CHAPTER 4

# The Shot: Mise-en-Scene

Of all film techniques, **mise-en-scene** is the one that viewers notice most. After seeing a film, we may not recall the cutting or the camera movements, the dissolves or the offscreen sound. But we do remember the costumes in *Gone with the Wind* and the bleak, chilly lighting in Charles Foster Kane's *Xanadu*. We retain vivid impressions of the misty streets in *The Big Sleep* and the labyrinthine, fluorescent-lit lair of Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*. We recall Harpo Marx clambering over Edgar Kennedy's lemonade stand (*Duck Soup*) and Michael J. Fox escaping high-school bullies on an improvised skateboard (*Back to the Future*). Many of our most vivid memories of movies stem from mise-en-scene.

## What Is Mise-en-Scene?

Consider this image from Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* **(4.1).** Aldo Raine, a U.S. soldier on a mission to assassinate Hitler, has been captured by SS Colonel Hans Landa. The shot seems a simple one, but if you're starting to think like a filmmaker, you'll notice how Tarantino has shaped the image to accentuate the action and engage our attention.

The shot presents the two men facing each other behind a movie theater. The alley is rendered minimally, in dark colors and subdued lighting. By playing down the setting, Tarantino obliges us to concentrate on the confrontation.

Although both men are positioned in profile, the image doesn't give equal weight to each one. The cowl masks Aldo's face. This costume choice encourages us to concentrate on the face that we can see. The lighting is important as well. A

**4.1** What attracts your eye? Elements of mise-en-scene accentuate action and engage attention in this scene from *Inglourious Basterds*, in which Aldo Raine is captured by Colonel Landa.

thread of illumination picks out the edge of Raine's cowl; without it, it would merge into the background. Again, however, it is Landa's face that gets greater emphasis. Strong lighting from above and left sharply outlines his profile, and a less powerful light (what filmmakers call *fill*) reveals his features.

Landa is emphasized in another way, through the actor's dialogue and facial expression. As Landa speaks, he shows delight in the capture of his quarry. His satisfaction bursts out when he chortles: "Alas, you're now in the hands of the SS—my hands, to be exact!" Letting the actor's hands fly up into the center of the frame and emphasizing them by the dialogue, Tarantino reminds us of the officer's florid self-assurance. This hand gesture will be developed when Landa playfully taps Raine's head with a forefinger: "I've been waiting a long time to touch you."

**4.2** Unplanned events and mise-en-scene. While filming *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, John Ford took advantage of a thunderstorm in Monument Valley.

Although Tarantino has made many creative choices in this shot (notably the decision to film in a relatively close framing), certain techniques stand out. Setting, costume, lighting, and performance have all been coordinated to highlight Landa's gloating and remind us that he enjoys his cat-and-mouse interrogation tactics. Tarantino has shaped our experience of this story action by his decisions about mise-en-scene.

In the original French, *mise en scène* (pronounced meez-ahn-sen) means "putting into the scene," and it was first applied to the practice of directing plays. Film scholars, extending the term to film direction, use the term to signify the director's control over what appears in the film frame. As you would expect, mise-en-scene includes those aspects of film that overlap with the art of the theater: setting, lighting, costume and makeup, and staging and performance.

As the *Inglourious Basterds* shot suggests, mise-en-scene usually involves planning in advance. But the filmmaker may seize on unplanned events as well. An actor may add a line on the set, or an unexpected change in lighting may enhance a dramatic effect. While filming a cavalry procession through Monument Valley for *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon,* John Ford took advantage of an approaching lightning storm to create a dramatic backdrop for the action **(4.2).** The storm remains part of the film's mise-en-scene even though Ford neither planned it nor controlled it; it was a lucky accident that helped create one of the film's most affecting passages. Jean Renoir, Robert Altman, and other directors have allowed their actors to improvise their performances, making the films' mise-en-scene more spontaneous and unpredictable.

## The Power of Mise-en-Scene

Filmmakers can use mise-en-scene to achieve realism, giving settings an authentic look or letting actors perform as naturally as possible. Throughout film history, however, audiences have also been attracted to fantasy, and mise-en-scene has often been used for this purpose. This attraction is evident in the work of cinema's first master of the technique, Georges Méliès. Méliès used highly original mise-en-scene to create an imaginary world on film.

A caricaturist and stage magician, Méliès became fascinated by the Lumière brothers' demonstration of their short films in 1895. (For more on the Lumières, see p. 177.) After building a camera based on an English projector, Méliès began filming unstaged street scenes and moments of passing daily life. One day, the story goes, he was filming at the Place de l'Opéra, but his camera jammed as a bus was passing. By the time he could resume filming, the bus had gone and a hearse was in front of his lens. When Méliès screened the film, he discovered something

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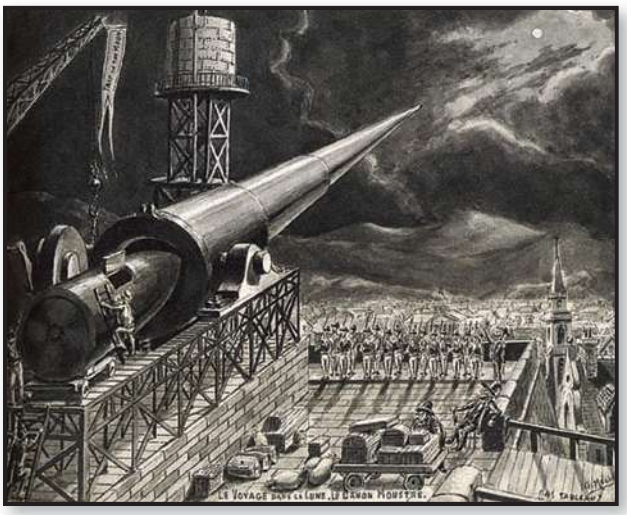
For more on Méliès and his last years, visit our entry "Hugo: Scorsese's birthday present to Georges Méliès."

> "When Buñuel was preparing *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie,* he chose a tree-lined avenue for the recurring shot of his characters traipsing endlessly down it. The avenue was strangely stranded in open country and it perfectly suggested the idea of these people coming from nowhere and going nowhere. Buñuel's assistant said, 'You can't use that road. It's been used in at least ten other movies.' 'Ten other movies?' said Buñuel, impressed. 'Then it must be good.'"

unexpected: a moving bus seemed to transform instantly into a hearse. Whether or not the anecdote is true, it at least illustrates Méliès's recognition of the magical powers of mise-en-scene. He would devote most of his efforts to cinematic conjuring.

To do so would require preparation, since Méliès could not count on lucky accidents like the bus–hearse transformation. He would have to plan and stage action for the camera. Drawing on his theatrical experience, Méliès built one of the first film studios—a small, crammed affair bristling with balconies, trapdoors, and sliding backdrops. Total control was necessary to create the fantasy world he envisioned **(4.3–4.6).** He drew shots beforehand, designed sets and costumes, and devised elaborate special effects. As if this were not enough, Méliès starred in his own films (4.6).

Méliès's "Star-Film" studio made hundreds of short fantasy and trick films based on a strict control over every element in the frame, and the first master of mise-en-scene demonstrated the resources of the technique. The legacy of Méliès's magic is a delightfully unreal world wholly obedient to the whims of the imagination.



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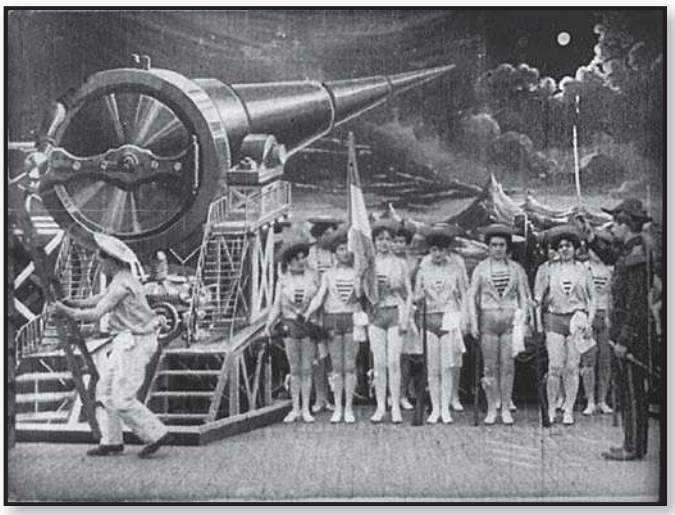

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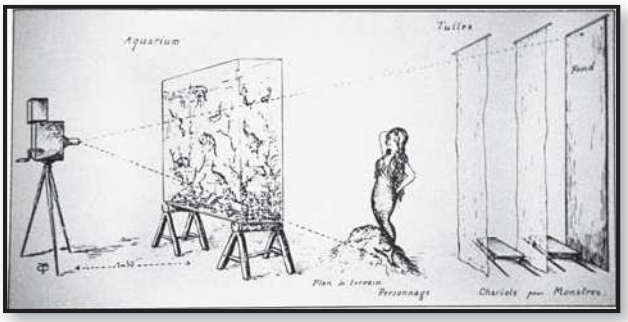


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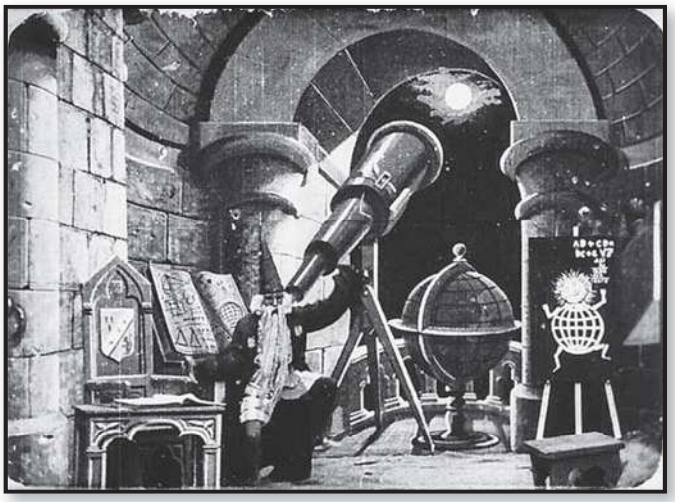

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**4.3–4.6 Méliès and mise-en-scene.** Méliès made detailed plans for his shots, as seen in the drawing and final version of the rocket-launching scene in *A Trip to the Moon* (4.3–4.4). For *The Mermaid* (4.5) he summoned up an undersea world by placing a fish tank between the camera and an actress, some backdrops, and "carts for monsters." In *La Lune à une mètre* (4.6) Méliès plays an astronomer. His study and its furnishings, including telescope, globe, and blackboard, are all painted cut-outs.

# Components of Mise-en-Scene

Mise-en-scene offers the filmmaker four general areas of choice and control: setting, costumes and makeup, lighting, and staging (which includes acting and movement in the shot).

**4.7 Setting creates narrative expectations.** The railway yard at the opening of *Wendy and Lucy* is a setting that will take on significance later in the film.

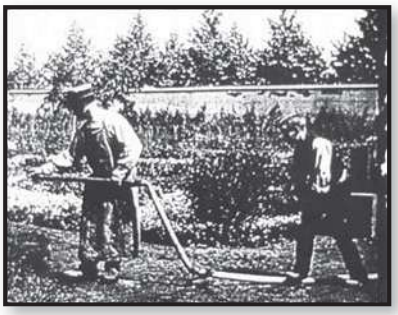
## Setting

Since the earliest days of cinema, critics and audiences have understood that setting plays a more active role in cinema than it usually does in the theater. André Bazin writes:

> The human being is all-important in the theatre. The drama on the screen can exist without actors. A banging door, a leaf in the wind, waves beating on the shore can heighten the dramatic effect. Some film masterpieces use man only as an accessory, like an extra, or in counterpoint to nature, which is the true leading character.

In a film, the setting can come to the forefront; it need not be only a container for human events but can dynamically enter the narrative action. Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy* begins with shots of a railroad yard as trains pass through **(4.7).** But we don't see any people. Wendy, who is making her way across the United States by car, is later seen walking her dog Lucy in a park. The opening shots of the rail yard suggest the sort of neighborhoods where she must stay. At later points in the film, the roar and whistle of rail traffic will increase suspense, but not until the ending will we come to understand why the opening emphasized the trains.

The filmmaker may select an existing locale for the action. The very early short comedy *L'Arroseur arrosé* ("The Waterer Sprayed," **4.8)** was filmed in a garden. At the close of World War II, Roberto Rossellini shot *Germany Year Zero* in the rubble of Berlin **(4.9).** Alternatively, the filmmaker may construct the setting. Méliès understood that shooting in a studio increased his control, and many filmmakers followed his lead. In France, Germany, and especially the United States, commercial filmmaking became centered on studio facilities in which every aspect of mise-en-scene could be manipulated.



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**4.8–4.9 Actual locations used as setting.** Although Louis Lumière's cameramen were famous for documentary filming, they also made fictional narratives such as the 1895 *L'Arroseur arrosé* (4.8). Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (4.9) maintained the tradition of staging fictional stories in actual locations.

Some directors have emphasized authenticity even in purpose-built settings. For example, Erich von Stroheim prided himself on meticulous research into details of locale for the sets of *Greed* **(4.10).** *All the President's Men* (1976) took a similar tack, seeking to duplicate the *Washington Post* office on a sound stage **(4.11).** Other films have been less committed to accuracy. Though D. W. Griffith studied the various historical periods presented in *Intolerance,* his Babylon constitutes a personal image of that city **(4.12).** Similarly, in *Ivan the Terrible,* Sergei Eisenstein freely stylized the decor of the czar's palace to harmonize with the lighting, costume, and figure movement, so that characters crawl through doorways that resemble mouseholes and stand frozen before symbolic murals **(4.13).**

Setting can overwhelm the actors, as in Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* **(4.14),** or it can be reduced to almost nothing, as in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* **(4.15).** The overall design of a setting can shape how we understand story action. In Louis Feuillade's silent crime serial *The Vampires,* a criminal gang has killed a courier on his way to a bank. The gang's confederate, Irma Vep, is also a bank employee, and just as she tells her superior that the courier has vanished, an imposter, in beard and bowler hat, strolls in behind them **(4.16).** They turn away from us in surprise as he comes forward **(4.17).** Working in a period when cutting to closer shots was rare in a French film, Feuillade draws our attention to the man by centering him in the doorway.

But suppose a filmmaker is using a more crowded locale. How can a compact setting yield smooth drama? The heroine of Juzo Itami's *Tampopo* is a widow who

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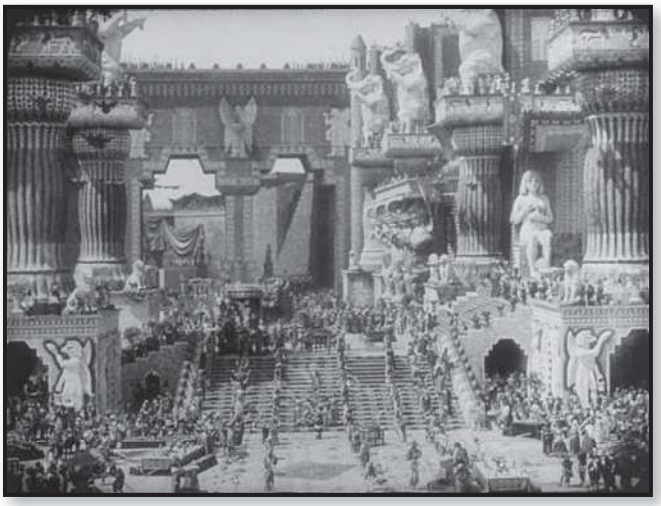
**4.10–4.11 Authenticity in constructed settings.** Details such as posters and hanging flypaper create a tavern scene in *Greed* (4.10). To replicate an actual newsroom in *All the President's Men* (4.11), even wastepaper from the actual office was scattered around the set.



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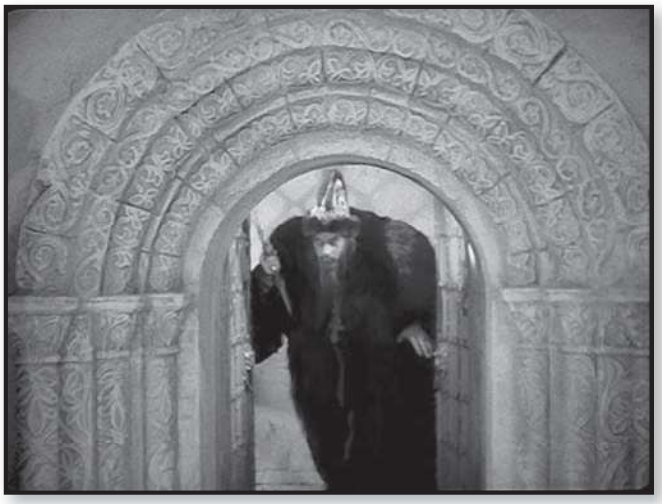

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**4.12–4.13 Stylized settings.** The Babylonian sequences of *Intolerance* (4.12) combined influences from Assyrian history, 19th-century biblical illustration, and modern dance. In *Ivan the Terrible,* Part 2, the décor (4.13) dominates the characters.

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**4.14–4.15 The interplay of setting and actors.** In *Wings of Desire,* busy, colorful graffiti draw attention away from the man lying on the ground (4.14). In contrast, in *Bram Stoker's Dracula,* apart from the candles, the setting of this scene has been obliterated by darkness (4.15).

is trying to improve the food she serves in her restaurant. In one scene, a cowboy-hatted truck driver takes her to another noodle shop to watch professionals do business. Itami has staged the scene so that the kitchen and the counter serve as two arenas for the action. At first, the widow watches the noodle-man take orders, sitting by her mentor on the edge of the kitchen **(4.18).** Quickly, the counter fills with customers calling out orders. The truck driver challenges her to match the orders with the customers, and she steps closer to the center of the kitchen **(4.19).** After she calls out the orders correctly, she turns her back to us, and our interest shifts to the customers, who applaud her **(4.20).**

As the *Tampopo* example shows, color can be an important component of settings. The dark colors of the kitchen surfaces make the widow's red dress stand out. Robert Bresson's *L'Argent* parallels its settings by drab green backgrounds and cold blue props and costumes **(4.21–4.23).** In contrast, Jacques Tati's *Play Time* displays sharply changing color schemes. In the first portion of *Play Time,* the settings and costumes are mostly gray, brown, and black—cold, steely colors. Later in the film, however, beginning in the restaurant scene, the settings start to sport cheery reds, pinks, and greens. This change in the settings' colors supports a narrative development that shows an inhuman city landscape that is transformed by vitality and spontaneity.

A full-size setting need not always be built. Through much of the history of the cinema, filmmakers have used miniature buildings to create fantasy scenes or simply to economize. Parts of settings could also be rendered as paintings and combined photographically with full-sized sections of the space. Now, digital special effects can conjure up settings in comparable ways. When the makers of *Angels & Demons* were refused permission to shoot in Vatican City, they built partial sets of St. Peter's Square and the Pantheon, then filled in the missing stretches **(4.24, 4.25).**

In manipulating a shot's setting, the filmmaker may use a *prop,* short for *property.* This is another term borrowed from theatrical mise-en-scene. When

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**4.16–4.17** Setting guides attention. In *The Vampires,* a background frame created by a large doorway emphasizes the importance of an entering character.

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**4.18–4.20** Activating areas of a setting. In *Tampopo,* at the start of the scene (4.18), the noodle counter, with only two customers, occupies the center of the action. The widow and her truck driver mentor stand inconspicuously at the left. After the counter is full (4.19), the dramatic emphasis shifts to the kitchen when the widow rises and takes the challenge to name the customers' orders. Her red dress helps draw attention to her. When she has triumphantly matched the orders, she gets a round of applause (4.20). By turning her away from us, Itami once more emphasizes the rear counter.

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**4.21–4.23 Color creates parallels among settings.** Color links the affluent home in *L'Argent* (4.21) to the prison (4.22) and later to the old woman's home (4.23).

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**4.24–4.25 Digital set replacement.** Only a portion of the buildings lining St. Peter's Square were built for *Angels & Demons.* The remainder of the set was covered with greenscreens during filming. Digital matte paintings were added to create major elements like the colonnades at the sides and the tops of the background buildings.

an object in the setting has a function within the ongoing action, we can call it a prop. Films teem with examples: the snowstorm paperweight that shatters at the beginning of *Citizen Kane,* the little girl's balloon in *M,* the cactus rose in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,* Sarah Connor's hospital bed turned exercise machine in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day.* Comedies often use props to create gags **(4.26).**

Over the course of a narrative, a prop may become a motif. In Alexander Payne's *Election,* the fussy, frustrated high school teacher is shown cleaning out spoiled food

and hallway litter, and these actions prepare for the climactic moment when he crumples a ballot and secretly disposes of it **(4.27–4.29).** Payne calls this the motif of trash, "of throwing things away, since that's in fact the climax of the film. . . . So we establish it early on." Color may help props become motifs. In some scenes of *Finye* (*The Wind*), the recurrent use of orange creates a cluster of nature motifs **(4.30–4.32).** When we look at *Our Hospitality* later in the chapter, we'll examine how elements of setting, particularly props, can weave through a film to create motifs.

**4.26** Comic use of props. The irresponsible protagonist of *Groundhog Day* eats an enormous breakfast; all the dishes serve as props in the diner setting.

## Costume and Makeup

If you were planning a film, you'd probably give as much attention to what your actors wear as you pay to their surroundings. Like setting, costume can have a great variety of specific functions in the film's overall form.

Costumes can play causal roles in film plots. In the runaway bus section of *Speed,* Annie's outfit provides the clue that allows Jack to outwit the bomber Howard. During a phone conversation Howard refers to Annie as a "Wildcat." Noticing Annie's University of Arizona sweater, Jack realizes that Howard must have hidden a video camera on the bus. Less obviously, costumes can become motifs, enhancing characterization and tracing changes in attitude **(4.33–4.36).**

In other films, costumes can be used for their purely graphic qualities. Throughout *Ivan the Terrible,* robes and capes are orchestrated with one another in their colors, their textures, and even the way they flow **(4.37).** *Freak Orlando* boldly uses costumes to display primary colors with maximum intensity **(4.38).**

In these last examples, as well as in *Tampopo* (4.18–4.20) and *L'Argent* (4.21–4.23), costume is coordinated with setting. Since the filmmaker usually wants to emphasize the human figures, setting may provide a more or less neutral background, while costume helps pick out the characters. Color design is particularly

> "The best sets are the simplest, most 'decent' ones; everything should contribute to the feeling of the story and anything that does not do this has no place. Reality is usually too complicated. Real locations contain too much that is extreme or contradictory and always require some simplifying: taking things away, unifying colors, etc. This strength through simplicity is much easier to achieve on a built set than in an existing location."
> —Stuart Craig, art director, *Notting Hill*

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**4.27–4.29** Props as motifs in *Election.* As he discards spoiled leftovers, the teacher is suspiciously watched by the custodian—who will play an important role in his downfall (4.27). He tosses a scrap of paper into the corridor trash bin (4.28). The motif culminates in a close-up of the teacher's hand discarding the crucial vote for student council president (4.29).

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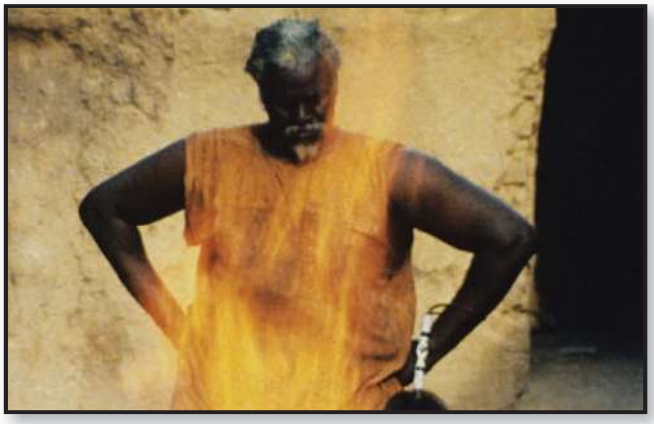

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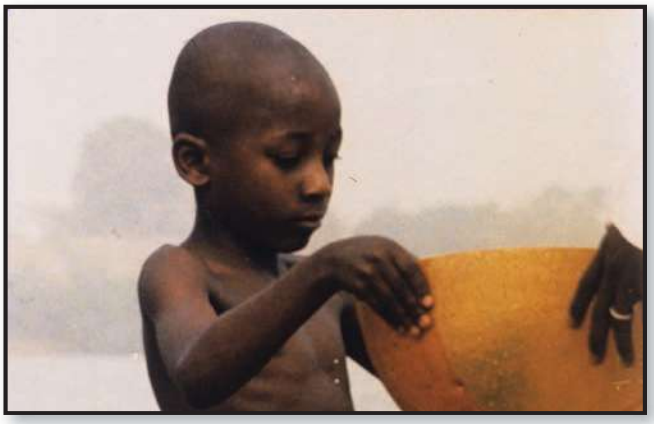

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**4.30–4.32 Color as a motif.** Souleymane Cissé's *Finye* begins with a woman carrying an orange calabash as the wind rustles through foliage (4.30). Later, the vengeful grandfather prepares to stalk his grandson's persecutor by dressing in orange and making magic before a fire (4.31). At the end, the little boy passes his bowl to someone offscreen (4.32)—possibly a couple seen earlier in the film.

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**4.33–4.34 Costume and character.** In a poignant moment in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation,* the Little Sister decorates her shabby dress with "ermine" made of cotton dotted with spots of soot (4.33). The image suggests both her effort to be elegant and her realization of her poverty. In Fellini's *8½,* the film director Guido persistently uses his dark glasses (4.34) to shield himself from the world.

> "The costume is a very important thing. It speaks before you do. You know what you're looking at. You get a reference and it gives context about the other characters and their relationships."
> —Harrison Ford, actor

important here. The *Freak Orlando* costumes (4.38) stand out boldly against the neutral gray background of an artificial lake. In *The Night of the Shooting Stars,* luminous wheat fields set off the hard black-and-blue costumes of the fascists and the peasants **(4.39).** The director may instead choose to match the color values of setting and costume more closely **(4.40).** This "bleeding" of the costume into the setting is carried to a kind of limit in the prison scene of *THX 1138,* in which George Lucas strips both locale and clothing to stark white on white **(4.41).**

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**4.35–4.36 Costume and character change.** When Hildy Johnson, in *His Girl Friday,* switches from her role of aspiring housewife to that of reporter, her hats change as well—from a stylish number with a low-dipping brim (4.35) to a more "masculine" hat with its brim pushed up, journalist-style (4.36).

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**4.37–4.38 Graphic qualities of costumes.** In *Ivan the Terrible,* the sweeping folds of a priest's lightweight black robe contrast with the heavy cloak and train of the czar's furs (4.37). In *Freak Orlando,* stylized costumes with intense, primary colors are featured (4.38). The director, Ulrike Ottinger, is a professional costume designer.

*Women in Love* affords a clear example of how costume and setting can contribute to a film's narrative progression. The opening scenes portray the characters' shallow middle-class life by means of saturated primary and complementary colors in costume and setting **(4.42).** In the middle portions of the film, as the characters discover love on a country estate, pale pastels predominate **(4.43).** The last section of *Women in Love* takes place around the Matterhorn, and the characters' ardor has cooled. Now the colors have almost disappeared, and scenes are dominated by pure black and white **(4.44).** By combining with setting, costumes may reinforce narrative and thematic patterns.

Computer technology can graft virtual costumes onto fully computer-generated characters, like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* or the many extras in the backgrounds of big crowd scenes. Entirely digital costumes for human actors are less common, but fantasy and science fiction films use them **(4.45).**

Many of these points about costume apply equally to a closely related area of mise-en-scene, the actors' makeup. In the early days of cinema, makeup was necessary because

**4.39 Color contrast of costume and setting.** In the climactic skirmish of *The Night of the Shooting Stars,* the dark costumes stand out starkly against the more neutral background.

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**4.40–4.41 Color coordinates costume and setting.** Fellini's *Casanova* creates a color gradation that runs from bright red costumes to paler red walls (4.40), the whole composition capped by a small white accent in the distance. In *THX 1138,* heads seem to float in space as white costumes blend into white settings (4.41).

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**4.42–4.44 Costume, setting, and narrative.** Bright colors in an early scene of *Women in Love* (4.42) give way to the softer hues of trees and fields (4.43) and finally to a predominantly white-and-black scheme (4.44), contributing to the progression of the story.

**4.45 Virtual costume.** *Watchmen's* superhero Rorschach wears a hood with moving black patterns. In postproduction, a digital simulation of ink flowing through the fibers was superimposed on the actor's face.

actors' faces would not register well on film stocks. Over the course of film history, a wide range of possibilities emerged. Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* was famous for its complete avoidance of makeup **(4.46).** For *Ivan the Terrible,* however, Nikolai Cherkasov plays the czar wearing a wig and a false beard, nose, and eyebrows **(4.47).** Changing actors to look like historical personages has been one common function of makeup.

Makeup is most noticeable in horror and science fiction films, and the popularity of those genres contributed new technology to the craft. Rubber and plasticine compounds can create bumps, bulges, extra organs, and layers of artificial skin. Now other genres are utilizing those resources **(4.48–4.50).**

Today the hope is for makeup generally to pass unnoticed, and quietly accentuate expressive qualities of the actor's face. Because the camera may record cruel details that we wouldn't notice in ordinary life, unsuitable blemishes, wrinkles, and sagging skin will have to be hidden. The makeup artist can sculpt the face, making it seem narrower or broader by applying blush and shadow. Viewers expect that female performers will wear lipstick and other cosmetics, but the male actors are usually wearing makeup as well.

**4.46 Plain faces.** Pale backgrounds focus attention on the actors' faces in many shots of *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc.* The actors wore no makeup, and the director, Carl Dreyer, relied on close-ups and tiny facial changes to create an intense religious drama.

**4.47 Makeup interprets a historical figure.** In *Ivan the Terrible,* Part 1, makeup shapes the eyebrows and hollows the eye sockets to emphasize Ivan's piercing gaze, a central feature in director Sergei Eisenstein's conception of the all-knowing czar.

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**4.48–4.50 Creative choices in makeup.** Tilda Swinton (4.48) is an actor who enjoys experimenting with makeup. In the futuristic fantasy *Snowpiercer,* she and her makeup designer used an artificial nose, protruding teeth, and vibrant lipstick to create a grotesque, tyrannical administrator (4.49). For *The Grand Budapest Hotel,* director Wes Anderson exploited the new makeup technology for grotesque comedy. To portray an elderly woman, Swinton wore 11 pieces of prosthetic makeup on her neck, chin, earlobes, forehead, and nose—along with five wig pieces (4.50).

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**4.51–4.52 Makeup: Man and woman.** In *Speed,* Sandra Bullock's eyeliner, shadow, and arched brows make her eyes vivid and give her an alert expression (4.51). For the same scene, the eyeliner on Keanu Reeves makes the upper edges of his eyes stand out (4.52). Note the somewhat fierce slope of the eyebrows, accentuating his slight frown.

4.53

4.54

**4.53–4.54 Digital makeup.** In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,* Ralph Fiennes's nose was removed and replaced with nostrils appropriate to the snake-like Lord Voldemort (4.53). When two clones of the same man get into a fight in *Moon,* a stunt man wearing a green hood with motion-capture dots played one of the clones (4.54). Actor Sam Rockwell's head was shot separately and then inserted into the scene.

Film actors rely on their eyes to a great extent (see A Closer Look, p. 134), and makeup artists can often enhance facial performance. Eyeliner and mascara can emphasize the direction of a glance. Nearly every actor will also have expressively shaped eyebrows—lengthened eyebrows can enlarge the face; shorter brows make the face seem more compact. Eyebrows plucked in a slightly rising curve add gaiety to the face, but slightly sloping ones hint at sadness. Thick, straight brows commonly applied to men reinforce the impression of a hard, serious gaze **(4.51, 4.52).**

Although most makeup continues to be physically applied to actors' faces, digital technology can be used as well. Minor cleanups remove flaws or shadows from faces. More drastically, a villain can lose a nose or, via head replacement, an actor can play two roles in the same shot **(4.53, 4.54).** Computer-generated imagery (CGI) has extended the importance of makeup, because now the filmmaker can sculpt entire bodies. Gary Sinise's legs were removed so that he could play an amputee in *Forrest Gump*, and a muscular actor was made to look thin and weak before becoming a superhero in *Captain America: The First Avenger.*

> "Light is everything. It expresses ideology, emotion, colour, depth, style. It can efface, narrate, describe. With the right lighting, the ugliest face, the most idiotic expression can radiate with beauty or intelligence."
> —Federico Fellini, director

## Lighting

If you've shot videos with your cellphone or camera, you may not have thought much about manipulating lighting. Modern digital capture can produce a legible

image in bright or dark situations, and for many purposes, all that matters is that the subject be visible. But the practiced filmmaker wants more than legibility. The image should have pictorial impact, and for that it's vital to control the lighting. Not many actual situations would yield the delicate edge lighting or facial fill light we saw in our shot from *Inglourious Basterds* (4.1).

In artistic filmmaking, lighting is more than just illumination that permits us to see the action. Lighter and darker areas within the frame help create the overall composition of each shot and guide our attention to certain objects and actions. A brightly illuminated patch may draw our eye to a key gesture, while a shadow may conceal a detail or build up suspense about what may be present. Lighting can also articulate textures: the curve of a face, the grain of a piece of wood, the tracery of a spider's web, the sparkle of a gem.

**Highlights and Shadows** Lighting shapes objects by creating *highlights* and *shadows*. A highlight is a patch of relative brightness on a surface. The man's face in **4.55** and the edge of the fingers in **4.56** display highlights. Highlights provide important cues to the texture of the surface. If the surface is smooth, like glass or chrome, the highlights tend to gleam or sparkle; a rougher surface, like a coarse stone facing, yields more diffuse highlights. Shadows likewise do the same, allowing objects to have portions of darkness (called *shading*) or to cast their shadows onto something else. Thus the fingers in 4.56 are visible partly because they are shaded, while the stark vertical shadows of 4.55 imply prison bars offscreen.

> "Every light has a point where it is brightest and a point toward which it wanders to lose itself completely. . . . The journey of rays from that central core to the outposts of blackness is the adventure and drama of light."
> —Josef von Sternberg

Lighting creates not only textures but also overall shape. If a ball is lit straight on from the front, it appears round. If the same ball is lit from the side, we see it as a half-circle. Hollis Frampton's short film *Lemon* consists primarily of light moving around a lemon, and the shifting shadows and shading create dramatically changing patterns of yellow and black. This film almost seems designed to prove the truth of a remark made by Josef von Sternberg: "The proper use of light can embellish and dramatize every object."

Lighting joins with setting in controlling our sense of a scene's space. In 4.55, a few shadows imply an entire prison cell. Lighting also shapes a shot's overall composition. One image from John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle* welds the gang members into a unit by the pool of light cast by a hanging lamp. At the same time, the lighting sets up a scale of importance, emphasizing the protagonist by making him the most frontal and clearly lit figure **(4.57).**

**Quality** For our purposes, we can say that filmmakers exploit and explore four major aspects of lighting: its quality, direction, source, and color. Lighting *quality* refers to the relative intensity of the illumination. *Hard* lighting creates clearly defined shadows, crisp textures, and sharp edges, whereas *soft* lighting creates a diffused illumination. In nature, the noonday sun creates hard light, whereas an overcast

4.55

4.56

4.57

**4.55–4.57 Highlights and shadows.** In Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat,* the man's face and body display highlights (4.55), while the cast shadows suggest the unseen bars of a jail cell. In Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket,* the edge of the fingers display highlights (4.56), while the hand is subtly modeled by shading. Shadows on faces create a dramatic composition in John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle (4.57).*

**4.58–4.59 Hard versus soft lighting.** In Satyajit Ray's *Aparajito,* Apu's mother and the globe she holds are emphasized by hard lighting (4.58). In another shot from the same film (4.59), softer lighting blurs contours and textures and makes for more diffusion and gentler contrasts between light and shade.

4.58

4.59

4.60

4.61

**4.60–4.61 Hard and soft lighting in color.** The spy thriller *Skyfall* shows James Bond returning from near death to international intrigue. Hard lighting in early scenes gives his face a haggard, worn look aided by makeup (including pink-rimmed eyes). Once he's back in action in a Macau casino, Bond's face is sculpted by gentler shading and softer illumination. The difference is enhanced by the neutral, colorless lighting in 4.60 and the warmer glow in 4.61.

**4.62 Frontal lighting.** In Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise,* frontal lighting eliminates most surface shading and makes the actress's shadow fall directly behind her, where we cannot see it.

**4.63 Side lighting.** In *Touch of Evil,* directed by Orson Welles, light from the left creates sharp shading of the character's nose, cheek, and lips.

sky creates soft light. The terms are relative, and many lighting situations will fall between the extremes, but we can usually recognize the differences **(4.58–4.61).**

**4.64 Backlighting.** In Godard's *Passion,* the lamp and window provide backlighting that presents the woman almost entirely in silhouette.

## Direction

The *direction* of lighting in a shot refers to the path of light from its source or sources to the object lit. For convenience we can distinguish among frontal lighting, sidelighting, backlighting, underlighting, and top lighting.

**Frontal lighting** can be recognized by its tendency to eliminate shadows. In **4.62,** from Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise,* the result of such frontal lighting is a fairly flat-looking image. Contrast **4.63,** in which a hard **sidelight** (also called a *crosslight*) sculpts the character's features.

**Backlighting,** as the name suggests, comes from behind the subject. The light can be positioned at many angles: high above the figure, at various angles off to the side, pointing straight at the camera, or from below. Used with no other sources of light, backlighting tends to create silhouettes, as in **4.64.** Combined with more frontal sources of light, the technique can create a subtle contour, as we saw with

Raine's black cowl in *Inglourious Basterds* (4.1). This use of backlighting is called *edge lighting* or *rim lighting* **(4.65).**

As its name implies, **underlighting** suggests that the light comes from below the subject. Since underlighting tends to distort features, it is often used to create dramatic horror effects, but it may also simply indicate a realistic light source, such as a fireplace, or, as in **4.66,** a flashlight. As usual, a particular technique can function differently according to context.

**Top lighting** is exemplified by **4.67,** where the spotlight shines down from almost directly above Marlene Dietrich's face. Here top lighting creates a glamorous image. In our earlier example from *Asphalt Jungle* (4.57), the light from above is harder, in keeping with the conventional harshness of crime films. Director Jacques Audiard chose to use top lighting with very little fill in his prison drama *A Prophet*: "It's a matter of realism—everything is not visible all the time" **(4.68).**

**4.65** Edge, or rim, lighting. Edge lighting makes the outline of each actor's body stand out from the background. This shot from *Wings* shows edge lighting on many parts of the frame, especially along the actors' faces and hair and on the edge of the porch.

**Source** Lighting has a quality, and it has direction. It can also be characterized by its *source*. In making a documentary, the filmmaker may be obliged to shoot with whatever light is available. Most fictional films, however, use extra light sources to obtain greater control of the image's look. Typically the table lamps and streetlights you see in a set aren't strong or varied enough to create a powerful image. Still, the filmmaker will usually create a lighting design that seems consistent with the sources in the setting. The pattern of illumination is motivated by the visible sources. (See p. 63.)

Look back at Figure 4.1, the confrontation in *Inglourious Basterds.* The pattern of light we see is roughly consistent with the source in the shot, the street lamp in the alley. But that lamp at that distance could not produce the hard light on Landa's head or the fill light that reveals his features. In **4.69,** from *The Miracle Worker,* the window in the rear and the lantern in the right foreground appear to be the sources of illumination, but many studio lights supplemented them.

Directors and cinematographers manipulating the lighting of the scene typically decide on two primary sources: a **key light** and a **fill light.** The key light is the primary source, providing the brightest illumination and casting the strongest shadows. The key light is the most directional light, and it is usually suggested by a light source in the setting. A fill is a less intense illumination that "fills in," softening or eliminating shadows cast by the key light. By combining key and fill, and by adding other sources, lighting can be controlled quite exactly.

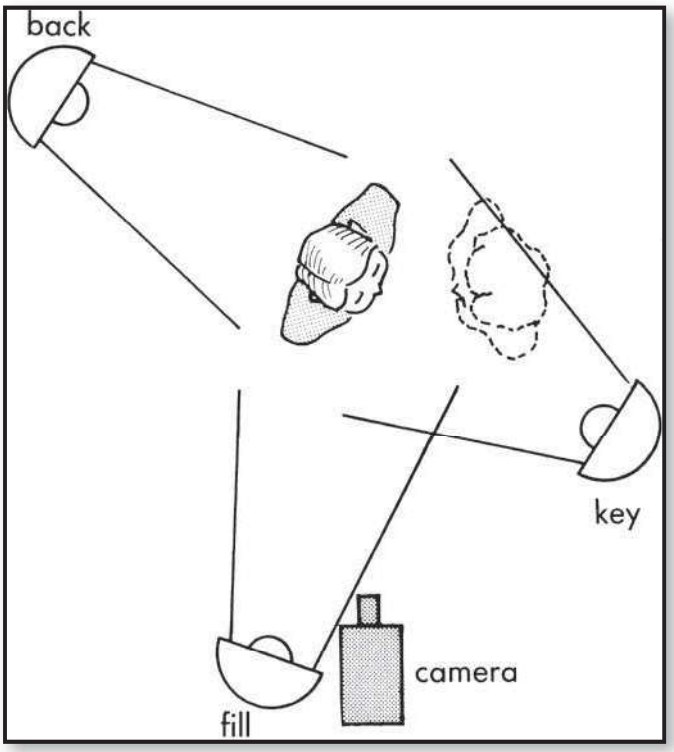
The key lighting source may be aimed at the subject from any angle, as we've seen. In our shot from *The Sixth Sense* (4.66), underlighting may be the key source, while a softer and dimmer fill falls on the setting in the background. Lights from various directions are often combined.

**4.66** Underlighting. In *The Sixth Sense,* a flashlight lights the boy's face from below, enhancing our empathy with his fright as he feels the presence of a ghost.

**4.67** Top lighting for glamour. Director Josef Von Sternberg frequently used a high frontal light to bring out the cheekbones of his star, as shown here in *Shanghai Express.*

**4.68** Top lighting for realism. Since actors' eyes are crucial to their performances, most filmmakers light scenes to make the eyes visible. But in the prison cells of *A Prophet,* harsh single-source lighting from above often renders the eyes as dark patches, making the characters more sinister and inscrutable.

**4.69** Motivating light sources. In this shot from *The Miracle Worker,* motivated light from the window and lantern is enhanced by offscreen studio lights. If you look closely, you can see the extra sources reflected in the lantern.




**4.70** Three-point lighting, one of the basic techniques of Hollywood cinema.

Classical Hollywood filmmaking developed the custom of using at least three light sources per shot: key light, fill light, and backlight. The most basic arrangement of **three-point lighting** on a single figure is shown in **4.70.** The *backlight* typically comes from behind and above the figure, the *key light* comes diagonally from the front, and a *fill light* comes from a position near the camera. The key will usually be closer to the figure or brighter than the fill.

In **4.71,** the title character of *Laura* is given glamorous three-point lighting. As in 4.70, the key light is off right, brightening that side of her face. A fill light from the left shades her cheek and chin while softening the shadow of her nose. This balancing of key and fill models her face to a greater degree than straight-on frontal lighting would. (Compare 4.62.)

A bright backlight from the upper rear illuminates her hat and gives a sharp edge to her shoulders. Even the left side of her hat brim is given volume and texture, thanks to shading and edge lighting. Other fill lights, called *background* or *set lighting*, fall on the setting behind her. As if this weren't enough, small lights close to the camera give her eyes a sparkle. Such *eye lights* were often used in close views.

Typically, each major character in a scene will have his or her own key light, fill light, and backlight. When characters face one another, as with the dotted figure in 4.70, the key light for one can serve as backlight for the other, and the fill light can serve as the second character's key.

A more complex arrangement is shown in **4.72,** also from *Laura*. Here the wall chandelier behind Waldo and Laura motivates two lighting patterns. On her, the key now comes from the left, the fill from the right, and backlighting from above. On Waldo, the key strikes his forehead and nose from the upper right, with the fill coming from off left, rather close to the camera, as in 4.70. Top light creates a highlight

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We discuss a lecture on lighting by master cinematographer Steven Poster (*Donnie Darko*) in "Light is a law."

**4.71**

**4.72**

**4.71–4.72** Three-point lighting on the screen. In 4.71, light from different directions makes Laura stand out from the dim background, while enhancing the volume of her face. In 4.72, each character gets the three-point treatment. Shots like this remind us that there were many lighting units hanging from the ceiling of the Hollywood studio, each one helping to sculpt the actors' images.

on his hair, while backlighting creates a thin line of brightness along his head, ear, neck, and collar.

Three-point lighting emerged during the studio era of Hollywood filmmaking, and it is still widely used, as in **4.73.**

We've referred to key, fill, and backlight as separate sources, but in production there will often be many lighting units providing each of those. Several lamps, for instance, might be recruited to provide a strong key light. Moreover, you've probably already realized that this three-point lighting system demands that the lamps be rearranged virtually every time the camera shifts to a new framing. In spite of the great cost involved, most commercial filmmakers choose to adjust lighting for each camera position. Changing light sources this way isn't very realistic, but it does enable filmmakers to make each shot a clear and vivid composition.

**4.73** Three-point lighting in high key. In *Amélie,* the light-hearted romantic tone is enhanced by high-key, three-point lighting. Its layout of sources is similar to that shown in 4.70.

Three-point lighting was particularly well suited for the high-key lighting used in classical Hollywood cinema and other filmmaking traditions. **High-key lighting** refers to an overall lighting design that uses fill light and backlight to create relatively low contrast between brighter and darker areas. Usually, the light quality is soft, making shadow areas fairly transparent. The frames from *Laura* (4.71, 4.72) and *Amélie* (4.73) exemplify high-key lighting. Hollywood directors and cinematographers have chosen this pattern for comedies and most dramas.

High-key lighting is not used simply to render a brightly lit situation, such as a dazzling ballroom or a sunny afternoon. High-key lighting is an overall approach to illumination that can suggest different lighting conditions or times of day. Consider, for example, two frames from *Back to the Future.* The first shot **(4.74)** uses high-key illumination matched to daylight and a brightly lit malt shop. The second frame **(4.75)** is from a scene set in a room at night, but it still uses the high-key approach, as can be seen from the lighting's softness, its low contrast, and its detail in shadow areas.

**Low-key lighting** creates stronger contrasts and sharper, darker shadows. Often the lighting is hard, and fill light is lessened or eliminated altogether. The effect is of *chiaroscuro,* or extremely dark and light regions within the image. An example is **4.76,** from *Kanal.* Here the fill light and background light are less intense than in high-key technique. As a result, shadow areas on the left third of the screen remain hard and fairly opaque. In **4.77,** a low-key shot from Leos Carax's *Mauvais sang,* the key light is hard and comes from the left side. Carax eliminates both fill and background illumination, creating very sharp shadows and a dark void around the characters.

> "When taking close-ups in a colour picture, there is too much visual information in the background, which tends to draw attention away from the face. That is why the faces of the actresses in the old black and white pictures are so vividly remembered. Even now, movie fans nostalgically recall Dietrich . . . Garbo . . . Lamarr . . . Why? Filmed in black and white, those figures looked as if they were lit from within. When a face appeared on the screen over-exposed—the high-key technique, which also erased imperfections—it was as if a bright object was emerging from the screen."
> —Nestor Almendros, cinematographer

**4.74**

**4.75**

**4.74–4.75** High-key lighting for different times and settings. *Back to the Future*: A brightly lit malt shop in daytime (4.74) and Doc's laboratory at night (4.75) both get the high-key treatment.

4.76

4.77

**4.76–4.77 Low-key lighting.** In Andrzej Wajda's *Kanal,* low-key lighting creates a harsh highlight on one side of the woman's face, a shadow on the other (4.76). The shadow on the man's face is even darker and sharper. In *Mauvais sang,* a single key light without any fill on the actress's face leaves her expression nearly invisible (4.77).

4.78

4.79

4.80

**4.78–4.80 Light, constant or changing?** At the end of Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria,* the heroine moves diagonally toward us, accompanied by a band of young street musicians (4.78). As she walks, the lighting on her face does not vary, enabling us to notice slight changes in her expression (4.79). By contrast, the sword fight in *Rashomon* is intensified by the contrast between the ferocious combat and the cheerfully dappled lighting pouring into the glade (4.80).

> "When I started watching films in the 1940s and 1950s, Indian cinematography was completely under the influence of Hollywood aesthetics, which mostly insisted on the 'ideal light' for the face, using heavy diffusion and strong backlight. I came to resent the complete disregard of the actual source of light and the clichéd use of backlight. Using backlight all the time is like using chili powder in whatever you cook."
> —Subrata Mitra, cinematographer

As our examples indicate, low-key lighting is often applied to somber, threatening, or mysterious scenes. It was common in horror films of the 1930s and *films noirs* (dark films) of the 1940s and 1950s. The low-key approach was revived in the 1980s in such films as *Blade Runner* and *Rumble Fish* and continued in the 1990s in film noirs like *Se7en* and *The Usual Suspects.*

When the actors change position, the director faces another forced choice: to alter the lighting or not. Surprisingly often, directors decide to maintain a constant lighting on the actors as they walk, even though that's quite unrealistic. By overlapping several different key-lighting units, the filmmaker can maintain a constant intensity on moving actors. As a result, distracting shadows and highlights do not flit across them **(4.78, 4.79).** Alternatively, the filmmaker may prefer to have the players move through shifting patches of light and shade **(4.80).**

In today's big-budget films, there are often three or more cameras covering scenes in large settings. To avoid rearranging dozens of lamps, the cinematographer will often opt for a soft, bright, top light covering the entire scene. Wherever the cameras are placed, the lighting units will not be visible on camera. In *The Wolfman* (2010), a nighttime forest scene had many lights nested in big translucent boxes hung on cranes above the location.

Digital tools permit lighting to be adjusted in postproduction. The cinematographer and the colorist can brighten a dark shot, add highlights or shadow, and enhance faces. The filmmakers' changes will tend to respect the three-point approach and motivate light sources and intensity in the traditional way.

**Color** We tend to think of film lighting as limited to two colors, the white of sunlight or the soft yellow of incandescent room lamps. In practice, filmmakers who choose to control lighting typically work with as purely white a light as they can. With filters placed in front of the light source, the filmmaker can color the onscreen illumination in any fashion.

There may be a realistic source in the scene to motivate colored light **(4.81).** Alternatively, colored light can also be unrealistic. In Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible,* Part 2, a blue light suddenly bursts upon the actor without any diegetic source. In the context of the scene, the abrupt lighting change expresses the character's terror and uncertainty **(4.82, 4.83).** Using lighting instead of acting to convey an emotion makes the scene more vivid and surprising.

**4.81** Filtered lighting. An orange filter suggests that all the light in this scene from *The Green Room* comes from candles.

Most film lighting is arranged as part of preparation for live-action filmmaking. But what if the settings and figures are created with a computer? Scanning a model or motion-capturing a figure does not record the light falling on it, and the resulting image is a neutral gray. Animators add simulated light to a scene using dedicated programs. Watch the credits for any special-effects-heavy film, and you will see long lists of names of people dealing with light and shade.

In *The Golden Compass,* the vicious combat between two armored polar bears was created entirely digitally. The fight takes place with a bright sun low in the sky, coming from off right. The icy clearing contains shadows of the surrounding crags **(4.84).** Simulated light is also used in digital animation. Pixar's *Cars* experimented with rendering the look of colored lights reflected on metal and glass **(4.85).**

We're used to ignoring the illumination of our surroundings, so film lighting is easy to take for granted. Yet the power of a shot is centrally controlled by light quality, direction, source, and color. The filmmaker can manipulate and combine these factors to shape the viewer's experience in a great many ways. No component of mise-en-scene is more important than what Sternberg called "the drama and adventure of light."

**4.82**

**4.83**

**4.82–4.83** Lighting without a motivated source. In *Ivan the Terrible,* a character's fear registers on his face (4.82), and this is underscored by a blue light that bursts onto him (4.83).

## Staging: Movement and Performance

When we think of a film director, we usually think of someone directing performers. The director is the person who says, "Stand over there," "Walk toward the camera," or "Show that you're holding back tears." In such ways, the director controls a major component of mise-en-scene: the figures we see onscreen. Typically the figure is a person, but it could be an animal (Lassie the collie, Balthasar the donkey), a robot, an object **(4.86),** or even a pure shape **(4.87).** Mise-en-scene allows all these entities to express feelings and thoughts; it can also dynamize them to create kinetic patterns **(4.88, 4.89).**

Cinema gains great freedom from the fact that here expression and movement aren't restricted to human figures. The filmmaker can breathe life into two-dimensional characters, such as Shrek or Daffy Duck. Puppets may be manipulated frame by frame through the technique of *stop-action* or *stop-motion* **(4.90).** In science fiction and fantasy movies, robots and fabulous monsters created as models can be scanned and movement added via computer manipulation (1.30). Even if the figures are fantastical, however, the filmmaker is obliged to stage their actions and construct their performances.

**Acting and Actuality** Although abstract shapes and animated figures can become important in the mise-en-scene, the most familiar cases of figure expression and movement involve actors performing roles. An actor's performance consists of visual elements (appearance, gestures, facial expressions) and sound

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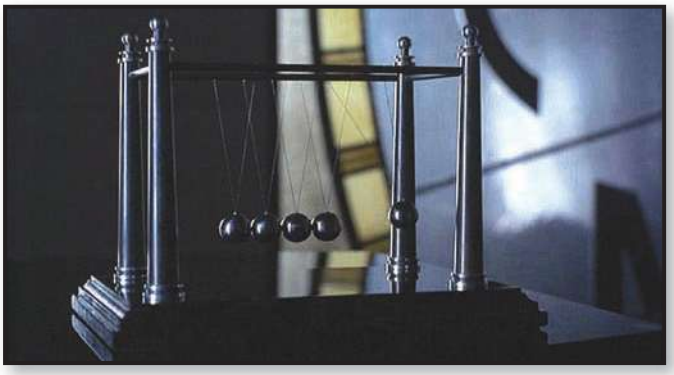
Our entry on "The Cross" talks about a kind of staging largely forgotten in this era of rapid cutting and close framing. We discuss how scenic details can be integrated into staging in "You are my density."

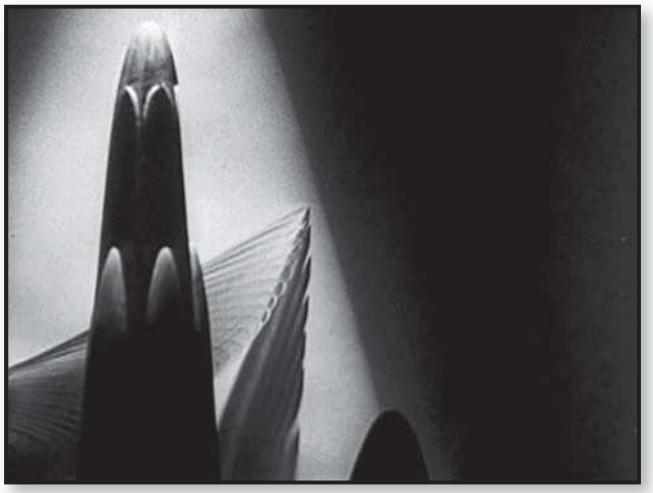
4.84

4.85

**4.84–4.85** Digitally simulated lighting. In *The Golden Compass*, stark arctic sunshine from offscreen right falls as sidelight on the snow and the fighting bears (4.84). Simulated fill light was added to the onlookers and in areas of shading on the foreground bears. *Cars* puts on a virtuoso display of computer-simulated lighting, with neon signs reflecting in shiny surfaces as the cars cruise through their small-town street (4.85).



4.86



4.87

**4.86–4.87** Controlling figure movement. In *The Hudsucker Proxy,* when the mailboy Norville proposes his new toy idea, the clicking balls on his boss's desktop inexplicably stop (4.86). The abstract film *Parabola* uses lighting and a pure background to emphasize shifting sculptural forms (4.87).

4.88

4.89

**4.88–4.89 Stasis and violence in figure movement.** In *Seven Samurai,* the samurai have won the battle with the bandits (4.88). Virtually the only movement in the frame is the driving rain, but the slouching postures of the men leaning on their spears express their tense weariness. By contrast, in *White Heat,* explosive movements and ferocious facial expressions present an image of psychotic rage as Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) learns of his mother's death (4.89).

**4.90 Stop-motion animation.** Ladislav Starevich's puppet film *The Mascot* includes a conversation between a devil and a thief, with subtle facial expressions and gestures created through animation.

(voice, effects). At times, of course, an actor may contribute only visual aspects, as in silent movies. In rare cases, an actor's performance may exist only on the sound track. In *A Letter to Three Wives,* Celeste Holm's character, Addie Ross, speaks a narration over the images but never appears on the screen.

Acting is often approached as a question of realism. But concepts of realistic acting have changed over film history. Today we may think that Hilary Swank in *Boys Don't Cry* and Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain* give performances that are close to natural behavior. Yet in the early 1950s, the New York Actors Studio style, as exemplified by Marlon Brando's performances in *On the Waterfront* and *A Streetcar Named Desire,* was also thought to be extremely realistic. Fine though we may still find Brando's work, today his portrayals seem deliberate, heightened, and fairly unrealistic. Going back farther, post–World War II Italian Neorealist films were hailed as almost documentary depictions of Italian life (p. 478). But many of their performances now look as polished as those in Hollywood films. Major naturalistic performances of the 1970s, such as Robert De Niro's protagonist in *Taxi Driver,* seem quite stylized. Who can say what the acting in *Boys Don't Cry, Brokeback Mountain, Frozen River, Boyhood,* and other films will look like in a few decades?

There's another reason to be cautious in appealing to realism. Not all films try to achieve it. Since the performance an actor creates is part of the overall mise-en-scene, films contain a wide variety of acting styles. Instead of assuming that acting must be realistic, we should try to understand what kind of acting style the film is aiming at. If the film is best served by a nonrealistic performance, the skillful actor will strive to deliver that.

For example, comedy seldom strives for surface realism. In *All of Me* Steve Martin portrays a man whose body is suddenly inhabited on the right side by the soul of a woman who has just died. Martin used sudden changes of voice, along with acrobatic pantomime, to suggest a split body, half-male and half-female. The performance doesn't conform to realism, since the plot situation couldn't exist in the real world. In a comedy, however, Martin's performance was completely appropriate, and hilarious.

It isn't only comedies that encourage stylized performance. Fantasy films do, too, as we see in certain parts of *The Wizard of Oz.* (How would a real Wicked Witch behave?) In melodramas and action films from Hollywood, India, Hong Kong, and other traditions, exaggerated performances are a crucial source of the audience's pleasure. Viewers do not expect narrowly realistic acting from martial-arts stars Jet Li and Jackie Chan.

Finally, when we watch any fictional film, we are to some degree aware that the performances are the result of the actors' skills and decisions. (See "A Closer Look.") When we use the phrase "larger than life" to describe an effective performance, we

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How can we analyze film acting? We make some suggestions, especially about silent-film performance, in "Acting up." The entry "Faces behind Facebook" considers actors' performances in *The Social Network.*

"I get impatient with many Hollywood films because there's this assumption that meaning or emotion is contained in those few square inches of an actor's face and I just don't see it that way at all. I think there's a power in withholding information, revealing things gradually. Letting the audience discover things within the frame in time, in the way they stand."
—Alison Maclean, director, *Crush*

# A CLOSER LOOK

## The Film Actor's Toolkit

We might think that the most important task facing an actor is speaking dialogue in a convincing and stirring way. Certainly, voice and delivery are very important in cinema, but considered in terms of mise-en-scene, the actor is always part of the overall visual design. Many film scenes contain little or no dialogue, but at every moment onscreen, the actor must be in character. The actor and director shape the performance pictorially.

Most of the time, film actors use their faces. This was most evident before movies had sound, and theorists of the silent film were full of praise for the subtle facial acting of Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo, and Lillian Gish. Since some happiness, fear, anger, and other facial expressions are understood easily across cultures, silent films could become popular around the world. Today, with mainstream films using many close-ups (see p. 46), actors' faces are hugely enlarged, and the performers must control their expressions minutely.

The most expressive parts of the face are the mouth, eyebrows, and eyes. All work together to signal how the character is responding to the dramatic situation. In *Jerry Maguire,* the accountant Dorothy Boyd accidentally meets Jerry at an airport baggage conveyor. She has a crush on him, partly because she admires the courageous mission statement he has issued to the sports agency that they work for. As he starts to back off from the statement, she eagerly quotes it from memory; Renée Zellwegger's earnest smile and admiring gaze suggest that she takes the issues more seriously than Jerry does **(4.91).** This impression is confirmed when Jerry says, "Uh-huh" and studies her skeptically, his fixed smile signaling social politeness rather than genuine pride **(4.92).** This encounter sets up one premise of the film—that Jerry's idealistic impulses will need constant shoring up, for he might at any moment slip back into being "a shark in a suit."

The eyes hold a special place in film. In any scene, crucial story information is conveyed by the direction of a character's glance, the use of the eyelids, and the shape of the eyebrows. One of Chaplin's most heart-rending moments comes in *City Lights,* when the blind flower girl, now sighted, suddenly realizes that he's her benefactor and we must find signs of hope in his eyes **(4.93).**

Normally, we don't stare intently at the people we talk with. We glance away about half the time to gather our thoughts, and we blink 10–12 times a minute. But actors must learn to look directly at each other, locking eyes and seldom blinking. If an actor glances away from the partner in the conversation, it suggests distraction or evasion. If an actor blinks, it suggests a reaction to what is happening in the scene (surprise, or anxiety). Actors playing forceful characters often stare fixedly. Anthony Hopkins said this of playing Hannibal Lecter: "If you don't blink you can keep the audience mesmerized." (See 8.7, 8.9.) In our *Jerry Maguire* scene, the protagonists watch each other fixedly. When Jerry closes his eyes in response to Dorothy's praise, it indicates his nervousness about confronting the issues that his mission statement raised.

Thanks to facial expressions—eyes plus eyebrows plus mouth—actors can develop their characterizations across the film. *The Social Network* centers on two college friends, Mark Zuckerberg and Eduardo Savarin, who collaborate to create Facebook. Throughout the film Jesse Eisenberg plays Mark with knitted brows, squinting eyes, and a grimly set mouth, all suggesting his fierce concentration and competitiveness **(4.94).** By contrast Andrew Garfield portrays the more trusting Eduardo with wide eyes, raised brows, and slightly bowed head **(4.95).** In their climactic confrontation, during a deposition for the suit that Eduardo has filed against Mark, Eduardo's facial behavior has changed to a direct, frowning challenge **(4.96).** This causes Mark to lower his head in embarrassment, an unusual reaction for the aggressive entrepreneur we've seen so far **(4.97).**

Actors act with their bodies as well as their faces. How a character walks, stands, or sits conveys a great deal

4.91

4.92

**4.91–4.92 Facial expressiveness in close-ups.** Perky and sincere, Dorothy pledges allegiance to Jerry Maguire's idealistic memo (4.91). Jerry smiles politely, but his sideways glance and raised brows suggest that he is a bit put off by her earnestness (4.92).

**4.93 Acting with the eyes.** In the climax of *City Lights,* Chaplin nervously twirls a flower, so we can't see the shape of his mouth. We must read yearning in his brows and rapt, dark gaze.

4.94

4.95

4.96

4.97

**4.94–4.97 Character domination through actors' expressions.** Early in *The Social Network,* Mark insists that Eduardo invest more in Facebook. The actors' expressions establish Mark as a tough, demanding leader and Eduardo as more submissive (4.94–4.95). During the climactic deposition, Eduardo fights back facially, and Mark submits (4.96–4.97).

4.98

4.99

4.100

**4.98–4.100 Extroverted acting for extravagant suffering.** In *Tigre Reale,* Menichelli's right hand seizes her hair, as if pulling her head back in agony; but her body still expresses defiance, thrust forward and standing firm as the left hand grips her waist (4.98). As Menichelli begins to feel shame, she retreats toward the fireplace, turning from us and slumping in a way that suggests regret (4.99). She keeps her back to the camera as she withdraws, now a pathetic figure (4.100).

about personality and attitude. In fact, during the 18th and 19th centuries, *attitude* was used to refer to the way a person stood. Stage acting gave early film a repertoire of postures that could express a character's state of mind. In the 1916 Italian film *Tigre Reale* (*The Royal Tigress*), the diva Pina Menichelli plays a countess with a shady past. At one point, she confesses this in a florid attitude that expresses noble suffering **(4.98).** While few actors today would resort to this stylized posture, early film audiences would have accepted it as vividly expressive, like a movement in dance. Menichelli plays the rest of the scene more quietly, but she still employs expressive attitudes **(4.99, 4.100).**

Actors who use their bodies in more naturalistic ways will still exercise firm control. *Margin Call* centers on a financial crisis in an investment firm. During a break in the negotiations, three employees take a break by going onto the building's roof. Contrasting body behavior distinguishes the cautious Peter from the more imprudent Seth, both of whom differ from their heedless, almost suicidal boss Will **(4.101, 4.102).**

The gestures of Chaplin, Menichelli, and Quinto show that hands are important tools of the film actor. Hands are to the body what eyes are to the face: They focus our attention and evoke the character's thoughts and feelings. Actress Maureen O'Hara said of Henry Fonda, "All he had to do was wag his little finger and he could steal a scene from anybody." A good example can be seen in the doomsday thriller *Fail-Safe.* Henry Fonda plays the U.S. president, who has learned that an American warplane has been accidentally sent to bomb the Soviet Union. Fonda stands erect at the phone as he hears distressing

## A CLOSER LOOK

*Continued*

4.101

4.102

**4.101-4.102 Character contrast through body language.** Peter, the analyst who has discovered the firm's overinvestment, follows Will to the edge of the rooftop but, looking down, is startled by the height. As Zachary Quinto plays the moment, Peter shies back and throws out one arm (4.101). Peter's colleague Seth (Penn Badgley) follows, and comes forward to peer over the roof edge (4.102). Throughout the plot, Seth is drawn to risk. Their superior, Will (Paul Bettany), is indifferent to danger, as he will show shortly when he climbs onto the railing far above the city.

4.103

4.104

4.105

4.106

**4.103–4.106 Acting as finger exercise.** In *Fail-Safe,* the president stands erect at the phone as he hears distressing news about the plane's progress, and he hangs up with his left hand (4.103). The president pauses and rubs his fingers together thoughtfully (4.104), then he taps into the intercom with his right hand (4.105). As he waits, for a brief moment his left fingers waggle anxiously, betraying his nervous concern (4.106).

news about the plane's progress, and he hangs up with his left hand **(4.103–4.106).** By keeping most of the shot still and bare, director Sidney Lumet has given Fonda's fingers the main role, letting them express the president's measured prudence but also suggesting the strain of the crisis.

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For more on how actors use their hands, see "Hand jive."
For more on eyes, see "Bette Davis eyelids."

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Sometimes critics concentrate on acting to the exclusion of a film's other qualities, as we complain in "Good actors spell good acting." On the conventions governing award-winning performances, see "Good actors spell good acting, 2: Oscar bait."

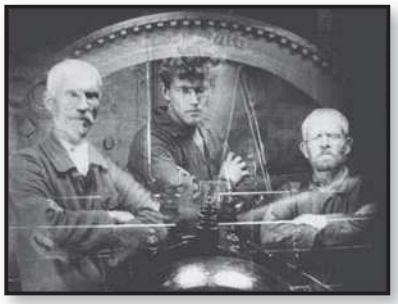
seem to be acknowledging the actor's craft. In analyzing a particular film, we usually must go beyond assumptions about realism and consider the purposes that the actor's craft serves. How appropriate, we can ask, is the performance to the context established by the genre, the film's narrative, and the overall mise-en-scene? A performance, realistic or not, should be examined according to its function in the film's overall formal design.

**Acting: Functions and Motivation** We can consider performance along two dimensions. A performance will be more or less *individualized,* and it will be

more or less *stylized.* Often we have both in mind when we think of a realistic performance: It creates a unique character, and it does not seem too exaggerated or too underplayed. Marlon Brando's portrayal of Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather* is quite individualized. Brando gives the Godfather a complex psychology, a distinctive appearance and voice, and a string of facial expressions and gestures that make him significantly different from the standard image of a gang boss. As for stylization, Brando keeps Don Vito in the middle range. His performance is neither flat nor flamboyant. He isn't impassive, but he doesn't chew the scenery either.

Yet this middle range, which we often identify with realistic performance, isn't the only option. On the individuality scale, films may create broader, more anonymous *types.* Classical Hollywood narrative was built on ideologically stereotyped roles: the Irish cop on the beat, the black servant, the Jewish pawnbroker, the wisecracking waitress or showgirl. Through *typecasting,* actors were selected and directed to conform to what audiences expected. Often, however, skillful performers gave these conventions a freshness and vividness. The 1920s Soviet filmmakers adapted this principle, which they called *typage.* Here the actor was expected to portray a typical representative of a social class or historical movement **(4.107, 4.108).**

4.107



4.108

**4.107–4.108** A range of acting styles in the same film. The opening of Eisenstein's *Strike* presents the cartoonish cliché of the top-hatted capitalist (4.107), while in contrast the workers are presented as earnest and resolute (4.108).

Whether more or less typed, the performance can also be located on a continuum of stylization. A long tradition of film acting strives for an expressive naturalness, with actors speaking their lines with slightly more clarity and emotion than we usually find in everyday life. The director and the performer may choose to enhance this streamlined naturalness by adding specific physical actions. Frequent gestures and movements by the actors add plausibility to the humor of Woody Allen's films **(4.109).**

The actor is usually obliged to express emotion, but emotions come in many colors. Some are intense and burst out violently **(4.110).** Other emotions are masked, as when jealousy and suspicion are covered by excessive politeness **(4.111).** Sometimes emotional expression is broad and sweeping, almost operatic **(4.112).** And the same film may combine different degrees of emotional stylization. *Amadeus* contrasts a grotesque, giggling performance by Tom Hulce as Mozart with Murray Abraham's suave Salieri. The two acting styles sharpen the contrast between the older composer's decorous but dull music and the young man's offensive genius. In every film, the actor needs to blend the performance with the genre, the narrative, and the overall formal patterning.

Films like *Ivan the Terrible* and *Amadeus* create stylized performances through extroversion and exaggeration. The director can also explore the possibilities of very muted performances. Compared to normal practice, highly restrained acting can seem quite stylized. Robert Bresson is noted for such restrained performances. Using nonprofessional actors and drilling them in the details of the characters' physical actions, Bresson makes his actors nearly flat by conventional standards **(4.113, 4.114).** Although these performances may upset our expectations, we soon realize that such restraint focuses our attention on details of action we never notice in most movies.

**4.109** Expressive naturalness in acting style. In *Hannah and Her Sisters,* Mia Farrow as Hannah, Diane Wiest as her sister Holly, and Carrie Fisher as their friend April set a table, chatting about the other guests as they do so.

**Motion and Performance Capture** Since the creation of digitally generated characters Jar Jar Binks in *Star Wars: Episode 1—The Phantom Menace* in 1999 and Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), actors have had to learn new skills. In these early films, performers in special suits covered with dots were filmed digitally to form the basis for characters' movements. Soon CGI (computer-generated imagery) programs allowed more dense arrays of dots to capture smaller details of facial movement (4.112). The addition

4.110

4.111

4.112

**4.110–4.112 Stylized acting and emotion.** In *Winchester 73,* James Stewart's mild manner occasionally erupts into vengeful anger, revealing him as on the brink of psychosis (4.110). The exaggerated smiles and gestures in *Trouble in Paradise* are amusing because we know that the women, competing for the same man, are only pretending to be friends (4.111). Nikolai Cherkasov's dramatically raised arm and thrown-back head are appropriate to *Ivan the Terrible,* which creates a larger-than-life portrait of its hero (4.112).

4.113

4.114

**4.113–4.114 Restrained acting.** Playing the heroine of *Au Hasard Balthasar,* Anna Wiazemsky looks without expression at her would-be seducer, who wants her to get in his car (4.113). She glances downward, still without registering her thoughts, before sliding in (4.114).

of tiny cameras attached to the actors' heads permitted even subtler capture of expressions.

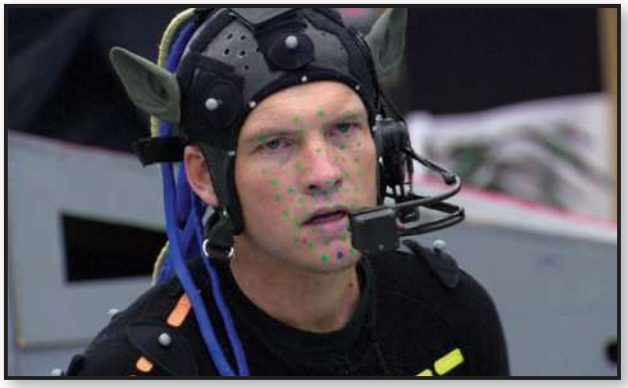
Now a distinction is made between *motion capture,* where the whole body is filmed, and *performance capture,* which concentrates on the face **(4.115, 4.116).** Motion capture can also be used on animals. Thanks to capture dots, ordinary horses can be transformed into fantastical creatures, as with *Avatar*'s six-legged Direhorses. Animated films like *The Polar Express, The Adventures of Tintin,* and *How to Train Your Dragon 2* use performance capture for their human characters.

In predigital days, actors would play fantasy characters with heavy prosthetics and ample makeup. Motion capture and performance capture make it easier for the actor to concentrate on the performance. As James Cameron explained:

> Actors have said to me, half jokingly but a little nervously, "Are you trying to replace actors?" And of course, the answer is no, we love actors. This whole thing is about acting. It's about creating these fantasy characters through the process of acting. What we're replacing is five hours in the makeup chair, having rubber glued all over your face.

**Acting in the Context of Other Techniques** By examining how an actor's performance functions within the overall film, we can also notice how acting blends with other film techniques. For instance, the actor is always a graphic element in the film, but some films underline this fact. In *The Cabinet of*

4.115



4.116

**4.115–4.116 Motion and performance capture.** In the high-tech studio used for *Avatar,* actors wear full-body motion-capture suits (4.115). For performance capture of Sam Worthington, green dots cover the most expressive areas of the face (4.116). A miniature camera, with rows of small LED bulbs trained on his face, adds extra light as it records his shifting expressions.

4.117

4.118

**4.117–4.118 The actor as graphic element.** In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* Cesare's body echoes the tilted tree trunks (4.117), his arms and hands their branches and leaves. In *Breathless,* Jean Seberg's face is linked to a Renoir painting (4.118). Does she give an inexpressive performance or an enigmatic one?

*Dr. Caligari,* Conrad Veidt's dancelike portrayal of the somnambulist Cesare makes him blend in with the graphic elements of the setting **(4.117).** The graphic design of this scene in *Caligari* typifies the systematic distortion characteristic of German Expressionism (pp. 463–466).

In *Breathless,* director Jean-Luc Godard juxtaposes Jean Seberg's face with a print of a Renoir painting **(4.118).** We might think that Seberg is giving a bland performance here, for she simply poses in the frame and turns her head. Indeed, her acting in the entire film may seem fairly flat. Yet her face and demeanor are appropriate for her role, a capricious American woman unfathomable to her Parisian boyfriend.

A performance may be shaped by editing as well. Because a film is shot over a period of time, actors perform in bits, with separate shots recording different portions of a scene. This process can work to the filmmaker's advantage. If there are alternate takes of each shot, the editor can select the best gestures and expressions and create a composite performance better than any sustained performance is likely to be. By adding sound and other shots, the filmmaker can build up the performance still further. Sometimes a performance will be created almost wholly in postproduction. The director may simply tell an actor to stare offscreen, wide-eyed. If the next shot shows a hand with a gun, we are likely to think the actor is depicting fear effectively.

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When digital technology is involved, where does the actor's performance leave off and the special effects begin? We consider the question in "Motion-capturing an Oscar."

4.119

4.120

**4.119–4.120** Performance in long shot and close-up. *The Spider's Stratagem*: In long shot, the actors' manner of walking helps characterize them (4.119). The stiff, upright way in which the heroine holds her parasol is one of the main facets of Alida Valli's performance. In a closer framing, her performance displays detailed eye and lip movements (4.120).

Camera techniques also create a controlling context for acting. Film acting, as you know, differs from theatrical acting. In a theater, we are usually at a considerable distance from the actor on the stage. We certainly can never get as close to the theater actor as the camera can put us in a film. For that reason, we're inclined to think that the film actor must always underplay—that is, act in a more restrained fashion than stage acting would require. But recall that the camera can be at *any* distance from the figure. Filmed from very far away, the actor is a dot on the screen—much smaller than an actor on stage seen from the back of the balcony. Filmed from very close, the actor's tiniest eye movement may be revealed.

Thus the film actor must behave differently than the stage actor does, but not always by being more restrained. Rather, she or he must be able to *adjust to each type of camera distance.* If the actor is far from the camera, he or she may have to gesture broadly or move around to be seen as acting at all. But if the camera and actor are inches apart, a twitch of a mouth muscle will come across clearly. Between these extremes, there is a whole range of adjustments to be made.

Often a shot will concentrate on either the actor's facial expression or on bodily movement. In most close shots, the face will be emphasized, and so the actor will have to control eyes, brows, and mouth quite precisely. But if the camera is farther back, or the actor is turned away from us, gestures and body language become the center of attention. In all, both the staging of the action and the camera's distance from the action control how we understand the performances **(4.119, 4.120).**

Matters of context are particularly important when the performers are not actors, or even human beings. Framing, editing, and other film techniques can make trained animals give appropriate performances. Jonesy, the cat in *Aliens,* seems threatening because his hissing movement has been emphasized by lighting, framing, editing, and the sound track **(4.121).**

As with every element of a film, acting offers an unlimited range of creative choices. It cannot be judged on a universal scale outside the context of the entire film's form.

## Putting It All Together: Mise-en-Scene in Space and Time

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For more on how shot scale can affect performance, see, "Where did the two-shot go? Here."

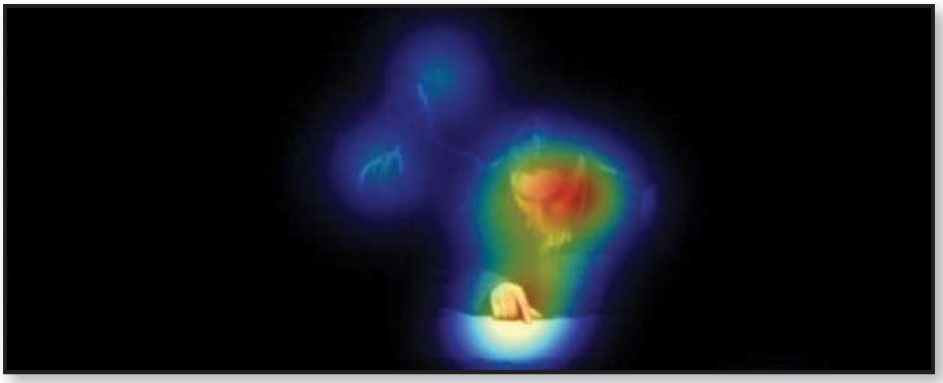
Back in Chapter 2, we argued that viewers try to blend what they see and hear into a larger pattern (p. 54). This process starts at the level of the shot, when we have to assemble information into a coherent space and time. And creating that coherence requires that the filmmaker guide us to certain areas of the frame.

How do we know that viewers scan the frame for important information? The psychologist Tim Smith asked viewers to wear lightweight glasses that could track their eye movements and then showed them a scene from *There Will Be Blood.* The eye movements were recorded by computers and mapped onto the film sequence, so Smith could study how the viewers' attention shifted within the scene. There was remarkable agreement among the subjects about where to look at any moment. The primary points of attention were, as we might expect, items crucial to building up a story: faces and hand gestures **(4.122, 4.123).** The characters' dialogue was important, too; the scan-paths revealed that people tend to look at the person speaking in the shot.

**4.121** Editing to create a performance. In *Aliens,* editing makes it seem that Jonesy is reacting angrily to something in the scene.

Before viewers can follow the story, recognize the emotional tenor of the scene, respond with their own emotions, and reflect on possible meanings, they must notice certain things in the frame. In setting up a shot, the filmmaker makes some things more salient than others. We noticed this happening when we examined how Tarantino nudged us to watch Colonel Landa in the scene from *Inglourious Basterds.* Thinking like a filmmaker means, to a large extent, finding ways to guide the viewer's eye. In other words, directors direct attention.

4.122



4.123

**4.122–4.123** Scanning the shot. Tim Smith and his colleagues tracked several subjects' eye movements during a single shot of *There Will Be Blood*. Here is one frame from the sequence, as the characters examine a map (4.122). Smith's "peekthrough heatmap" graphically indicates the areas of interest for the eight viewers watching at that moment (4.123). The black surround represents areas not watched by anyone. Areas of attention are lit up, and the hotter the color, the more viewers are looking at that spot. At this instant, most viewers were concentrating on Sunday's face and hand, with two viewers looking at the man facing front behind him. As filmmakers might expect, faces, hands, and dialogue have commanded viewers' attention.

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For more on Tim Smith's eye-tracking experiments, see "Watching you watch *There Will Be Blood*."

## CREATIVE DECISIONS

### *Mise-en-Scene in a Sequence from* L'Avventura

To get a sense of the filmmaker's creative options in guiding our eye, let's look at another sequence. In Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura,* Sandro and Claudia are searching for Anna, who has mysteriously vanished. Anna is Claudia's friend and Sandro's lover, but during their search, they've begun to drift from their goal of finding her. They've also begun a love affair. In the town of Noto, they stand on a church rooftop near the bells, and Sandro says he regrets giving up architectural design. Claudia is encouraging him to return to his profession when he suddenly asks her to marry him.

She's startled and confused, and Sandro comes toward her. She is turned away from us. At first, only Sandro's expression is visible as he reacts grimly to her plea, "Why can't things be simpler?" **(4.124).** Claudia twists her arms around the bell rope, then turns away from him, toward us, grasping the rope and fluttering her hand. Now we can see that she's quite distraught. Sandro, a bit uneasy, turns away as she says anxiously, "I'd like to see things clearly" **(4.125).**

Brief though it is, this exchange shows how the tools of mise-en-scene—setting, costume, lighting, performance, and staging—can work together smoothly. We've considered them separately in order to examine the contribution each one makes, but in any shot, they mesh. They unfold on the screen in space and time, fulfilling several functions.

Most basically, the filmmaker has to guide the audience's attention to the important areas of the image. The filmmaker also wants to build up our interest by

> "The audience is only going to look at the most overriding thing in the frame. You must take charge of and direct their attention. It's also the principle of magic: what is the single important thing? Make it easy for them to see it, and you're doing your job."
> —David Mamet, director

4.124

4.125

**4.124–4.125 Frontality gets attention.** In *L'Avventura,* first Claudia has her back to the camera (4.124), and then Sandro does (4.125). Each shift is timed to show us a crucial facial reaction.

arousing curiosity and suspense. And the filmmaker tries to add expressive qualities, giving the shot an emotional coloration. Mise-en-scene helps the filmmaker achieve all these purposes.

How did Antonioni guide our attention in the Claudia–Sandro exchange? First, we're watching the figures, not the railing behind them. Based on the story so far, we expect Sandro and Claudia to be the objects of interest. At other points in the film, Antonioni makes them tiny figures in massive urban or seaside landscapes. Here, however, his mise-en-scene keeps their intimate interchange foremost in our minds.

Consider the first image merely as a two-dimensional picture. Both Sandro and Claudia stand out against the pale sky and the darker railing. They're also mostly curved shapes—heads and shoulders—and so they contrast with the geometrical regularity of the balcony. In the first frame, light strikes Sandro's face and suit from the right, picking him out against the rails. His dark hair is well positioned to make his head stand out against the sky. Claudia, a blonde, stands out against the railing and sky less vividly, but her polka-dot blouse creates a distinctive pattern. And considered only as a picture, the shot roughly balances the two figures, Sandro in the left half and Claudia in the right.

It's hard to think of the shot as simply two-dimensional, though. We instinctively see it as portraying a space that we could move around in. Claudia seems closer to us because her body masks things farther away, a spatial cue called *overlap.* She's also somewhat larger in the frame than Sandro, which reinforces our sense that she's closer. The rope slices across the bottom third of the frame, separating the couple (overlap again). Sandro himself overlaps the railing, which in turn overlaps the sky and the town beyond. We get a sense of distinct planes of space, layers lying closer to or farther from us. Costume, lighting, setting, and figure placement create this sense of a three-dimensional arena for the action.

Antonioni has used mise-en-scene to emphasize his characters and their interaction. But that interaction unfolds in time, and it gives him an opportunity to guide our attention while building up suspense and expressing emotion. Claudia is turned away from us when Sandro presses her to marry him, and the rope is taut between them (4.124). How will she respond?

Antonioni starts by giving Claudia a bit of business. She twists the rope around her arms and slips it over her back. This could be a hint that she's drawn to Sandro's proposal. At the same time, she hesitates. For as soon as he presses her, she turns away from him (4.125).

We know that faces give us access to characters' thoughts and emotions. Another filmmaker might have had Claudia already facing us when Sandro asked, so we'd see her response immediately. Antonioni instead makes things uncertain for a moment. He conceals Claudia's reaction and then lets her turn toward us. To make sure that we watch her and not Sandro at this moment, Antonioni has him turn away when she gestures and speaks ("I'd like to see things clearly"). Our attention is riveted on Claudia.

Soon enough, Sandro turns back toward the camera, so we can see his reaction, but already Claudia's anxiety has flashed out at us. Her mixed response to Sandro's proposal—attraction (sliding under the bell rope) and uncertainty (turning away tensely)—has been presented to us concretely.

This is only one moment in a complex scene, but it shows how various elements of mise-en-scene can cooperate to create a specific effect: the delayed

revelation of a character's emotion. That revelation depended on the director's choices about what to show us at particular points. Once we've been guided to notice certain things, we can build up larger meanings and particular feelings. Let's now look at some specific options for using mise-en-scene to shape our sense of a film's space and time.

## Space

**Screen Space** In many respects, a film shot resembles a painting. It presents a flat array of colors and shapes. Before we even start to understand the image as a three-dimensional space, mise-en-scene offers many cues for guiding our attention and emphasizing elements in the frame.

Take something as simple as balancing the shot. Filmmakers often try to distribute various points of interest evenly around the frame. They assume that viewers will concentrate more on the upper half of the frame, probably because that's where we tend to find characters' faces. Since the film frame is a horizontal rectangle, the director usually tries to balance the right and left halves. The extreme type of such balancing is *bilateral symmetry.* In the battle scene in *Life on a String,* Chen Kaige stages one shot symmetrically **(4.126).**

More common than such near-perfect symmetry is a loose balancing of the shot's left and right regions. The simplest way to achieve compositional balance is to center the frame on the human body. Filmmakers often place a single figure at the center of the frame and minimize distracting elements at the sides, as in **4.127.** Many of our earlier illustrations display this flexible balance. Other shots may counterweight two or more elements, encouraging our eye to move back and forth, as in **4.128** and our *L'Avventura* dialogue (4.124, 4.125).

Balanced composition is the norm, but unbalanced shots can also create strong effects. In *Bicycle Thieves,* the composition emphasizes the father's new job by massing most of the figures on the right **(4.129).** A more drastic example occurs in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Il Grido* **(4.130),** where two strong elements, the hero and a tree trunk, are grouped on the right side of the shot. The shot creates a powerful urge for the audience to see the woman's hidden face.

Sometimes the filmmaker will leave the shots a little unbalanced, in order to prime our expectation that something will change position in the frame. The cinema of

**4.126** Symmetrical framing. A limited palette emphasizes this symmetrical composition in *Life on a String.*

**4.127**

**4.128**

**4.127–4.128** Balancing the frame. *Mars Attacks!:* centering a single character (4.127) and balancing two (4.128).

**4.129–4.130 Deliberately unbalanced composition.** In *Bicycle Thieves,* the men on the right don't balance the son (4.129), but he seems even more vulnerable by being such an ineffective visual counterweight. In *Il Grido,* instead of balancing the couple, the composition centers the man (4.130). If there were no tree in the frame, the shot would still be somewhat weighted to the right, but the unexpected vertical of the trunk makes that side even heavier.

4.129

4.130

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**4.131–4.134 Balancing and rebalancing.** From quite early in cinema history, filmmakers used unbalanced compositions to prepare the viewer for new narrative developments. In Yevgenii Bauer's *The Dying Swan* (1916), the young ballerina receives a tiara from an admirer (4.131). She studies herself in a mirror, in a composition that makes the doorway more visible (4.132). As the ballerina lowers her arm, the door opens and her father appears (4.133). He comes to the front area and balances the composition (4.134).

the 1910s offers intriguing examples. Very often a doorway in the back of the set allowed the director to show that new characters were entering the scene, but then figures closer to the camera had to be rearranged to permit a clear entrance. The result was a subtle unbalancing and rebalancing of the composition **(4.131–4.134).** In Chapter 6, we'll see how cutting can balance two shots containing relatively unbalanced compositions.

The filmmaker can guide our attention by use of another time-tested strategy, the principle of contrast. Our eyes are biased toward registering differences and changes. In most black-and-white films, light costumes or brightly lit faces stand out while darker areas tend to recede **(4.135).** If there are several light shapes in the frame, we'll tend to look from one to the other. But if the background is light, black elements will become prominent, as Sandro's hair does in our *L'Avventura* scene (4.124). The same principles work for color. A bright costume or bit of setting shown against a more subdued setting is likely to draw the eye **(4.136).** Another pertinent principle is that when lightness values are equal, warm colors in the red-orange-yellow range tend to attract attention, while cool colors like purple and green are less prominent **(4.137).**

**4.135 Contrast guides attention.** In V. I. Pudovkin's *Mother,* the spectator concentrates on the man's face rather than on the darkness surrounding it.

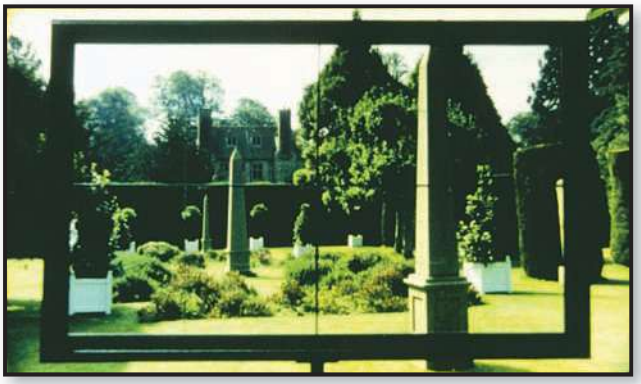
4.136

4.137

**4.136–4.137** Bright and warm colors get attention. In Jiří Menzel's *Larks on a String,* a propaganda display about happy workers stands out against the earthy grays and blacks of the junkyard (4.136). In Yilmaz Güney's *Yol,* the setting and the characters' outfits are warm in hue, but the hot pink vest of the man in the central middle ground helps make him the primary object of attention (4.137).

Color contrasts don't have to be huge, because we're sensitive to small differences. What painters call a *limited palette* involves a few colors in the same range, as in our earlier example from Fellini's *Casanova* (4.40). Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* employs a limited palette from the cooler end of the spectrum **(4.138).** An extreme case of the principle is sometimes called **monochromatic color design.** Here the filmmaker emphasizes a single color, varying it only in purity or lightness. We've already seen an example of monochromatic mise-en-scene in the white décor and costumes of *THX 1138* (4.41). In a monochromatic design, even a fleck of a contrasting color will catch the viewer's attention **(4.139).**

Film has one resource that painting lacks. Our tendency to notice visual differences is strongly aroused when the image includes *movement.* In the *L'Avventura* scene, the turning of Claudia's head became a major event, but we are sensitive to far smaller motions in the frame. Normally, for instance, we ignore the movement of scratches and dust on a film. But in David Rimmer's *Watching for the Queen,* in which the first image is an absolutely static photograph **(4.140),** the jumping bits of dust on the film draw our attention. In **4.141,** from Yasujiro Ozu's *Record of a*



4.138

4.139

**4.138–4.139** Limited color palettes. *The Draughtsman's Contract* uses a limited palette of green, black, and white (4.138). The color design of *Aliens* is dominated by gray and blue metallic tones, so even a dingy yellow can mark the stiltlike loader as an important prop in the narrative (4.139).

4.140

4.141

**4.140–4.141** Minimal motion. *Watching for the Queen* emphasizes scratches and dust (4.140), while flapping paper catches our attention in *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (4.141).

*Tenement Gentleman,* many items compete for our attention. But the moment that a scrap of newspaper flaps in the wind, it immediately attracts the eye because it is the only motion in the frame.

When several moving elements appear on the screen, we are likely to shift our attention among them, according to other cues or depending on our expectations about which one is most important for the narrative. In **4.142,** from John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln,* Lincoln is moving much less than the dancers we see in front of him. Yet as the film's major character he is framed centrally, and the dancers pass rapidly through the frame. As a result, we are likely to concentrate on his gestures and facial expressions, however slight they might be compared to the energetic action in the foreground.

**Scene Space** Looking at a film image as a two-dimensional picture helps us appreciate the artistry of filmmakers, but it requires some effort. We find it easier to immediately see the shapes on the screen as presenting a three-dimensional area, like the spaces we live in. The elements of the image that create this impression are called *depth cues.*

Depth cues are what enabled us to understand the encounter of Sandro and Claudia as taking place in a realistic space, with layers and volumes. We develop our understanding of depth cues from our experience of real locales and from our earlier experience with pictorial media. In cinema, depth cues are provided by lighting, setting, costumes, and staging—that is, by all the aspects of mise-en-scene.

Depth cues suggest that a space has both *volume* and several distinct *planes.* When we speak of an object as having volume, we mean that it is solid and occupies a three-dimensional area. A film suggests volume by shape, shading, and movement. In 4.118 and **4.143,** we don't see the actors as flat cutouts, like paper dolls. The shapes of those heads and shoulders suggest solid people. The attached shadows on the faces suggest the curves and recesses of the actors' features and give a modeling effect. We assume that if Jean Seberg in 4.118 turned her head, we would see a profile. Thus we use our knowledge of objects in the world to discern volume in filmic space.

An abstract film, because it can use shapes that are not familiar objects, can create compositions without a sense of volume. The shapes in **4.144** give us no depth cues for volume—they are unshaded, do not have a recognizable shape, and do not move in such a way as to reveal new views that suggest roundness.

Depth cues also pick out *planes* within the image. Planes are the layers of space occupied by persons or objects. Planes are described according to how close to or far away from the camera they are: foreground, middle ground, background.

Only a completely blank screen has a single plane. Whenever a shape, even an abstract one, appears, we will perceive it as being in front of a background. In 4.144, the four red S shapes are actually painted right on the frame surface, as is the

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Whether you see *Coraline* in a 3D or a 2D version, it has some fascinating use of depth cues to differentiate the heroine's real life and the alternative life she finds behind a door in her room. We take a look at these in "Coraline, cornered."

**4.142** Centered framing. Central position emphasizes a background figure in *Young Mr. Lincoln.*

**4.143** Volume in scene space. Shading and shape suggest volume in Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc.*

**4.144** Flattened space. Norman McLaren's *Begone, Dull Care,* provides no depth cues for volume.

lighter, textured area. Yet the textured area seems to lie behind the four shapes. The space here has only two planes, as in decorated wallpaper. This example, like our *L'Avventura* scene, suggests that one of the most basic depth cues is **overlap.** The curling S shapes have edges that overlap the background plane, block our vision of it, and thus seem to be closer to us.

Through overlap, a great many planes can be defined. In 4.62, from Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise,* three distinct planes are displayed: the background of fashion cutouts, the woman's face that overlaps that background, and her hand, which overlaps her lower face. In the three-point lighting approach, edge lighting accentuates the overlap of planes by emphasizing the contour of the object, thus sharply distinguishing it from the background. (See again 4.65, 4.71, and 4.72.)

Color differences also create overlapping planes. Because cool or pale colors tend to recede, filmmakers commonly use them for background planes such as setting. Similarly, because warm or saturated colors tend to come forward, such hues are often employed for costumes or other foreground elements **(4.145).** (See also 4.30 and 4.38.) In *One Froggy Evening* **(4.146),** the luminous yellow of the umbrella and the frog's brilliant green skin make him stand out against the darker red curtain and the earth tones of the stage floor.

Because of the eye's sensitivity to differences, even quite muted color contrasts can suggest three-dimensional space. In *L'Argent* (4.21–4.23), Robert Bresson uses a limited, cool palette and relatively flat lighting. Yet the compositions pick out several planes by means of overlapping slightly different masses of black, tan, and light blue. Our shot from *Casanova* (4.40) articulates planes by means of slightly differing shades of red. By contrast, a filmmaker may want to minimize color differences and depth cues in order to create a flatter, more abstract composition **(4.147).**

In cinema, *movement* is one of the most important depth cues, since it strongly suggests both planes and volumes (4.142). **Aerial perspective,** or the hazing of more distant planes, is yet another depth cue. Typically, our eyes and brain assume that sharper outlines, clearer textures, and purer colors belong to foreground elements. In landscape shots, the blurring and graying of distant planes can be caused by natural atmospheric haze **(4.148).** Even when such haze is a minor factor, our vision typically assigns strong color contrasts to the foreground, as in the *Sambizanga* shot (4.145). In addition, very often lighting is manipulated in conjunction with lens focus to blur the background planes **(4.149).**

In **4.150,** the mise-en-scene provides several depth cues: overlap of edges, cast shadows, and **size diminution.** That is, figures and objects farther away from us are seen to get proportionally smaller. This reinforces our sense of seeing a deep space with considerable distances between the planes.

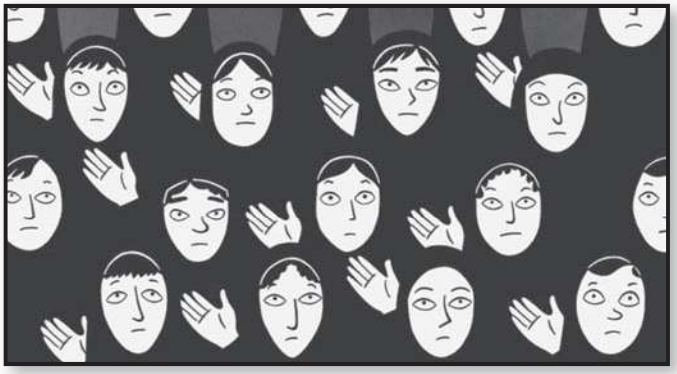
The same illustration dramatically displays *linear perspective.* We will consider perspective relations in more detail in the next chapter, since they derive as much from properties of the camera lens as they do from mise-en-scene. For now, we can simply note that a strong impression of depth emerges when parallel lines converge at a distant vanishing point. *Central* perspective is exemplified in 4.138 from *The Draughtsman's Contract. Off-center* linear perspective is illustrated in 4.150, in which the vanishing point is not the geometrical center of the frame.

All of these depth cues are *monocular,* which means that the illusion of depth requires input from only one eye. *Stereopsis* is a binocular depth cue. It results from the fact that our two eyes see the world from slightly different angles. In two-dimensional films, there is a single lens and thus no stereoptic effect. Three-dimensional

4.145

4.146

**4.145–4.146 Warm color for the foreground.** In Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga,* the heroine's dress has very warm and fairly saturated colors, making it stand out distinctly against the pale background (4.145). Brilliant colors emphasize extreme depth in Chuck Jones's *One Froggy Evening* (4.146).



**4.147 Flattening space for expressive effect.** Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud's animated film *Persepolis* doesn't differentiate the schoolgirls' costumes by edge lighting or color differences. The result is a mass of black. Combined with the students' repetitive gestures, the image suggests that the school system demands conformity.

**4.148 Aerial perspective through atmospheric effects.** Fog emphasizes the distance between the foreground and background trees in Güney's *The Wall.*

**4.149 Aerial perspective through lighting.** In *The Charge of the Light Brigade,* aerial perspective is artificially created by diffused lighting of the background and a lack of clear focus behind the officer in the foreground.

**4.150 Size diminution.** Steep size diminution emphasizes depth in Straub and Huillet's *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach.*

cinema uses two lenses, imitating the separation of our eyes. The glasses used for viewing 3D films direct different visual information to each eye, creating a stronger illusion of depth than monocular depth cues can render. Stereopsis is a depth cue rendered by cinematography rather than mise-en-scene, so we'll talk about it more in the next chapter.

In many of the examples already given, you may have noticed that mise-en-scene serves not simply to direct our attention to foreground elements but rather to create a dynamic relation between foreground and background. In 4.62, for instance, Godard keeps our attention on the whole composition by using prominent backgrounds. Here the pictures behind the actress's head lead us to scan the various small shapes quickly.

The *La Chinoise* shot is a **shallow-space** composition. In such shots, the mise-en-scene suggests comparatively little depth, and the closest and most distant planes seem only slightly separated. The opposite tendency is **deep-space** composition, in which a significant distance seems to separate planes. Our example from *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (4.150) exemplifies deep-space mise-en-scene. Often a director creates a deep-space composition by making the foreground plane quite large and the background plane quite distant **(4.151).**

Shallow and deep mise-en-scene are relative concepts. Most compositions present a moderately deep space, falling between the extremes we've just considered. Sometimes a filmmaker manipulates depth cues to make a space appear deeper or shallower than it really is—creating an optical illusion **(4.152).**

**4.151 Deep-space composition.** Several scenes of Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds* create large foregrounds and distant background planes.

**4.152 Playing with depth cues.** Leos Carax creates an optical illusion in *Boy Meets Girl* by making the painted advertisement seem to thrust out into the space inhabited by the boy.

At this point, you might want to return to shots illustrated earlier in this chapter. You'll notice that these images use depth cues of overlap, movement, cast shadows, aerial perspective, size diminution, and linear perspective to create distinctive foreground/background relations.

## CREATIVE DECISIONS

### *Mise-en-Scene in Two Shots from* Day of Wrath

The fact that our vision is sensitive to differences allows filmmakers to guide our understanding of the mise-en-scene. All the cues to story space interact with one another, working to emphasize narrative elements, direct our attention, and set up dynamic relations among areas of screen space. We can see this interaction clearly in two shots from Carl Dreyer's *Day of Wrath.*

In the first shot, the heroine, Anne, is standing before a grillwork panel **(4.153).** She isn't speaking, but since she is a major character in the film, the narrative already directs us to her. Setting, lighting, costume, and figure expression create pictorial cues that confirm our expectations. The setting yields a pattern of horizontal and vertical lines that intersect in the delicate curves of Anne's face and shoulders. The lighting yields a patch of brightness on the right half of the frame and a patch of darkness on the left, creating pictorial balance. Anne is the meeting point of these two areas. Her face is modeled by the relatively strong key lighting from the right, a little top lighting on her hair, and relatively little fill light. Anne's black dress punctuated by a white collar and her black cap edged with white further emphasize her face.

The shot is comparatively shallow, displaying two major planes with little distance between them. The background sets off the most important element, Anne. The rigid geometrical grid in the rear makes Anne's slightly sad face the most expressive element in the frame, thus encouraging our eye to pause there. In addition, the composition divides the screen space horizontally, with the grid pattern running across the top half and the dark, severe vertical of Anne's dress dominating the lower half. As is common, the upper zone is the stronger because the character's head and shoulders occupy it. Anne's figure is positioned slightly off center, but with her face turned to compensate for the vacant area on the right. (Imagine how unbalanced the shot would look if she were turned to face us squarely and the same amount of space were left empty on the right.) Thus compositional balance reinforces the shot's emphasis on Anne's expression. Without using movement, Dreyer has channeled our attention by means of lines and shapes, lights and darks, and the foreground and background relations in the mise-en-scene.

In the second example, also from *Day of Wrath,* Dreyer coaxes our attention into a to-and-fro movement **(4.154).** Again, the plot guides us, since the characters and the cart are crucial narrative elements. Sound helps, too, since Martin is at the moment explaining to Anne that the wood in the cart will fuel the witch-burning. But mise-en-scene also plays a role. Size diminution and cast shadows establish basic foreground/background relations, with Anne and Martin on the front plane and the cart of wood in the background. The space is comparatively deep (though the foreground is not as exaggeratedly close as that in *Ashes and Diamonds,* 4.151). The prominence of the couple and the cart is reinforced by line, shape, and lighting contrasts. The figures are defined by hard edges and by dark costumes within the predominantly bright setting. Unlike most shots, this puts the human figures in the lower half of the frame, which gives that zone an unusual importance. The composition thus creates a vertical balance, counterweighting the cart with the couple. Were Tim Smith to test his viewers' scanning on this shot, we'd expect eye movements glancing up and down between the two objects of our attention.

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For our thoughts on some digital 3D films, see "A turning point in digital projection?"; "Bwana Beowulf"; "Do not forget to return your 3D glasses"; and "Adieu au language: 2 + 2 × 3D."

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For a variety of staging options, in both shallow space and depth, see "Gradations of emphasis, starring Glenn Ford" and "How to watch *Fantômas,* and why." "*Dial M for Murder*: Hitchcock frets not his narrow room" analyzes how Hitchcock uses 3D to stage nearly all of a film in one apartment.

4.153

4.154

**4.153–4.154** Concentrating our attention. *Day of Wrath*: Highlighting a single figure (4.153) and dividing attention between foreground and background (4.154).

4.155

4.156

**4.155–4.156** Color and composition. An apparently simple shot from *An Autumn Afternoon* employs several depth cues (4.155) and harks back to the striped smokestacks seen at the beginning (4.156).

Similar processes are at work in color films. In one shot of Yasujiro Ozu's *An Autumn Afternoon* **(4.155),** our attention is concentrated on the bride in the center foreground. Many depth cues are at work. Overlap locates the two figures in two foreground planes, setting them against a series of more distant planes. Aerial perspective makes the foliage outside somewhat out of focus. Movement creates depth when the bride lowers her head. Perspective diminution makes the more distant objects smaller. The woman's face and the bright silver, red, and gold bridal costume stand out strikingly against the muted colors of the background planes. Moreover, the colors lead us to recall a red-and-silver motif that appeared in the first shot of the film **(4.156).**

In looking at a shot, we're more aware of *what* we see than *how* we see it. To think like a filmmaker, though, we need to reflect on that *how.* The filmmaker arranges shapes and colors on the two-dimensional screen. He or she also controls depth cues that suggest three dimensions. The filmmaker uses those patterns to activate what is most important at each moment. Mise-en-scene structures space in ways that guide, and sometimes dazzle, our eyes.

## Time

Cinema is an art of time as well as space. So we shouldn't be surprised to find that many of our examples of two-dimensional composition and three-dimensional scenic space have unfolded over time. The director's control over mise-en-scene governs not only *what* we see but *when* we see it and for how long. In our *L'Avventura* scene between Sandro and Claudia on the rooftop (4.124, 4.125), the timing of the characters' movements—Sandro turning away just as Claudia turns toward us—contributes to the effect of a sudden, sharp revelation of her anxiety.

The director shapes the speed and direction of movement within the shot. Since our eyes are attuned to noticing changes, we can pick up the slightest cues. In **4.157,** from Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,* the protagonist simply peels potatoes. This feminist film traces, in painstaking detail, the everyday routines of a Belgian housewife. The composition of this shot strongly centers Jeanne, and no competing movements distract us from her steady and efficient preparation of a meal. The same rhythm is carried throughout the film, so that when she does start to vary her habits, we are prepared to notice even the slight errors she makes under emotional pressure.

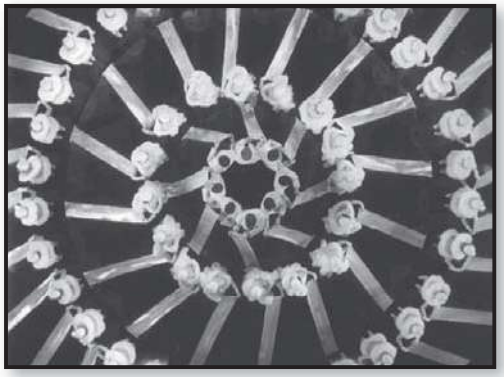
A far busier shot is **4.158,** from Busby Berkeley's *42nd Street.* This overhead view presents strongly opposed movements. The central and outer rings of dancers circle in one direction, while the second ring turns in a contrary direction. The dancers also swing strips of shiny cloth back and forth. The result is a partially abstract composition, but it's easy to grasp because the movement of the wheels within wheels has a geometrical clarity.

**4.157** Movement cues. Slow, quiet movements of the actor in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* enable the audience to detect even slight changes.

The dancers in *42nd Street* are synchronized to a considerable degree, but **4.159,** from Jacques Tati's *Play Time,* contains movements of differing speeds, with different visual accents. Moreover, they occur on different planes and follow contrasting trajectories. These diverse movements accord with Tati's tendency to cram his compositions with gags that compete for our attention.

As we have already seen, we scan any film frame for information. This scanning brings time sharply into play. Only a very short shot forces us to try to take in the image all at once. In most shots, we get an initial overall impression that creates formal expectations. These expectations are quickly modified as our eye roams around the frame.

As we'd expect, our scanning of the shot is strongly affected by the presence of movement. A static



**4.158 Strong, synchronized movements.** In *42nd Street,* the shot is busy but the movements are synchronized.

**4.159 Vivid, competing movements.** The competing rhythms of movement in a busy shot from *Play Time* divide the audience's attention around the frame.

composition may keep pulling our attention back to a single element, as our first shot from *Day of Wrath* does with Anne's face (4.153). In contrast, a composition emphasizing movement may use the movement's speed or direction to guide our glance. In the second image from *Day of Wrath* (4.154), Anne and Martin are turned from us and are standing still. Thus the single moving thing in the frame—the cart—catches our attention. But when Martin speaks and turns, we look back at the couple, then back at the cart, and so on, in a shuttling, dynamic shift of attention.

Our time-bound process of scanning involves not only looking to and fro across the screen but also, in a sense, looking into its depths. A deep-space composition will often use background events to create expectations about what is about to happen in the foreground. "Composing in depth isn't simply a matter of pictorial richness," British director Alexander Mackendrick has remarked. "It has value in the narrative of the action, the pacing of the scene. Within the same frame, the director can organize the action so that preparation for what will happen next is seen in the background of what is happening now."

Our example from *The Dying Swan* (4.131–4.134) illustrates Mackendrick's point. The same principle is used in **4.160–4.162,** from *Three Kings.* Here the

**4.160**

**4.161**

**4.162**

**4.160–4.162 Movements arouse narrative expectations.** In this shot from *Three Kings,* Chief Elgin comes in to tell the partying GIs that their superior is coming. Normally, when a character is looking offscreen, he or she is placed a little off center, leaving an empty space to imply the area that the person is looking at. (See the shot of Anne, 4.153.) But Elgin is decentered in a different way; here the space on the right side sits empty (4.160). That makes the tent flap behind him prominent. Without being aware of it, we're prepared for some action to develop there. Abruptly, the superior officer bursts into the background (4.161). He strides forward, which is always a powerful way to command the viewer's attention (4.162). As he comes into close-up, he ramps up the conflict, demanding to know where the men got alcohol.

frame starts off unbalanced, and the fact that it includes a background doorway prepares us for the scene's dramatic development. In addition, any movement from background to foreground is a strong attention-getter. At moments like these, the mise-en-scene is quietly setting up what will happen. By arousing our expectations, the director has engaged us with the unfolding action.

The *Dying Swan* and *Three Kings* examples also illustrate the force of *frontality.* In explaining one five-minute shot in his film *Adam's Rib,* George Cukor acknowledged this power. He remarked how the defense attorney was positioned to focus our attention on her client, who's reciting the reasons she shot her husband **(4.163).** Katharine Hepburn "had her back to the camera almost the whole time, but that had a meaning: she indicated to the audience that they should look at Judy Holliday."

All other things being equal, the viewer expects that more story information will come from a character's face than from a character's back. The viewer's attention will thus usually pass over figures that are turned away and fasten on figures that are positioned frontally. A more distant view can exploit frontality, too. In Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness,* depth staging centers the Japanese woman coming to visit the hospital, and a burst of bright fabric also draws attention to her **(4.164).** Just as important, the other characters are turned away from us. It's characteristic of Hou's style to employ long shots with small changes in figure movement. The subdued, delicate effect of his scenes depends on our seeing characters' faces in relation to others' bodies and the overall setting.

Frontality can change over time to guide our attention to various parts of the shot. We've already seen alternating frontality at work in our *L'Avventura* scene, when Sandro and Claudia turn to and away from us (4.124, 4.125). When actors are in dialogue, a director may allow frontality to highlight one moment of one actor's performance and then give another performer more prominence **(4.165, 4.166).** This device reminds us that mise-en-scene can borrow devices from theatrical staging.

**4.163** Movements coordinated with other cues for attention. In *Adam's Rib,* the wife who has shot her husband is given the greatest emphasis by three-point lighting, her animated gestures, and her three-quarter frontal positioning. Daringly, the most frontal and centered character is the nurse in the background, but Cukor keeps her out of focus and unmoving so that she won't distract from Judy Holliday's performance.

**4.164** Frontality. Although she is farther from the camera than other characters, the woman visiting the hospital in *City of Sadness* draws our eye partly because she is the only one facing front. (Compare the unimportance of the front-facing nurse in 4.163.)

4.165

4.166

**4.165–4.166** Fluctuating frontality. In a conversation in *The Bad and the Beautiful,* our attention fastens on the studio executive on the right because the other two characters are turned away from us (4.165). But when the producer turns to the camera, his centered position and frontal posture emphasize him (4.166).

A flash of frontality can be very powerful if it's integrated into the scene's unfolding drama. In the opening of *Rebel without a Cause,* three teenagers are being held at the police station **(4.167).** They don't know one another yet. When Jim sees that Plato is shivering, he drunkenly comes forward to offer the younger boy his sport coat **(4.168, 4.169).** Jim's frontality, forward movement, bright white shirt, and central placement emphasize his gesture. The moment foreshadows the ways in which Jim will become something of a father to Plato. Just as Plato takes the coat, Judy turns and notices Jim for the first time **(4.170).** Like Claudia's turn to the camera in our *L'Avventura* example, this sudden revelation spikes our interest. It prepares us for the tense romance that will develop between Judy and Jim in later scenes. Director Nicholas Ray has blended the scene's setting, lighting, costume, and staging in order to establish the core relationships among the three central characters.

4.167

4.168

4.169

4.170

**4.167–4.170** Developing a scene over time. A long shot lays out the major characters in *Rebel without a Cause* (4.167). Jim comes forward, drawing our attention and arousing expectations of a dramatic exchange (4.168). Jim offers Plato his jacket, his action centered and his brightly lit white shirt making him the dominant player. Judy remains a secondary center of interest, segregated by the office window but highlighted by her bright red coat (4.169). Judy turns abruptly, and her face's frontal position lets us see her interest in Jim (4.170).

4.171

4.172

**4.171–4.172** Frontality denied. At the height of the drama in *Naniwa Elegy,* Kenji Mizoguchi has the heroine move away from us, into depth (4.171). As she passes through patches of distant darkness, our curiosity about her emotional state intensifies (4.172). Compare the forward movement in 4.160–4.162 and 4.167–4.170.

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For more on Mizoguchi's staging style, see "Mizoguchi: Secrets of the exquisite image."

The director can also achieve a strong effect by denying frontality, keeping us in suspense about what a character's face reveals. At a climactic moment in Kenji Mizoguchi's *Naniwa Elegy,* some of the usual cues for emphasis are reversed **(4.171, 4.172).** We get a long shot rather than a closer view, and the character is turned from us and moving away from the camera, through patches of darkness. Ayako is confessing to her suitor that she's been another man's mistress. Her withdrawal conveys a powerful sense of shame, and we, like her friend, have to judge her sincerity based on her posture and voice. In this and our other examples, several techniques of mise-en-scene dovetail from moment to moment in order to engage us more vividly with the action.

## Narrative Functions of Mise-en-Scene in *Our Hospitality*

Throughout this chapter, most of our examples have looked at mise-en-scene techniques in isolation, studying single shots or scenes. Now we're ready to see how these techniques work together to shape a film's overall form and, consequently, our experience of it.

Like most of Buster Keaton's films, *Our Hospitality* shows that directorial choices about mise-en-scene can economically advance the narrative and create a pattern of motifs. Since the film is a comedy, the mise-en-scene also creates gags. *Our Hospitality,* then, exemplifies what we will find in our study of every film technique: An individual element almost always has *several* functions, not just one.

Consider, for example, how the settings function in the plot of *Our Hospitality.* For one thing, they help divide the film into contrasting sections. The film begins with a prologue showing how the feud between the McKays and the Canfields kills off the young Canfield and the husband of the McKay family. We are left in suspense about the fate of the baby, Willie. Willie's mother flees with her son from their southern home to the North (action narrated to us mainly by an intertitle).

"The most striking aspect of the Keaton pictures was the enormous amount of trouble lavished over every gag. Production value on such a scale requires more than a simple desire to make people laugh. It is not surprising that Keaton's childhood aim was to be a civil engineer."
—Kevin Brownlow, film historian

The plot jumps ahead many years to begin the main action, with the grown-up Willie living in New York. There are a number of gags concerning early-19th-century life in the metropolis, contrasting sharply with the prologue scene. Soon Willie receives word that he has inherited his parents' home in the South. A series of amusing short scenes follows as he takes a primitive train back to his birthplace. During these scenes, Keaton uses real locales, but by laying out the railroad tracks in different ways, he exploits the landscapes for surprising comic effects, which we'll examine shortly.

The rest of the film deals with Willie's stay in the southern town. On the day of his arrival, he wanders around and gets into a number of comic situations. That

night he stays in the Canfield house itself. An extended chase occurs the next day, moving through the countryside and back to the Canfield house for the settling of the feud. Thus the action depends heavily on shifts of setting that establish Willie's two journeys, as baby and as man, and later his wanderings to escape his enemies' pursuit.

Along with the shifts of setting, the narration is relatively unrestricted after Willie reaches the South. It switches between him and members of the Canfield family. We usually know more about what they're doing than Willie does, and the narrative generates suspense by showing them coming toward the places where Willie is hiding.

Specific settings fulfill distinct narrative functions. The McKay estate, which Willie envisions as a mansion, turns out to be a tumbledown shack. The McKay house is contrasted with the Canfield's palatial plantation home. In narrative terms, the Canfield home gains even more functional importance when the Canfield father forbids his sons to kill Willie on the premises: "Our code of honor forbids us to shoot him while he is a guest in our house." Once Willie overhears this, he determines *never* to leave.

Ironically, the home of Willie's enemies becomes the only safe spot in town, and many scenes are organized around the Canfield brothers' attempts to lure Willie outside. At the end of the film, another setting takes on significance: the landscape of meadows, mountains, riverbanks, rapids, and waterfalls across which the Canfields pursue Willie. The feud ends back in the Canfield house itself, with Willie now welcomed as the daughter's husband.

The pattern of development is clear: from the opening shootout at the McKay house that breaks up Willie's family to the final scene in the Canfield house with Willie becoming part of a new family. In such ways, every setting becomes highly motivated by the narrative's system of causes and effects, parallels and contrasts, and overall development.

The same narrative motivation marks the film's use of costume. Willie is characterized as a city boy through his dandified suit, but the southern gentility of the elder Canfield is represented by his white planter's suit. Props become important here. Willie's suitcase and umbrella succinctly summarize his role as visitor and wanderer, and the Canfields' ever-present pistols remind us of their goal of continuing the feud. In addition, a change of costume (Willie's disguising himself as a woman) enables him to escape from the Canfield household. At the end, when the characters put aside their guns, the feud is over.

Like setting, lighting in *Our Hospitality* has both general and specific functions. The film alternates scenes in darkness with scenes in daylight. The feuding in the prologue takes place at night; Willie's trip South and wanderings through the town occur in daylight; that night Willie comes to dinner at the Canfield's and stays as a guest; the next day, the Canfields pursue him; and the film ends that night with the marriage of Willie and the Canfield daughter.

More specifically, the bulk of the film is evenly lit in the three-point method. Yet the somber action of the prologue takes place in hard sidelighting **(4.173, 4.174).** Later, the murder scene is played out in flashes of light—lightning, gunfire—that fitfully punctuate the overall darkness. Because this sporadic lighting hides part of the action from us, it helps build suspense. The gunshots themselves are seen only as flashes in the darkness, and we learn that both men have died only during a burst of lightning.

Most economically of all, virtually every bit of the acting functions to support and advance the cause-effect chain of the narrative. The way Canfield sips and savors his mint julep establishes his southern ways; his southern hospitality in turn will not allow him to shoot a guest in his house. Similarly, Willie's every move expresses his diffidence or resourcefulness.

Even more concise is the way the film uses staging in depth to present two narrative events simultaneously, obliging us to scan back and forth between them. While the engineer drives the locomotive, the other cars pass him on a parallel

4.173

4.174

**4.173–4.174** Dramatic lighting changes in *Our Hospitality.* When the elder McKay flings off his hat to douse the lamp, the illumination changes from a soft blend of key, fill, and backlight (4.173) to a stark key light from the fireplace (4.174).

4.175

4.176

4.177

**4.175–4.177 Deep staging and narration: How to give the audience superior knowledge.** During the train journey, within the same frame (4.175) we see both cause—the engineer's cheerful ignorance—and effect—the runaway cars. Later the Canfield boys make plans to shoot Willie, who overhears them in the background (4.176). While Willie ambles along unsuspectingly toward the camera, one Canfield waits in the foreground to ambush him (4.177).

track **(4.175).** In other shots, Willie's awareness or ignorance of a situation is displayed through planes of depth **(4.176, 4.177).** Thanks to such spatial arrangements, Keaton is able to pack together two story events, resulting in a tight narrative construction and in a relatively unrestricted narration. In 4.176, we know what Willie knows, and we expect that he will probably flee now that he understands the sons' plans. But in 4.177, we're aware, as Willie is not, that danger lurks around the corner, so there's suspense as we wonder whether the Canfield boys' ambush will succeed.

Keaton has unified his film further by using mise-en-scene to create specific motifs. For one thing, there is the repeated squabble between the anonymous husband and wife. On his way to his estate, Willie passes a husband throttling his wife. Willie intervenes to protect her; the wife proceeds to thrash Willie for butting in. On Willie's way back, he passes the same couple, still fighting, but studiously avoids them. Nevertheless, the wife aims a kick at him as he passes. The repetition strengthens the film's narrative unity, but the motif functions thematically, too, as another joke on the contradictions surrounding the idea of hospitality.

Other motifs recur. Willie's first hat is too tall to wear in a jouncing railway coach. (When it gets crushed, he swaps it for the trademark flat Keaton hat.) Willie's second hat serves to distract the Canfields when Willie coaxes his dog to fetch it. There is also a pronounced water motif in the film. Rain conceals from us the murders in the prologue and later saves Willie from leaving the Canfield home after dinner. ("It would be the death of anyone to go out on a night like this!") A river functions significantly in the final chase. And a waterfall appears soon after Willie's arrival in the South **(4.178).** This waterfall initially protects Willie by hiding him **(4.179, 4.180)** but later threatens both him and the Canfield daughter as they are nearly swept over it (4.186).

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4.180

**4.178–4.180 The water motif.** After an explosion demolishes a dam, the water spills over a cliff and creates a waterfall (4.178). The new waterfall starts to hide Willie as he sits fishing (4.179). By the time the Canfields rush into the foreground, he is invisible (4.180).

Two specific motifs of setting help tighten the narrative. First there is the recurrence of an embroidered sampler hanging on the Canfield wall: "Love Thy Neighbor." It first appears in the prologue of the film, when seeing it motivates Canfield's attempt to stop the feud. The sampler reappears at the end when Canfield, enraged that Willie has married his daughter, glances at the wall, reads the inscription, and resolves to halt the years of feuding. His change in attitude is motivated by an item of setting.

The film also uses gun racks as a motif. In the prologue, each feuder goes to his mantelpiece to get his pistol. Later, when Willie arrives in town, the Canfields hurry to their gun rack and begin to load their pistols. Near the end of the film, when the Canfields return home after failing to find Willie, one of the sons notices that the gun rack is now empty. And, in the final shot, when the Canfields accept the marriage and lay down their arms, Willie produces from all over his person a staggering assortment of pistols swiped from the Canfields' own supply.

Yet *Our Hospitality* is more than a film whose narrative system relates economically to patterns of mise-en-scene. It's a comedy, and one of the funniest. We shouldn't be surprised to find that Keaton uses mise-en-scene for gags. Indeed, so unified is the film that most of the elements that create narrative economy yield comic effects too.

The mise-en-scene bristles with many comic elements. Settings are exploited for amusement—the ramshackle McKay estate, the Broadway of 1830, the specially cut train tunnel that just fits the old-fashioned train and its smokestack **(4.181).** Costume gags also stand out. Willie's disguise as a woman is exposed by a gap in the rear of his skirt; later, Willie puts the same costume on a horse to distract the Canfields. Most strongly, comedy arises from the staging and performances. The railroad engineer's high kick unexpectedly swipes off his conductor's hat **(4.182).** The elder Canfield sharpens his carving knife with ferocious energy, just inches from Willie's head. When Willie lands at the bottom of the river, he stands there looking left and right, his hand shading his eyes, before he realizes where he is. Later, Willie scuds down the river, leaping out of the water like a fish and slithering across the rocks.

Perhaps the only aspect of mise-en-scene that competes with the comic inventiveness of the performances is the film's use of deep space for gags. Many of the shots we've already examined function to create comedy as well: The engineer stands firmly oblivious to the separation of train cars from the engine (see 4.175) just as Willie is unaware that the Canfield boy is lurking murderously in the foreground (4.177).

Even more striking, though, is the deep-space gag that follows the demolition of the dam. The Canfield boys have been searching the town for Willie. In the meantime, Willie sits on a ledge, fishing. As the water bursts from the dam and sweeps over the cliff, it completely engulfs Willie (4.179). At that very instant, the Canfield brothers step into the foreground from either side of the frame, still looking for their victim (4.180). The water's concealment of Willie reduces him to a neutral background for the movement of the Canfields. This sudden eruption of new action into the scene surprises us, rather than generating suspense, since we were not aware that the Canfield sons were so close by. Here surprise is crucial to the comedy.

However appealing the individual gags are, *Our Hospitality* organizes its comic aspects as strictly as it does its other motifs. The film's journey pattern often arranges a series of gags according to a formal principle of theme and variations. For instance, during the train trip South, a string of gags is based on the idea of people encountering the train. Several people turn out to watch it pass, a tramp rides the rods, and an old man chucks rocks at the engine. Another swift series of gags takes the train tracks themselves as its theme. The variations include a humped track, a donkey blocking the tracks, curled and rippled tracks, and finally no tracks at all.

But the most complex theme-and-variations series can be seen in the motif of "the fish on the line." Soon after Willie arrives in town, he is angling and hauls up a minuscule fish. Shortly afterward, a huge fish yanks him into the water **(4.183).** Later in the film, through a series of mishaps, Willie becomes tied by a rope to one

**4.181** Setting used for comic effect. The tunnel is cut to fit the old-fashioned train.

**4.182** Performance as comic surprise. As the engineer, Keaton's father, Joe, uses his famous high-kick vaudeville stunt for this gag.

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4.186

**4.183–4.186** Men as fish. The fish-on-the-line motif begins as Willie is jerked into the water (4.183). Later, tied to Willie, the Canfield boy falls off the cliff (4.184), and Willie braces himself to be yanked after him (4.185). Still later, Willie dangles like a fish on the end of a pole (4.186).

of the Canfield sons. Many gags arise from this umbilical-cord linkage, including one that results in Canfield's being pulled into the water as Willie was earlier.

Perhaps the single funniest shot in the film occurs when Willie realizes that since the Canfield boy has fallen off the rocks **(4.184),** so must he **(4.185).** But even after Willie gets free of Canfield, the rope remains tied around his waist. So in the film's climax, Willie is dangling from a log over the waterfall **(4.186).** Here again, one element fulfills multiple functions. The fish-on-the-line device advances the narrative, becomes a motif unifying the film, and takes its place in a pattern of parallel gags involving variations of Willie on the rope. In such ways, *Our Hospitality* becomes an outstanding example of how a filmmaker can integrate cinematic mise-en-scene with narrative form and create comedy in the process.

## SUMMARY

If we want to think like a filmmaker, we should notice mise-en-scene systematically. In any film, we can watch, first of all, for how setting, costume, lighting, and staging and performance are presented. Try tracing only one sort of element—say, setting or lighting—through a scene. How does it change, and what purposes does it fulfill?

We should also reflect on how mise-en-scene factors work together. Try pausing on a single image and scrutinizing it, as we've done throughout this chapter. How are the aspects of mise-en-scene arranged to attract our attention? Do they guide us toward key narrative elements—a face, a gesture, an object? Once we notice those elements, how are we cued to react?

Mise-en-scene can operate as part of narration, the unfolding of story information. How does it achieve this? Do the settings, lighting, costume, and staging and performance create curiosity, or suspense, or surprise? Do they become motifs that weave their ways through the entire film?

As we look more closely, we'll become aware of the vast range of possibilities offered by this area of technique. The simplest choice—where to put a light, what gesture an actor should employ—can have a powerful impact. Whether by intuition or by calculation, filmmakers have shown that mise-en-scene can engage and move viewers in an almost endless variety of ways.