**Part 4: Mise-en-scene (meez on sen)**

**Mise-en-scène**, French for "staging or putting on an action or scene," refers to how filmmakers determine what the audience sees and hears within the frame of the movie image.

Mise-en-scène includes placement of people, objects, and elements of décor (and their movements).

*Mise en scène* creates mood and atmosphere. Literally: **Staging a scene** or everything an audience experiences while viewing a movie

Why is mise-en-scène important? Because it explains how all the formal elements of cinema contribute to one’s interpretation of a movie’s meanings. Each genre film must meet the expectation of the viewer with regard to mise-en-scène.

Because film is a temporal and spatial form, the visuals are constantly in flux. Although a frame from a film can be analyzed for aspects of mise-en-scene, the aspects need to be considered in the narrative context in which they appear.

**A systematic mise en scène analysis of any shot includes the following elements:**

1. ***Dominant* - Where is our eye directed first and why?**
2. ***Subsidiary contrasts -* What are the main eye stops after taking in the dominant?**

Normally, the director uses a dominant contrast (also known as **dominant**) to attract our eye to a specific part of the frame. Sometimes this is done by juxtaposing lights and darks. There are usually 8-9 visual compositional elements or weights emphasizing the midground, foreground and background. The director will often emphasize the space between characters. Dominance is defined contextually in film.

**3)     *Lighting key* High key or low key? High contrast? (see class notes for cinematography)**

**4)     *Shot and camera proxemics* What type of shot? How far away from the action is the camera?**

**5)     *Angle* High angle or low angle or is camera neutral (eye level)? (see class notes for cinematography)**

**6)    *Color Values* What is the dominant color? Does color have a symbolic value? Look for colors associated with characters or themes. (see class notes for cinematography)**

**7)    *Lens/filter/stock* How do these distort or comment on the photographed materials? (see class notes for cinematography)**

**8)     *Density* - How much visual information is packed into the image?**

**9)     *Composition -* How is the two dimensional space segmented and organized? What is the underlying design?**

1. **Framing**: What we see on the screen
2. **Kinesis**: What moves on the screen

The first function of the motion picture frame is to control the audience’s perception of the world. Framing implies a POV (point of view) as well as determining what the viewer sees. The boundaries of the camera’s point of view are indicated by the **viewfinder**.

The frame lets the filmmaker control **offscreen** space (what is outside it) and **onscreen** space (what is in the frame).

**10)   *Form* Open or closed? Does the image suggest a window that arbitrarily isolates a fragment of the scene? Or does it suggest an arch in which the visual elements are carefully arranged and held in balance?**

Open form composition: frame tends to be de-emphasized. Space is continuous in these shots. (Actors may be only partially in frame, suggesting that action is continued off screen)

Closed form composition: camera anticipates the dramatic action. Actors and objects are visually blocked out within the confines of a predetermined camera setup. (Eg: Camera looks upon empty room: door opens and character enters and action begins.) Sometimes implies entrapment or security.

**11)   *Framing* Tight or loose? How easily can characters move around?**

Tight frame: The closer the shot, the more confined the photographed figures appear to be.

Loosely framed: The shots tend to suggest freedom, background visible

**12)   *Depth* On how many planes is the image composed? (Foreground, midground, background)**

1. Plane Front to Back: foreground, middle, background
2. The Frame Left to Right

Classical composition conventions (the use of equilibrium) are often ignored in movies to achieve the dramatic context.

**13)   *Character placement -*  What part of the framed space do the characters occupy and why?**

Art historian Heinrich Wolfflin theorized that audiences scan pictures left to right, as if reading. Consequently, a character moving left to right can appear to empowered; whereas, a character moving right to left can appear to be laboring against the grain. Beside movement, the spatial position can also imply power

• left third: the origin of impact

• center third: intrinsic interest, balance

• right third: heavy, receiver of impact, nearly disappeared

Frame Levels Top to Bottom: Because of the political themes in JAWS, the movie uses a vertical structure to reinforce the hierarchal metaphor.

top: power, authority, aspiration

mid: importance or balance

low: subservience, vulnerability, powerlessness

**14)   *Staging positions -* Which way do the characters look vis a vis the camera**

**5 basic positions to photograph the actor:**

a) full front-facing the camera. This is most intimate position, actor looks at us directly

b) quarter turn – the favoured position; intimate, but with less emotional involvement that full frontal position..

c) profile—More remote. The character is unaware of being observed

d) three-quarter turn: More anonymous. Character unfriendly or antisocial as his back is partially turned on us, or POV

e) back to camera: Conveys character’s alienation from the world

**Staging action to expand diegetic space**

A) side of the screen (*Manhattan* or Arlene Joseph prevents frybread riot in *Smoke Signals*)

B) behind camera (shooting of Miles Archer *Maltese Falcon*)

C) behind set (Sebastian and Nazis behind the door *Notorious*)

D) partially obscured within frame (door frame *Rosemary's Baby*)

While the actor is the most important figure in the frame, determining physical relationships between the actor(s) and the camera is referred to as **blocking**.

**15)   *Character proxemics* How much space is there between the characters? Why?**

a)  intimate: extreme close shot

b)  personal medium shot

c) social: medium to full shot

d) public: long and extreme long shot

**16) Stage or on location? Stage dressing**

**17) Costumes**

**18) Props**

Go to the IB Film Documents page and watch the PowerPoint on Mise-en-scene.

Quiz: Use the above to analyze this still from Out of the Past.

