

## The Scene and Mise en Scène

### The Scene

If narrative structure is about the patterns used to tell stories in movies, the scene is one small piece of that pattern. In a film, scenes advance one complete idea or central piece of information, much like a paragraph does in an essay.

You can think of many film scenes as being structured like a funnel or an hourglass. Conventionally, a scene opens with an establishing shot that lets the audience know exactly where the action takes place, followed by a series of long shots, medium shots, and close-ups. As the scene wraps up, it may also include a re-establishing shot that tells the viewer that the scene is coming to a close. The establishing shots and re-establishing shots are often extreme long shots that act as signs introducing a new setting to the viewer or bringing the viewer back from involvement in the just-completed scene. This psychologically prepares the viewer to enter a new environment in the next scene, much the same way as a set change does in live theatre.

However, it should be noted that while there are patterns that films tend to follow, there are no hard and fast rules as to how a scene must be constructed or how long a scene should be. A scene can be made up of one shot or many shots. It can last for ten seconds or, as in the opening of Orson Welles' *A Touch of Evil* (1958), a scene can be built around one shot running for much longer.

### Mise en Scène

Where scenes are often used to build momentum, mise en scène refers to how space is used in individual shots to create dramatic or emotional effect, or symbolic meanings throughout a movie.

Mise en scène was originally a French theatre term meaning "placing on a stage". In movies, it refers to how objects, characters and materials are placed inside the film frame. What we're talking about, in other words, is the choreography or design of visual elements in individual shots, including people, objects and their location. Some filmmakers very intricately choreograph the actors' and camera's movements so that within a single shot, as the camera moves, the framing and angles change, the actors move in and out of frame in a duet, and the film itself does not cut or stop.

In creating symbolic meaning, lighting, the set, props and visual patterns are all components of mise en scène. In the Coen Brothers' *Fargo* (1996), for example, as the film progresses, the character of Jerry is increasingly shot so that he appears to be enclosed behind vertical lines and shadows that can be interpreted as prison bars representing his impending fate.

An emphasis on mise en scène to create meaning (or even to keep meaning ambiguous), is often contrasted with an editing technique called montage. Rather than relying on the composition within the shot, montage relies more on how different shots are put together to create meaning.

The director is ultimately the one who decides on the design of the mise en scène but he or she depends on the cinematographer, the costume designer, the set designer, and the art director for assistance in creating the "look" of the film.