



THINKING FILM

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FILM LANGUAGE

MISE EN SCÈNE

Filmmakers will tend to follow cultural codes - ideas that we all share, be it about the way we live now or how they think we will identify different periods in history. They will use these assumptions when it comes to creating the filmic world in which the film's story takes place.

We, the audience, understand that the filmic world is a reality created by filmmakers. The French term 'mise en scène' describes this created reality of a film very well – it translates as 'what is placed in the frame'. Everything that we see on screen has been deliberately put there to make the meaning - the furniture we see in a room or the costume that a character is wearing, or something more subtle such as the make-up that an actor wears.

Because the phrase 'mise en scène' describes 'putting' something in the picture, it reinforces the idea that films are constructed – nothing appears by chance in the filmic frame. Everything we see is placed carefully so that the audience enters and understands that filmic world – the characters that we see acting out that story and the time and place where the story is set.

We understand how the device of mise en scène creates this world and makes meaning through these areas of the creative filmmaking process:

- Settings and props
- Costume, hair and make-up
- Facial expression and body language
- Lighting and colour
- Position of characters and objects within a frame.

Settings are where the actions of a film take place. They can help us understand **when** and **where** the film is set. A film set in the past will have to convey when it is set through the selection of locations that give the viewer the impression of a particular period in history. The setting also needs to be linked to the correct costumes and props. All of these combined will help create a filmic world to represent a time in the past that the viewer understands.

Seeing the same character in different settings can also change our understanding of both the plot and also the character.



THINKING FILM
thinking FILM
FILM LANGUAGE

ACTIVITY

In your group, imagine seeing a character first in a very modern, richly furnished room and then the film cuts to the same character in a rather dingy and run down part of town. Discuss what connections and predictions might you make about this character and what might happen to them. List as many different ideas as you can about the possible story lines that this change of scene could suggest.

Setting can also suggest the **genre**, or type, of film - romance, comedy, thriller, for example. The film title might not indicate what type or genre the film is, but once we start to see the settings we would generally recognise these as being typical of the **genre**.

It is not only the place itself that is important. The filmmaker can suggest other ideas or meanings to the audience through things like the weather - a country lane in bright sunlight feels very different to the same lane covered in snow or in heavy rain at night. Change the colour of the walls or the furniture in a room and it can feel very different. Elements like this can affect the way in which we 'read' a particular scene and location where the action is set.

ACTIVITY

Imagine a room . How would you decorate it and what would you put in it to suggest the following inhabitants:

1. A poor and destitute couple in the 17th Century
2. A middle-class couple in the 1940s
3. A spy in the year 2012
4. A businessman in 2012
5. A business woman 2012
6. A group of students

Props are the artifacts used in the film that can be used in a number of ways. They can be used to convey a general sense of the period that the film was set in. Props can also confirm the film's genre for the audience. We, as an audience, may expect to see certain props. This is also known as **iconography**. For example, you may expect to see the following, significant objects, or iconography, in a Western; guns, spurs, chaps, boots, saddles, horses, Native American costume, feather headdresses, Stetsons etc. You don't need to see all of these items, but would expect to see at least some of them to confirm your belief that you really were watching a Western.



THINKING FILM

thinking FILM

FILM LANGUAGE

Shared cultural codes from advertising, books, TV, the internet, for example, mean that even if you've never seen a Western before, you can recognise at least some of this iconography.

Costume, hair and make-up can be key ingredients in signalling to the audience what **time period** the film is set in, the **status** of the characters, as well as other **character information**.

What a character wears in a film can rapidly communicate all sorts of information about them to the audience – their position in society, the particular social group they belong to, whether they may be threatening or sympathetic. We can pick up clues from jewellery, hairstyle, shoes, the colour of a particular shirt or dress.

These shared cultural codes create powerful meaning in relation to clothing that we take from our everyday experience, paintings, TV and the internet amongst other things. They give us reference points for understanding a particular character's 'type' and potential significance within the narrative of a film.

Make-up can be used in different ways to create meaning. It may be used to make the characters look 'natural' under the studio lighting. Or it may be used as part of the iconography of the genre; for example, horror films might use make up to create artificial bruising and blood, to make the audience believe a character had just been chased through the woods. Filmmakers can also manipulate details of hair and make-up to make the created filmic world more believable or to meet audience expectations of either genre or narrative.

Facial expression and body language

So much our communication is done without words. This non-verbal communication can be through tiny gestures, posture, rolling the eyes, frowning, etc. and can give an audience very important information.

This aspect of mise en scène is based on the relationship between the actor and the director. The director decides what type of emotion they wish the actor to portray and asks the actor to walk or behave in a particular way. The actor's skill helps to convey both the story line and build up the narrative understanding of the character they are playing so that the audience identifies and understands that character 'type'.

A director can help the audience to understand what is happening to a character emotionally by framing them in the shot in a particular way. A close-up on an actor during a key moment or speech makes their face five metres tall on a cinema screen, so that the audience appreciates the



THINKING FILM

thinking FILM

FILM LANGUAGE

full impact of the facial expression and how it communicates a huge amount about a character's emotions, response to the situation, or relationships between characters.

The eyes, eyebrows and mouth are the most expressive parts of the face and they all work together to make meaning for the audience beyond what is actually said.

The eyes are particularly important, as they signal to the audience where a character is directing their attention. Actors carefully control where they fix their gaze, so that they can communicate information and meaning to the audience.

But acting involves the entire body. Shared cultural understanding means that an audience can accurately read a situation from an actor's 'body language' or position and movement.

Watch how different characters in the same scene might contrast with each other physically to show the differences between them, or how a character's body language changes as a film progresses.

Lighting and Colour

Colours can be used to signify certain feelings or emotions. Red is often associated with love and passion but could also suggest danger. Blue is sometimes thought to be a cold colour or suggest conformity or sadness.

ACTIVITY

Think about a range of colours – yellow, green, brown, purple for example. What mood or emotions or other associations do you make with each colour?

Compare your ideas with other members of your class...Does everyone in your class agree with your ideas?

If there are differences why do you think this may be?

Lighting can be used to create a sense of place, give ideas about the weather, the state of mind of the character and also for aesthetic or artistic reasons. For example, in a thriller you might expect to see certain scenes shot in shadow – to create the sense of the unknown (the unseen). But shadows can signify different genres. Imagine shadows being used in a romantic film. Would they carry the same threat as in a thriller or a horror story?



THINKING FILM

thinking FILM

FILM LANGUAGE

Very bright white lighting can make an environment look very cold and clinical, creating a mood in the filmic world that we the viewer 'read' and apply to our understanding of the story.

Lighting can also be used to draw our attention to a particular character's actions, a significant object, or a particular part of a location or frame.

Whilst lighting is one of the devices that filmmakers use to create meaning in the filmic world, lighting set ups usually serve to enhance the action taking place rather than be significant in itself.

Positions of characters and objects within a frame help us, as spectators, understand when something significant is happening. For example, a minor character might have something important to say, so they will be framed in such a way for us to understand that this is important. This may be the only time that character is ever framed in this way. Or the camera may show a particular object in close up to focus our attention on it.

Look at how characters are placed within the frame. A character placed at the front of the frame with other characters in the background will take on particular importance in our understanding of what is happening.

When we analyse a sequence in terms of mise en scène, we need to look at how all the different elements and techniques work together to:

- Tell a story
- Evoke an atmosphere
- Give the audience information
- Provoke an audience response
- Highlight key themes