still an expectation here will some day be completely fulfilled' (Astruc, 1985, p. 267).

Magical shot or formal bluff?

In both the writings and the films of Jacques Rivette, we can observe a symptomatic shifting of positions, several times over, in relation to the ideal and the practice of *mise en scène*. These shifts registered not only his personal predilections, but the arguments going on around him – at *Cahiers du cinéma*, and in the larger world of progressive filmmaking where he became an increasingly key figure. This survey of Rivette's thought, in three snapshots, will serve to introduce us the various deaths and rebirths of *mise en scène* across the decades to follow – the subject of my next two chapters.

1954: Rivette, as a member of the *Cahiers* crew, is not wholly, but certainly decisively, under the influence of the tutelary figure of André Bazin. Let us briefly recall (as it is a topic discussed exhaustively elsewhere, by many commentators) Bazin's championing of the long take and open image stylistics in directors as diverse as Renoir, Welles and Rossellini. When we read the jokesters of *Premiere* evoking the bogus war of 'montage vs. *mise en scène*', what they are no doubt dimly recalling from their early university days is a pulverisation of Bazin's multifaceted critical practice into a dogmatic credo or prescriptive theory: to best capture and respect reality, films must (so the caricature goes) shoot in lengths of time that are as little broken up or manipulated as possible – hence, the necessity for long takes, open frames and the non-intervention of editing.

Bazin was, in fact, nowhere near as rigid as this – in his book on Renoir, unfinished at his death, he had no trouble entertaining the notion

that 'realism does not at all mean a renunciation of style' (Bazin, 1974, p. 106) – and he had no specific theory (or barrow) of *mise en scène* to push. As he always did, Bazin let films new and old suggest the aesthetic parameters and possibilities of the medium of cinema as it unfolded in history – to the point of eventually suggesting that the camera 'delivers' reality in the most advanced films not through sheer photography but 'in the manner of a cipher grid moving across a coded document' (Bazin, 1974, p. 108), an almost poststructural metaphor *avant la lettre*! But Bazin did indeed stake his hand on the conviction that, at least for filmmaking that strove to be in some way realistic, 'cinematic expression must be dialectically fused with reality and not with artifice' (Bazin, 1974, p. 106) – with many later commentators overlooking the dialectical part of that formulation.

Brian Henderson draws out the consequence of Bazin's interest – and what became hardened (by commentators and detractors alike) into his 'position' – on *mise en scène*:

> It is generally thought that the true cultivation and expression of the image as such – as opposed to the *relation between* images, which is the central expressive category of montage – requires the duration of the long take [...] It is the long take alone that permits the director to vary and develop the image without switching to another image; *it is often this uninterrupted development which is meant* by *mise en scène*. Thus the long take makes *mise en scène* possible. The long take is the presupposition or *a priori* of *mise en scène*, that is, the ground or field in which *mise en scène* can occur. It is the time necessary for *mise en scène* space. (Henderson, 1980, p. 49, my emphasis)

Henderson goes on to critically probe this presupposition, as I, too, do in other parts of this book. But let us hold it in our minds, for the moment, as a certain chronotope of a particular moment in film culture history, and turn to Rivette's 1954 review (1985) of Otto Preminger's *Angel Face* (1953) within the frame of that moment.

Preminger is among the filmmakers Rivette admires – albeit ambivalently – and for approximately 'Bazinian' reasons. But the critic also registers a certain doubt or hesitation – as well as an intuition concerning where cinema is headed in future. Always temperamentally drawn to what is new, strange or confounding, Rivette confesses, confronted with *Angel Face*, that he might well 'enjoy a different idea of the cinema more' – namely, the still-reigning American classicism of Hawks, Hitchcock or Lang, filmmakers who 'first believe in their themes and then build the

strength of their art upon this conviction' – but that Preminger intrigues him, because he insists as a 'case' to be reckoned with and accounted for. Rivette intuits a subtle shift in aesthetic economy that Preminger's films seem to signal in the early 1950s:

> Preminger believes first in *mise en scène*, the creation of a precise complex of sets and characters, a network of relationships, an architecture of connections, an animated complex that seems suspended in space. What tempts him, if not the fashioning of a piece of crystal for transparency with ambiguous reflections and clear, sharp lines or the rendering audible of particular chords unheard and rare, in which the inexplicable beauty of the modulation suddenly justifies the ensemble of the phrase? (Rivette, 1985, p. 134)

Rivette is sensitive to the objection that Preminger's style, in the terms that he has just characterised it, is 'probably the definition of a certain kind of preciosity' – but he nonetheless insists that it is not 'some abstract aesthete's experiment', no mere formalism for its own sake. Rather, Preminger appeals to Rivette as an instance of a new way of working, a new artistic process that will find many echoes in Rivette's own future films of the 1960s and 1970s:

> In the midst of a dramatic space created by human encounters, he would instead exploit to its limit the cinema's ability to capture the fortuitous (but a fortuity that is willed), to record the accidental (but the accidental that is created) through the closeness and sharpness of the look; the relationships of the characters create a closed circuit of exchanges, where nothing makes an appeal to the viewer. (Rivette, 1985, p. 134)

In his *Angel Face* piece (tellingly titled 'The Essential'), Rivette recycles both the grand question of Astruc ('what is *mise en scène*?') and the even grander question of the father-figure Bazin: 'what is cinema?'. He merges his answers to both puzzles in this very 1950s formulation: 'What is cinema, if not the *play* of actor and actress, of hero and set, of word and face, of hand and object?' (Rivette, 1985, p. 135). Rivette the critic quickly steps from theory to practice – 'an example would be better' – and cites 'the heroine's nocturnal stroll among the traces of the past' in the penultimate sequence of *Angel Face*. This scene indeed offers a terrific example of Preminger's long take *mise en scène* – as well as a characteristic cinephilic fetish item, since the scene is all gestures, objects and

music (by Dimitri Tiomkin), and no words, not to mention being (as cinephiles of the time loved to say) the apotheosis of Jean Simmons!

Like Cabrera Infante on Minnelli, Rivette sees in his chosen scene, considered as a dramatic device in the screenplay, 'the unmistakable classic temptation of the mediocre'. Pity the poor screenwriters, including Frank Nugent and Ben Hecht! However, Rivette sets out to redeem the scene in the familiar (and also somewhat obscure) terms of a pure, directorial *mise en scène*:

> But Preminger is more than author of this idea, he is the one who invents Jean Simmons' uncertain footfall, her huddled figure in the armchair. What could have been banal or facile is saved by a striking absence of complaisance, the hardness of the passage of time and lucidity of the look; or rather, there is no longer either theme or treatment, facility or luck, but the stark, heart-rending, obvious presence of a cinema that is sensitive to its core. (Rivette, 1985, p. 135)

1969: Preminger's cinema – especially as it had developed in the 1960s through bigger-budget productions – was no longer so 'sensitive to its core' for Rivette. Now, in the wake of 1968, and in the midst of a public seminar on radical theories and practices of montage led by three members of the *Cahiers* crew, Rivette responds (somewhat obediently) to the terms of a very different debate – where Preminger now figures on the villain side. *Mise en scène* itself, as wielded in this discussion, becomes a bad object (it even requires scare quotes), a 'formal bluff' traced back to German director G.W Pabst in the 1920s and 1930s, whose malign function was to effect the 'liquidation of expressionism'.

> The aesthetic of '*mise en scène*' [is] a formal bluff which even today still governs the entire European and Hollywood cinema: [René] Clement, Preminger, [Grigori] Chukhrai, [Francesco] Rosi. This technique of manipulating 'reality', where the director is the more or less invisible master, quickly ceased to be the art of montage to become the art of *découpage* (and concomitantly, of 'framing' and the 'direction' of actors.) (Rivette, 1977b, pp. 81–82)

Much is going under the axe here: *mise en scène* as a professional, mainstream practice is assimilated all at once to the ideological alibi of realism, to an insidious 'invisibility' or transparency of film form and to functional, conventional shot coverage (which is the sense in which *découpage* is wielded here). Even camera framings and the guidance of

actors are ridiculed! The gesture is also anti-Bazinian, with (in its time) a modish vengeance: where 'forbidden montage' was a catchphrase once positively associated with the ex-Master, by 1969 it carried the taint of a repressive interdiction – and so montage (in all its forms) had to be rehabilitated over *mise en scène*.

It is odd indeed to look back on this pronouncement, given that Rivette himself came to be rightly hailed as a master practitioner of the art of *mise en scène* in the 1970s and beyond, quite proudly organising his style of filmmaking entirely around it. (His preferred directorial credit stabilises on screen, over the course of his career, as '*Mise en scène* – Jacques Rivette'.) Rivette had taken another turn in his thinking by then, and arrived at a type of cinematic *neo-classicism*. This is not (as I will argue in the next chapter) simply the 1950s ethos of *mise en scène* nostalgically revisited, but an aesthetic renewal taking on, in a vigorous way, many of the most glorious attributes of *mise en scène* as past masters like Preminger, Murnau, Mizoguchi and Welles once practiced it.

So, 1989: Rivette goes to see *Peaux de vaches* (1989) by newcomer Patricia Mazuy twice in two weeks. In Claire Denis' absorbing two-part documentary *Jacques Rivette, the Night Watchman* (1990), the (by now) veteran of *mise en scène* moves – of long takes, ensemble configurations and full-framings in scrupulously detailed environments – recounts to his famous critic-interlocutor, Serge Daney, the experience of a scene from near the end of Mazuy's film. This vivid retelling, caught by Denis' camera in a static, long take, is itself a stirring spectacle – a *mise en scène* of descriptive words and evocative, bodily gestures from Rivette. Aren't the greatest acts of film criticism always a *recreation*, through their own aesthetic means, of the films to which they bear homage? That is certainly the case with Rivette on *Peaux de vaches*, the following transcription capturing only a trace of the speaker's passionate enthusiasm.

> A film that impressed me was Patricia Mazuy's *Peaux de vaches*. I was moved by the film for a number of reasons. From the start, you feel like the film is leading somewhere, and the more it goes on, the better it gets, the more the relationships become both more intense and also more mysterious. And we suddenly come to a scene which I found extraordinary, so shattering I went to see it again the following week, both for the pleasure and to check on that scene, and see what happened and how it was filmed.
>
> The first time I almost had the feeling of those scenes that you dream, I often do that. I dream I'm in a cinema, watching a film and seeing

wonderful things, but then I wake up and it's gone. But here, it was on screen, I hadn't dreamed it!

It was Jean-François Stévenin's final scene…I can't remember the character's name. Like everyone else, I talk about films using the actors' names! Jean-François sets off on the road; that's the first shot of the scene. In the next shot, we see Sandrine Bonnaire running towards him. She catches him up, tries to stop him, and they carry on walking and talking for a while, until they fall into each other's arms and kiss. And Jean-François turns to Sandrine and says: 'Bring the girl and come away with me'. That's all one take, hand-held I think, fairly bumpy but following the movement. It looks good, the camera accompanies the characters. Suddenly there's this close-up on Jean-François, which shocked me the first time I saw the film – because it cuts into this wonderful long shot, and shows him watching Sandrine after asking her. It's a short shot, followed by a reverse angle close-up on Sandrine, who doesn't answer – she just looks at him. Then her face begins to move, she begins to move, and we understand by her movement that she's going to him – but he's no longer there. The camera continues following her from behind; we follow, the camera moves behind her, and we see Jean-François heading up the road, stopping the truck that's coming towards us, and climbing aboard – all in this shot that started on her face. It all happened from Jean-François' reaction to the fact that she didn't reply – and his leaving, all that happened off camera, we only saw Sandrine's face, then her movement, and that's it, it's over, he's gone. It's virtually the last shot of the film.

I thought it was a magical shot, very well filmed and, at the same time, it conveys emotion through the inventive use of the camera. You almost have to be a filmmaker to appreciate it; it was very simply done.

From the heroic age of *mise en scène* in the 1950s through its radical critique in the 1960s and on to its various reformulations in subsequent decades: Rivette bears witness to some of these changes in his films and in his pronouncements. His example should open our eyes to the malleability of *mise en scène* as a concept in history – cultural history, film history and the history of criticism itself. It is these assorted challenges and changes, on several fronts, that the following two chapters will sketch.

Note

1. I have amended Nell Cox's translation (Godard, 1968, pp. 47–49) slightly; where she renders *mise en scène* (somewhat forgivably) as 'direction', the alternative translation by Tom Milne (Godard, 1972, pp. 39–41) retains *mise en scène* but uses 'montage' instead of editing, which has (in this context, at least) a misleading, more strident connotation in English.

9

The Rise of the *Dispositif*

In 2003, the low-budget Danish film *The Five Obstructions* was an unlikely success in art house cinemas, around film festivals, and subsequently on DVD; it has become so popular in film study courses that an entire book (in English), compiled by Mette Hjort, was devoted to it in 2008. The film itself is simple yet novel, and paradoxically involving for what is, essentially, an exercise in conceptual art.

Lars von Trier approaches his friend and filmmaking mentor, Jørgen Leth, with a crazy idea: the older man must remake his own classic, experimental short *The Perfect Human* (1967) – von Trier's favourite film, we are informed – five times over, but each time with an 'obstruction' or condition that at once sets a challenge and creates difficulties: it has to be an animation, it must be shot in Cuba, each shot can be no longer than twelve frames, Leth must play the central role... and so on. Leth performs ably, failing only once (and is thus compelled to re-do that version). The final variation is a surprise move on von Trier's part: he unveils *his* remake of *The Perfect Human*, for which Leth must read a pre-scripted voice-over, and credit the finished work to himself.

Like *The Perfect Human* itself, *The Five Obstructions* is a film beyond genre: is it fiction, documentary, essay, experimental? Its charm is undeniable; gradually, under the surface and between the five remakes, in the cracks of the conversation and in the artistic decisions that each participant makes, we glimpse the details of the friendship between these two men. A cerebral game gives way to a 'perfectly human' dimension we did not expect from it at the start. Was that von Trier's aim all along: to set up a rule-bound structure (a method of which he is very fond) that, ultimately, lets in a different kind of light, ending up in unforeseen places? We may never know the answer to that one

but, incontrovertibly, *The Five Obstructions* is an emblem of the rise of a new kind of film – one that is based, at least in the first instance, on the logic of a *dispositif*.

Games and rules

What is a *dispositif*? To put it, at the outset, in the simplest terms, and in the manner most pertinent to an example such as *The Five Obstructions*: it is a game with rules, where the execution of the game's moves – the following of the rules – *generates* outcomes, results and sometimes surprises. These rules can be the structures or parameters of a film. It is useful to keep in mind that, in fields such as urban planning and in various branches of the social sciences (see Kessler, 2006a), *dispositif* is a term used to describe such mundane set-ups in the everyday world as the operation of traffic lights or the organisation of rites such as funerals (social *mise en scène*, again). In a more sinister and wide-reaching vein (including but also going far beyond works of art), the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has defined a *dispositif* as 'literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings' (Agamben, 2009, p. 14).

So, a *dispositif* is basically this: the arrangement of diverse elements in such a way as to trigger, guide and organise a set of actions. Michel Foucault stressed the *heterogeneity* of those elements – bits and pieces from all over the place – and thus grasped the logic of a *dispositif* as the 'nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements' (Foucault, 1980, p. 194). Yet, as we will see – and as *The Five Obstructions* amply demonstrates – a *dispositif* is (or can be) much more than the application or illustration of a pre-set procedure (like obediently crossing the street); it may resemble a machine, but it can be an anarchic machine, a crazy machine.

Luc Moullet, a critic for *Cahiers* in the 1950s and a filmmaker since the 1960s, has emerged as a principal theorist of the *dispositif* in cinema – not surprisingly, when we consider that many of his droll comedies proceed by a rigorous principle of entropy (The *Comedy of Work*, 1987) or that his inspired feature documentary *Origins of a Meal* (1979) takes a single idea all the way to its conclusion: to trace the ingredients of a humble, dinner-time meal right back, down through the complex, multinational chain of food production, to their animal sources. If anyone can do justice to the anarchistic possibilities of a *dispositif*, it is him.