

Mise-en-scène

The term **mise-en-scène** was first used in the theatre, where it refers to all the elements placed on a stage that contribute to the setting or mood the creative team were working towards. In film, it refers to everything on the screen in front of the camera, from the colours and style of the clothes worn by the actors, to the settings and locations, to the feeling created by the lighting (see Cinematography, pages 16–19) and the positioning of the characters in relation to one another.

Everything you see **on screen** (and the six **off-screen spaces** – for more on these spaces see page 29) has been considered and deliberately chosen to be there. If you can see it, it is there because the filmmaker wants you to see it. How you interpret this information will take time and practice; you can view a film multiple times and find new information on each viewing.

Your response to a film may well be different from others. Your gender, age, life experiences, the books you have read, and the other films, theatre, paintings, photographs and music you have seen/heard or studied will all play a part in your interpretation of a film.

Colour

Colour is integral to the cinematographer's repertoire of resources for creating mood and conveying meaning. Colour is an important part of the **mise-en-scène** to signal a character's mood or also personality, to enhance the narrative arc, to draw attention to something, support a colour motif or to elicit psychological reactions in the viewer. Here, it would be the responsibility of the production and costume designer.

The psychology of colour

- **Red:** anger, violence, danger, love, excitement
- **Pink:** femininity, sweetness, innocence, playfulness
- **Orange:** warmth, happiness, friendly, exoticness
- **Yellow:** sickness, madness, idyllic, insecurity
- **Green:** nature, renewal, hope, darkness, envy, ominous
- **Blue:** cold, calm, melancholy, cerebral
- **Purple:** fantasy, mystical, ethereal, ominous
- **Black:** fear, grief, sophistication
- **White:** sincerity, purity



Focus on how one or more elements of **mise-en-scène** create meaning and generate response in a film sequence from either Film A, Film B and/or Film C.

Note: select a sequence of approximately seven minutes from films of the same genre/film movement/national.

The question is asking you to analyse either:

- 1 one film sequence or
- 2 two in comparison.

And either:

- 1 one element of **mise-en-scène**
- 2 multiple elements of.

What to do:

- 1 Watch the film(s).
- 2 Select an appropriate sequence.
- 3 Select which elements of Film Form you wish to study.
- 4 Have multiple viewings of the selected sequence.
- 5 Relevant research into **mise-en-scène**, cinematography, sound, editing, performance, etc.

Remember: **mise-en-scène** includes setting, décor, costume and make-up, figure expression and movement, lighting, framing and composition, off-screen space and special effects.

iA Independent Activity

What emotions do we associate with particular colours? Create a colour wheel of images from films you are studying and annotate this with the mood generated in these scenes by using these colours.



Case study: Colour *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Ramsay, 2011)

The screenshot below, from *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, shows Eva, whose son has carried out a mass school shooting, sitting in a café. In it are two primary colours: red and green. Eva is sitting in the green-lit window – here green alludes to darkness, giving the shot an ominous feel. The window, and therefore Eva, is framed on all sides by large blocks of red, suggesting that she is surrounded by anger, violence and danger, with no escape.



House of Flying Daggers (Yimou, 2004)

Colour plays a significant part in the aesthetic style of *House of Flying Daggers* with a single colour dominating the **mise-en-scène** in different sequences. Here the characters and backgrounds are almost all the same shade of green, with the green alluding to nature, renewal and hope.



There is considerable cross-over between cinematography and **mise-en-scène**, particularly with regards to lighting, which is covered in detail on pages 16–19. The position of the actors, part of the **mise-en-scène**, is also an essential element of a cinematographer's framing.

Mise-en-scène: Setting and props

Setting and props are the responsibility of the **production designer**, who helps to define and manage every visual aspect of a film.

Setting

Setting includes the location, be it an exterior, interior, a real place or a specially built set on a soundstage or on location.

However, it is not only the physical locations that form setting, but also what the time is – dawn, daylight, dusk or the dead of night.

Props

Setting props are all the items used in both interior and exterior locations. For a historical drama, attention would have to be paid to vehicles, street lighting, shop facades and background extras. For an interior scene thought would have to be paid to the pictures on the wall, the books on a shelf and the items on a table. The absence of these would also be indicators to character and story.

Where props are placed and how they are used can carry additional narrative emotional or symbolic weight.

There is some overlap between props and costumes: props that characters make use of, such as spectacles, a holstered gun, an umbrella or a wristwatch, are known as **costume props**.

IA Independent Activity

Create a mind-map outlining what settings or props you would expect to find in each of the following:

- a horror film
- a western
- a science fiction film.

For each genre explain what function the settings and props serve?

Case study: Setting, costume and props

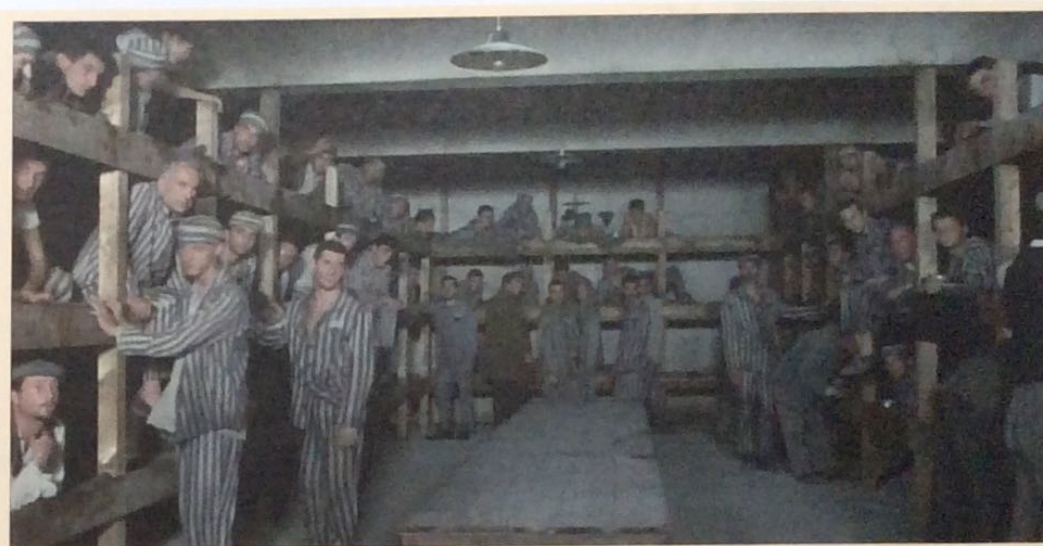
Setting and **props** combined with **costume** can help develop the narrative, provoke emotional responses, offer further understanding to the characters or serve a symbolic function. Consider the two shots on the next page.

Life is Beautiful (Beningni, 1997)

The principal colour of the screenshot on the next page, from *Life is Beautiful*, is grey, giving an impression of cold, darkness and misery.

The setting is clearly a barrack in a concentration camp, with the men wearing the grey and black striped uniform synonymous with the German World War II concentration camps. The uniforms have a yellow star on them, so we know that these men are Jewish because the Nazis forced all Jews to wear the Star of David. They are all wearing their jackets, and some their hats, so we can

assume that the weather is cold. The barrack is dimly lit, there is a central light fitting but, even though it is dark, it is not switched on, which suggests that these men are not worthy of such luxury. The wood structure of the bed frames looks hard and uncomfortable, and the absence of mattresses, pillows or blankets reinforces the hardship of the place and the characters' situation. There is one central dusty, empty table but there are no chairs, and there is nothing on the table, nor does it seem that any of the men have any possessions, indicating that they have been stripped of all personal identifiers.



Life is Beautiful (Beningni, 1997)

We Need to Talk About Kevin (Ramsay, 2011)

The setting in the screenshot below, from *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, is a domestic living space, filled with furniture and soft furnishings of golden browns and reds, which alludes to gold, warmth and comfort. The stripped wooden floor and throw rugs indicate an arty-affluence that is reinforced by the vinyl records, hi-fi separates and the African mask collection. The only primary colours in the room are the children's toys, suggesting that Kevin has invaded this warm golden space with his solid colourful toys. This tonal difference between the adult and child is reinforced in the costumes, with Kevin's

bright blue T-shirt contrasting with Eva's pale blue one. That she is wearing white trousers to sit on the floor serves as indicator that she may not have adjusted to the role of a mother. We can see that it is a bright sunny day by the light coming through the windows, reinforced by Eva wearing linen clothes and sandals. Given that the film opens with the teenage Kevin's violent school shootout there is very little blood shown, but red props are used as a motif throughout the film to stand-in for the blood, such as the ball they are playing with in this shot.



We Need to Talk About Kevin (Ramsay, 2011)



Trainspotting (Boyle, 1996)



Daisies (Chytilová, 1965)



Pan's Labyrinth (del Toro, 2006)



Under the Skin (Glazer, 2013)

Mise-en-scène: Costume, make-up and hair

The costume designer works closely with the other creative departments, particularly the production designer, to ensure that they:

- are part of the wider aesthetic vision
- develop the character
- support or contrast other characters' costumes
- are suitable for the actor's performance (physical/restrained)
- are appropriate to the setting (both time and location).

The colour of costumes and how they are worn all form part of the character and the story arc. The lighting design and whether the film is being shot in colour or black and white will influence the choice of colours.

As with setting and props, clothes the characters wear provide shortcuts to the film's genre, historical and social setting. There are certain items of clothing that are genre signifiers, such as Stetson hats in a western.

The clothes worn are not mere accessories, they are key elements in the construction of character and identity. As much care is taken in the choice of clothes in a contemporary rom-com as those set in a historical or futuristic setting.

For the purposes of mise-en-scène, make-up (including special effect make-up) and hair styling also serve as part of the costume.

There are three main uses of make-up:

- day to day, aka straight make-up or street make-up – this would be used for naturalistic performances, or used to enhance an actor's features. Additionally, this make-up may be needed to hide any blemishes, scarring, tattoos, etc.
- character or transformation make-up would employ specialist make-up alongside facial prosthetics to change a person's appearance. The materials used may include latex or silicone and could be used to make someone look older/younger, fatter or ill
- special effects (FX) make-up also uses prosthetics made of latex, foam or silicone, but these may be entire body suits and complete head/facial masks as used to create the look of the mythical creature, Pale Man, in *Pan's Labyrinth* (del Toro, 2006). Special effects make-up may also involve some CGI.

An actor may be required to wear contact lenses or false teeth in any of these three make-up uses. Their own hair may be cut, coloured or styled, or they may be required to wear a toupee, extensions or wigs.

Case study: Costume, hair and make-up *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004)

The screenshot shown on the next page, from *Shaun of the Dead*, is an over-the-shoulder shot, with Shaun in the foreground. He and his junior colleagues are all wearing the same costume: black trousers, white shirt and red tie. But the styling for each reflects six different characters. Some shirts are ironed, others wrinkled. Some have the shirt neatly tucked into

their trousers, while others have them bagged out or half-tucked. Some have the shirt's top button done up, others are open at the neck. Ties are loose, long or short. All these decisions offer clues to their personality and commitment to working at Foree Electric.

The colour red is used throughout the film to suggest danger, violence and blood.

This scene is the beginning of the 'You've got red on you' gag, where a number of people point out that Shaun has a red ink mark on his crisp white shirt. Later this line is repeated by Ed when he is covered in blood. Red is also the colour of their work logo.



The Lady from Shanghai (Welles, 1947)

White usually stands for innocence and purity, but in many of the classic film noirs filmmakers subverted this use and costumed their manipulative femme fatales in white clothes, with platinum blonde hair. Rita Hayworth, who played Elsa, was renowned for her long red hair but with her transformation to a platinum blonde she joined Barbara Stanwyck (Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, Wilder, 1944) and Lana Turner (Cora Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Rafelson, 1946) as the wicked blonde, spinning her web around the unfortunate man. In the screenshot on the right, from *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1947), Elsa is wearing a white dress and this, coupled with the lighting, makes her stand-out from the dark background, making her appear vulnerable and overwhelmed by the setting.



Winter's Bone (Granik, 2010)

The earthy tones of the landscape in the screenshot on the right, from *Winter's Bone*, are mirrored in Ree's costumes, and those on the clothes line behind (which in this instance would be considered props). The predominant colours are brown (ruggedness), blue (cold/melancholic) and earthy reds (compassion). The one exception is Ree's winter hat, which is creamy white with a blue pattern, and is a stark contrast to the drab landscape. Her clothes are well-worn, indicating that she has no money to spend on new ones. They are practical and warm and, as she is wearing a hat, scarf, gloves, boots and thick jacket, they are appropriate for this harsh landscape and her lifestyle. They are gender neutral and she is not wearing overt make-up. The one nod to her femininity is her long, seemingly natural blonde-brown hair.



IA Independent Activity

Create a collage of images showing the different uses of make-up in one of your focus films. Note how make-up contributes to the construction of character and how a character's make-up alters as the narrative progresses.

- Q Select a scene from a film. What are the different functions for the clothes one of the characters wears?

Mise-en-scène: Staging, movement and use of off-screen space

IA Independent Activity

Choose two frames from a film you are studying that feature a two-shot. Consider the way in which the position of the actors in relation to one another adds a further layer of meaning. Write 100 words on each.

Staging

How characters and objects are positioned in the frame can:

- add further meaning to their relationship to one another
- indicate their importance to the narrative
- draw attention to a particular character/object.

Case study: Staging *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004)

Consider the two screenshots below from *Shaun of the Dead*. What can we learn about the characters and their relationship to one another from the staging?

Image 1: In the foreground Liz and Shaun are sitting opposite each other, across the fairly wide table. They are placed in the lower half of the screen. In the background is Ed. He is standing, so we see more of his body, and is literally standing between them, as though his mere presence is pushing them further apart.



Image 2: Here Shaun and Ed are sitting very close together on a sofa, with their arms overlapping. This proximity to one another mirrors their friendship, which seems far closer than that of Shaun and Liz.



Movement

Rather than camera movement, in this section it is the movement of the actors that is considered. There will naturally be some cross-over with the actors' performances and this will be discussed in the Performance section.

Off-screen

When studying film we tend to focus on what is happening on screen, but it is important to remember that there are six off-screen spaces:

- to the left
- to the right
- above
- below
- behind the set
- in front of the camera.

The use of the spaces can be subtle, such as walking into frame from the right, across the frame and out of the left; or looking upwards; or for one character to point to action happening off-screen.

A more overt use is when a character **breaks the fourth wall** by addressing the audience, or looking directly into the camera, making the audience complicit in the action.

Case study: Off-screen space *Vivre sa vie* (Godard, 1962)

The two images below are from *Vivre sa vie*:



Image 1: Shows a more traditional use of off-screen space, with the character on screen pointing a gun at an unseen character off-screen.



Image 2: Nana is in conversation, and this fleeting breaking of the fourth wall, as she looks to the audience, is haunting, and its meaning can be interpreted in different ways. Is she looking to 'us' (the audience) for help, or is it an acknowledgement of the voyeuristic relationship between the on-screen performer and the viewer?



STUDY TIP

Written assignments

- 1 Do not exceed the recommended length for each piece.
- 2 Check that you have actually answered the question asked.
- 3 Double-check how many films and/or elements you are being asked to write about. It's all about the 'and/or'!
- 4 Make sure you proofread them thoroughly, not just relying on the spell check.
- 5 Leave a day or two between completion and submission so you can re-read the assignment with a fresh pair of eyes.
- 6 Make sure you meet the deadline.