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Mise-en-scène

PUBLISHED BY GABE MOURA, ON JULY 1, 2014

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

cutting. In other words, if it's on the screen and if it's a physical object recorded by the camera, then it's part of the mise-en-scène.

Academically Speaking

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

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

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

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

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



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

scenes from *The Graduate* but also from other pictures.

Set Design

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

To illustrate: an early scene from *The Graduate* (1967) opens with a [close-up](#) of Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) alone on his bed. Behind him is a fish tank, which symbolically represents Ben's entrapment in a life that he doesn't want. Later in the movie, Ben finds himself at the bottom of a swimming pool, thus further elaborating on that concept.

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

In [Rear Window](#) (1954), an enlarged photograph placed in the living room offers [exposition](#) on the accident that made L.B. Jeffries (James Stewart) handicap:



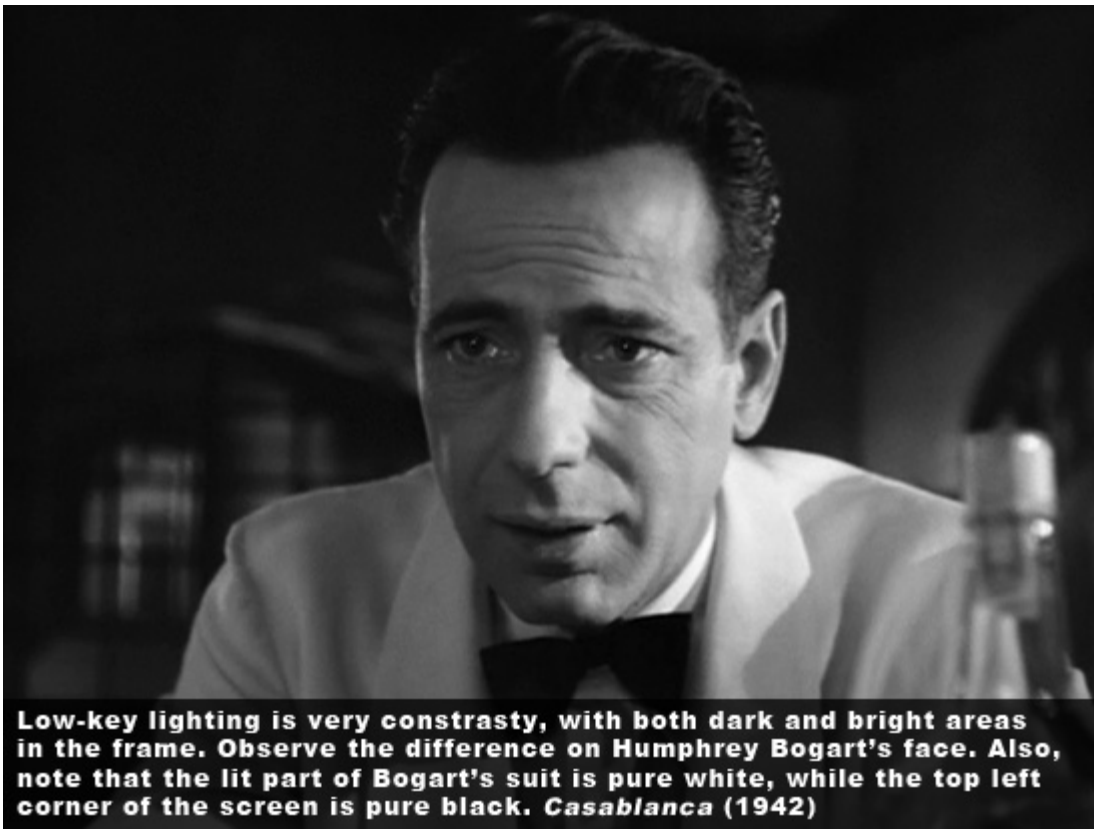
Lighting

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

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



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



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

Costume

The obvious purpose of costuming is to dress an actor according to his character.

Lawyers wear suits, nurses wear scrubs, and a drifter could wear worn out shoes, ragged shirt, and baggy pants.

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

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

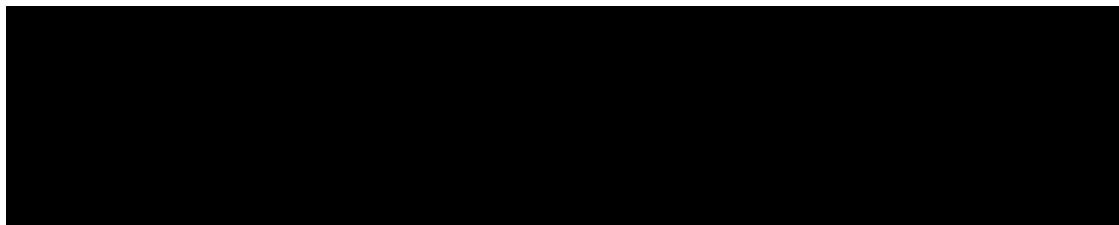
it be a cougar?

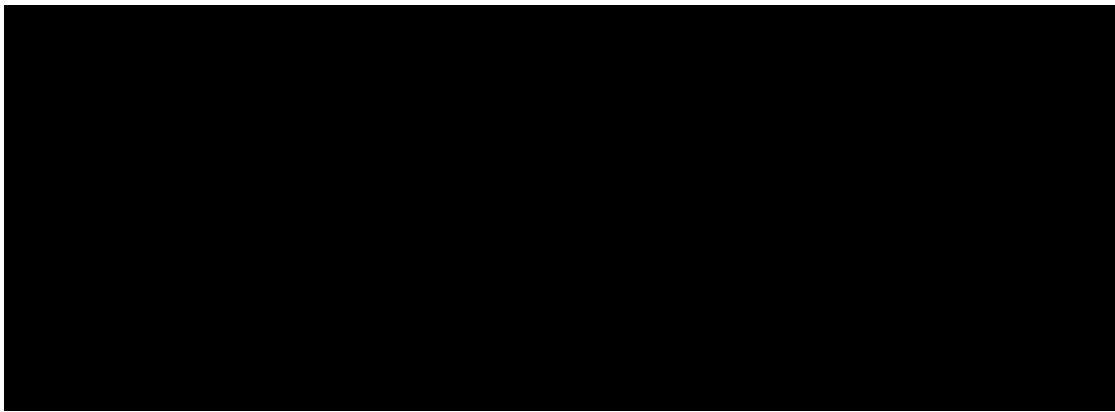


Location

In [Witness](#) (1985), on the day after rejecting Rachel's (Kelly McGillis) seduction, John Book (Harrison Ford) explains to her why nothing could have happened between them the night before. Quite conveniently, the confrontation takes place in a barn, while Rachel is collecting eggs. The location emphasizes Rachel's responsibilities as a woman. If they had made love and Rachel gotten pregnant, she would have to carry the baby and eventually give birth. Also, during the conversation, John stands outside the barn, thus being physically separated from Rachel by the barn's door. In this case, the door functions as a metaphor of the social and cultural barriers that keeps them apart.

The **final confrontation** in *The Graduate* takes place in a church. Ben tries to prevent Elaine (Katherine Ross) from getting married, but he arrives too late. Nonetheless, when Elaine sees him, she sprints to him, and they run away. When the couple is cornered by infuriated parents and relatives, Ben starts swinging a cross to avoid them. As they exit, Ben uses the cross to hold the church's doors shut.





The prop (cross) and location (church) offer a comment on religious institutions, perhaps implying that Elaine's parents are trapped by traditional beliefs and practices.

For the Future Directors, With Love

As you know, the director on a set has final word on all the creative elements, which means many of your crew members will stop you and ask for approval on this or that: Is the blond wig okay? Can we shoot on top of the building? Can we place the sofa under the window? Where's is the restroom?

Some of these questions may or may not be the questions you are willing to answer at the time, but remember: everyone is just doing their job. The important thing is to not get overwhelmed and snap at your crew. They are all there for you, working on *your* film.

If you are on an well-oiled set, your Assistant Director (AD) will be the last barrier before people get to you. He or she will try to answer as many questions for you as they can. And if your AD doesn't know the answer, at least he or she will be able to prioritize and let you know what needs immediate attention.

FILED UNDER: DIRECTING

TAGGED WITH: AMADEUS, DIRECTING, GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM, MISE-EN-SCENE, PRODUCTION DESIGNER, REAR WINDOW, THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (1920), THE GRADUATE

COMMENTS



Dee Sherwood says

[August 5, 2015 at 7:47 pm](#)

Such an elegantly conceived website should not have a misspelled word. A hunted animal is Òprey,Ó not ÒprayÓ which is appropriate activity for worship.

[Reply](#)



Gabe Moura says

[August 6, 2015 at 6:57 am](#)

Thanks for pointing that out, Dee! Sorry I don't have an army of editors and writers. Sometimes in my excitement writing these articles a finger will hit the wrong key. I blame my excitement. But seriously, thank you for your kind words.

[Reply](#)



umrah shakil says

[June 6, 2017 at 11:16 pm](#)

This is a really amazing and comprehensive work on the topic.thanks alot.helped me tons ♡

[Reply](#)



Agro says

[June 13, 2016 at 3:13 pm](#)

f**k elegance. Great content!!

[Reply](#)



[Oskars](#) says

[September 18, 2015 at 6:28 am](#)

Very good article! As a directing student I find it very helpful!

And understand your excitement! I have every time I deal with writing my own texts!

Regards

[Reply](#)



Gabe Moura says

[October 6, 2015 at 7:26 am](#)

Thank you, Oskars!

[Reply](#)



Joana says

[October 6, 2015 at 7:19 pm](#)

This was extremely helpful! Thank you! I needed to grasp the concept for a paper for my Into to Film class.

[Reply](#)



Gabe Moura says

[October 9, 2015 at 6:00 am](#)

You are very welcome, Joana. Good luck with your paper. 

[Reply](#)



[Michael Muhumuza](#) says

[November 4, 2015 at 9:58 pm](#)

Thank you for the overview , many people will find it very useful

[Reply](#)



Sarah Ehrlich says

[January 9, 2016 at 8:33 pm](#)

Fantastic overview! Thank you for writing this!

[Reply](#)



Flavia Hemida says

[January 18, 2016 at 12:07 pm](#)

Thankyou so much. I am doing this drama homework on miss en scene and this was the most exiting website. Thankyou again.

[Reply](#)



Gabe Moura says

[January 18, 2016 at 1:45 pm](#)

You are very welcome. Glad to be helpful.

[Reply](#)



Flavia Hermida says

[January 18, 2016 at 12:09 pm](#)

I want to become an actress but its really hard . I hope you keep posting things like this to help more people. 🤔🤔

[Reply](#)



Emma says

[February 11, 2016 at 2:42 am](#)

Hi!

Just wondered if you could tell me where in David Cook's A History of Narrative Film you found the quote in the top of the page? Would be a really big help, because I can't find the entire book and read it myself. Thanks!



[Reply](#)



Gabe Moura says

[February 11, 2016 at 5:59 am](#)

Hi Emma, thank you for your question! I happen to have a Custom Second Edition of A History of Narrative Film, so it's possible that the exact phrasing is different in your edition, but I extracted the quote from the Glossary, page 936, under "Mise-En-Scène". Hope this helps! Thank you and have a great day!

[Reply](#)



Teresa Quindy says

[February 29, 2016 at 10:55 am](#)

Awesome article. Thank you so much for sharing all of this information that you have provided.

I am taking a course in cinema and stumbled upon your website. Will save to favorites.

Thank You,

Teresa

[Reply](#)



Gabe Moura says

[March 1, 2016 at 7:04 pm](#)

Thank you, Teresa! Glad you found us!

[Reply](#)



Joyce says

[March 3, 2016 at 8:42 am](#)

Your article was very helpful for my screen directing class especially that its very current.

[Reply](#)



Chelana jain says

[April 3, 2016 at 1:37 am](#)

Well described with examples just as needed (y) great help for my papers 🤔🤔

[Reply](#)



biren says

[May 13, 2016 at 2:18 am](#)

Hi, nice to come across with your site, Being a film buff and aspiring writer and film maker it is so much to me. I have subscribed your news letter. hope that you keep solving my never ending queries on films and film making (The C R A F T). All the best

[Reply](#)



Gabe Moura says

[May 20, 2016 at 7:31 am](#)

Thank you so much!

[Reply](#)



[Kamal](#) says

[September 21, 2016 at 4:13 am](#)

Hi, your blog is very useful for inspired filmmakers like me. I appreciate your efforts to collect lots of film making tips for us in one blog.

[Reply](#)



annie says

[October 19, 2016 at 7:32 pm](#)

This is amazingly helpful and also very insightful

[Reply](#)



Gabe Moura says

[October 20, 2016 at 8:14 am](#)

You're too kind, Annie! Thank you for your words!

[Reply](#)



riley says

[December 3, 2016 at 7:54 pm](#)

Just wanna reiterate what's already been said by my fellow commenters Ñ this is an incredibly exciting, informative, engaging website. not even a film student, just writing a relevant paper but I got caught up reading your different articles and it's just such great content that is so clear and well-organized and even gives practical interpretations of nearly every concept. I'm ranting now. Basically, reading this website makes me want to be a director. lol. Good stuff, thank you so much for this. If I make it big as a director I'll donate 100 bucks or something

[Reply](#)



Vaishnavi Gajapure says

[April 18, 2017 at 8:16 am](#)

This was really helpful, thank you so much 🎬🎬

[Reply](#)



kunle adepoju says

[August 13, 2017 at 7:58 am](#)

I love this great film making piece

[Reply](#)



Remguy (Montreal) says

[December 31, 2017 at 9:09 am](#)

I'm just a guy who googled "mise en scene" and found myself here (You were 3rd or 4th on the list, btw). Great site! I read the entire article with relish (no hot dog jokes, please) and will poke around the rest of your site. I'm someone who appreciates reading just about anything that's well organized and well written and you, Sir, excel at both (!!). Good People who do Good Things oft go un(dere)rewarded, at least as far as recognition and remuneration. But, being Good People, they say they do it to reach other people, to be of service. Consider me reached. This is great work, and most likely comes from a genuinely good person. Thank you for your selfless efforts. You, and others like you, are truly the gems of the Internet!!!

[Reply](#)



Gabe Moura says

[January 2, 2018 at 10:14 pm](#)

Hey Remguy, thank you so much for your kind words! I created this site to teach and reach people, so it's nice to see that the mission continues alive and well! Happy New Year to you!

[Reply](#)

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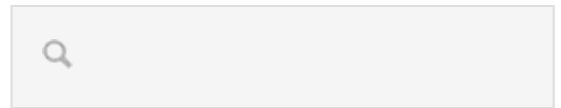
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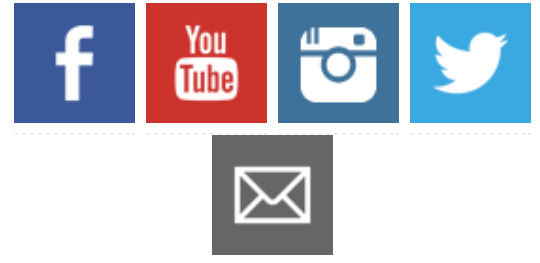
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