**Module 3: Mise-en Scene**

**Mise-en-Scene** is a French term for “all of the elements in the frame” of a film. One of the key things to understand about film is that for a good director, there is always a reason for every single element in the frame. It’s not an accident, and it’s not random. Your job as a viewer is to interpret the reasons why these things are present.

There are **4 Components: Sets, Costumes and Make-Up, Lighting, and Stage Direction.**

**Sets** involve the use of existing or constructed locations, and the use of furniture and props. A great scene to use as an example for this class is my favorite one from “Psycho”, the Alfred Hitchcock thriller/horror film that came out in 1960.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9mJ2oBONug>

The Parlor Scene from *Psycho*

The protagonist for the first 45 minutes or so of this film is Marion Crane (Janet Leigh). She has been employed by a real estate company for 10 years and is a very trusted employee. A customer comes in at 4PM on Friday afternoon, and plunks down $40,000 in cash to buy a house for his daughter as a wedding present. ($40,000 in 1960 is the equivalent of about $500,000 today). Marion is engaged to a divorced man who doesn’t want to marry her until he can afford it. Marion is supposed to put the money in a safety deposit box over the weekend, but instead decides to take the money and run. She drives to see her fiancé, who lives about 5 hours away. She trades cars, but then it starts raining very hard, so she pulls into the Bates Motel to sleep until the morning. Unknowingly, she has gotten off the main highway, so where she stops is basically a deserted motel. Proprietor Norman Bates lives in this Gothic Horror of a mansion on the hill overlooking the motel, but comes down and registers Marion, and even brings her a light dinner of sandwiches and milk. While going up to the house to get the food, we overhear Norman’s mother castigating him for associating with a “disgusting” woman and for giving her food.

Norman invites Marion into the parlor to eat, and it is the setting in this room that I want you to pay particular attention to. Notice the stuffed birds of prey that are mounted on the walls. Notice how one of the birds “hovers” over Norman when he and Marion start talking about Norman’s mother. Also notice the lighting. Norman is a psychopath (thus the title of the film), which means a person with a split personality. The lighting of the scene cuts Norman’s face in half, half in light, half in near darkness, a great representation of a split personality. Notice the demonic look in Norman’s eyes after Marion dares to suggest that Norman should maybe put his mother in a psychiatric institution.

Here are some still photos from this scene, where the set, the props, and the lighting in particular have a major impact on what you get from the scene:



In the above scene, Marion is lit to look almost angelic, despite having stolen the money earlier in the day; it is in this scene that she does decide to return to Phoenix and give back the money



In this shot, notice how Norman’s face is basically only half lit; this is one way that the lighting gives a clue to the idea that he has a split personality



Here, the stuffed birds of prey hover over Norman, and really they are also hovering over Marion, in anticipation of making Marion their next victim

**Costumes and Makeup**: the second element of “Mise-en-Scene”. Obviously these can play a big part in impacting how “real” you think a film is, particularly for any film with a historical setting or featuring any kind of a monster. The original actors in Greek dramas used masks, so they didn’t need makeup, but greasepaint started to be used in the theaters in the late 1800’s, with the advent of the use of gas lamps and later electricity, and the art of makeup has been evolving ever since.

One of my favorite recent uses of makeup was of that used on the late Heath Ledger to create the most recent “Joker” in “The Dark Knight”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8PxG5zvgOM>



Compare this to the version of The Joker played by Jack Nicholson in an earlier Batman film. How do you think just the makeup affects your perception of Nicholson’s version of this character, and generally your perception of these two different film versions of Batman? Which one looks more sinister?



Here are some other great examples of makeup: Tom Hulce as Mozart in *Amadeus;* Robin Williams as *Mrs. Doubtfire,* and The Faun and The Pale Man from *Pan’s Labyrinth*



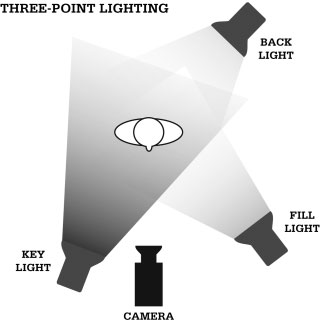
Costume Design also plays a major role in how believable we think a film is, again, particularly with historical films.

Here are two photos of Kate Winslet’s costumes for *Titanic,* set in 1912, followed by two photos from *Gladiator,* which was set in AD 180 during the Roman Empire. Russell Crowe plays General Maximus, and Joaquin Phoenix plays the evil Emperor Commodus.



**Lighting** is the third element of “Mise-en-Scene”; situation comedies and musicals mostly use **bright lighting** to convey the generally happy or comical moods of those films, but mysteries and thrillers rely on **dramatic lighting, with lots of shadows**. Lighting is a key component of Cinematography as well as Mise-en-Scene; it’s highly technical skill, but it’s also part of mise-en-scene because it has such an impact on the “look” of what is contained within the frame.

The most basic lighting set up we teach beginning filmmakers is called **Three Point Lighting** and involves **a Key Light, a Fill Light, and a Back Light**. You never want to place a light aimed directly head-on at someone because it creates very harsh shadows and makes them look terrible. You place a Key Light from either the left or right side and light half of their face; the fill light comes from the other side. The back light is aimed towards the background, to give some depth and definition to the setting.



Some of the most dramatic lighting in the history of film was done during the Film Noir era, when almost all films were still being made in black and white. *Casablanca* contains some memorable examples.

**

In the first photo, notice the dramatic shadow of Rick on the wall, as Louis first tells him that he must not supply Laszlo with the exit visas. The second shot is when Ilsa tries to explain what happened in Paris to a very drunk Rick. The third is when they reconcile and she is finally able to tell him the truth of what occurred back then.

**Staging** is the fourth aspect of “Mise-en-Scene”. What this means is how the Director tells the actors and actresses to move within the frame, which quite often has a direct impact on how the viewer interprets the film. In the Parlor Scene in *Psycho* that we have discussed, notice how “Norman” initially slouches in his chair, indicating that he is both awkward and a laid back kind of guy. When Marion suggests that Norman put his mother in an institution, “Mother” takes over Norman and answers. The camera angle shifts to a low angle, with the birds of prey hovering over Norman. He sits up and leans over, his body gets very tense and rigid, and he starts speaking both rapidly and tersely. And then he just as seamlessly switches back to “Norman”, relaxes, and tells Marion that “Mother” couldn’t ever even harm a fly.

The film we want you to watch this week is *Psycho.* You might also want to watch the 2012 film *Hitchcock,* which takes place in 1959 during the filming of *Psycho* and gives some terrific insights into everything about this film, including the ongoing battle Hitchcock had with the Hollywood censors over everything from the description of Norman as a transvestite to actually showing a toilet in one scene.

Hitchcock was a very famous director at this time, but still could not get any of the studios to finance his first “horror” film, so he and his wife Alma put up $800,000 of their own money to finance the production; it made them 30 million dollars, so it turned out to be a good gamble. This was also one of the main reasons the film was shot in black and white, as black and white film stock was considerably cheaper to shoot and process vs color stock.

The “Shower Scene” from this film is famous for many reasons; every single shot was story boarded prior to being shot, and the stabbing violin chords from composer Bernard Herrmann are also instantly recognizable to any student of film history. The “choreography” of this scene also had to be carefully staged to not show any nudity, since this also was forbidden in Hollywood films before the censorship laws changed in the mid 1960’s. A fun fact is that chocolate syrup was used instead of actual blood going down the drain, because it actually looked more like blood on black and white film than actual blood did.

But an equally important scene is the one just prior to the Shower Scene, which is the Parlor Scene we have discussed in this module, with its creepy, stuffed birds of prey mounted on all of the walls of this claustrophobic room. The set, the fantastic lighting, the wonderful acting, and rich dialogue all combine to create one of the greatest scenes in film history.

Another major reason for the film’s success was that it really did shock the audiences in 1959 by killing off the “name” star (Janet Leigh) 45 minutes into the film. The audience totally did not expect this. We talked in Module 2 about how your expectations help shape your viewing experience; nobody expected the main star to die, and for the storyline to thus then totally change. It was a unique film experience on many different levels.

Hitchcock was also savvy enough to realize how to turn this fact into a major marketing tool for the film. Theaters had to agree to not let any new patrons enter the theater after the film had started, and promotional signs urged those departing the theater to not ruin the surprise for those who were standing in line.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |