

Four Elements of Film

Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène is everything that the audience can see in the frame. This includes the set — whether on location or in a studio, and some studio sets are so large that they can fool you into thinking you are seeing an on-location shot — props, lighting, the actors, costumes, make-up, blocking (where actors and extras stand), and movement, whether choreographed or not. All kinds of movement, from crossing a room to a sword-fight, can be choreographed, not just dance. Mise-en-scène demonstrates how film is the ultimate collaborative art, requiring contributions from professionals with a wide variety of skills.

Cinematography

Cinematography is the way in which a shot is framed, lit, shadowed, and colored. The way a camera moves, stands still, or *pans* (stands still while changing where it points), the angle from which it views the action, whether it elevates (usually a *crane shot*, when the camera is mounted on a crane, but sometimes a director will employ a *helicopter shot* instead), whether it follows a particular actor or object (a *tracking shot*, also called a *dolly shot*, because the camera is placed on a dolly, meaning a small, wheeled platform), *zooms in*, *zooms out* — these all affect the way the audience views the action, whether literally or metaphorically. Think of cinematography as being to a film what a narrator is to prose fiction.

Sound

Sound is probably the element of film that people most often underestimate. It includes dialogue, ambient sound, sound effects, and music. Consider how a “Boing!” sound in the soundtrack would change how we view a love scene or a scene in which an old lady falls down. Or think about how the wrong music would ruin the seriousness of a battle scene.

Editing

As has been long observed, a film is composed three times: once on the page, once in the camera, and once in the editing room. In almost all cases, filming produces far more material than could ever be shown in a feature-length movie (or even a so-called *Director's Cut*), and a film's scenes are almost never shot in order. Sometimes, a single scene is shot with multiple cameras from different angles. Editing encompasses both the selection of which scenes end up in the final film and how those scenes are pieced together. A switch from one piece of film to another, whether within a scene or between scenes, is called a *cut*. In some films, a single scene of a minute or two might involve dozens of cuts; in others, a single tracking shot continues for minutes on end. Some directors, like Martin Scorsese and Paul Thomas Anderson, love to show off with these long tracking shots. Conventionally, people think of action scenes as involving more cuts and quieter scenes as involving fewer, but this is not always the case.

These elements work in combination. For example, imagine a scene in a horror film begins with an exterior *establishing shot*: a *crane shot* looking down on the scene of what is about to happen — a medieval castle, let's say — from an elevated position. During this establishing shot, we hear eerie music that creates a mood, or the sound of a wolf howling in the distance.

Then the film cuts to an interior establishing shot, in which the *mise-en-scène* involves dim lighting and a richly furnished room with an apparently stone floor. It's not; this is a studio set. The floor is wood and painted foam, and the castle that we saw in the first shot is in fact just CGI (or possibly a model, especially if the film is more than a few years old). The one person in the room is an old man. He's not actually old, because (as we soon find out) much of the film will be told in flashback, so the actor is actually 35, but the make-up artists have made him look twice that. He is wearing a monk's robe (sewn by the wardrobe department, based on historically accurate information supplied by a consultant) and sitting on a bed with his head in his hands.

When the wolf's howl repeats on the soundtrack, he looks up toward the camera with a frightened expression, at which point the camera cuts (or perhaps zooms) to a close-up on his wildly staring, rheumy, and bloodshot eyes (also accomplished through make-up).

At that point, the camera pans across the room to the window, giving us an *eyeline match* shot (meaning that the camera focuses where he is looking). Through the window we can see a full moon, which was added in *post-production*, because waiting for a full moon to film a scene would be a waste of money, and again the filming is happening inside a big building.

The camera then cuts to a *bird's-eye view* shot, in which we are looking directly down on the man as he gets up and walks over to the window; a bird's-eye view shot tends to dehumanize its object, as if we are looking down (literally and metaphorically) on ants.

Next we get an *over-the-shoulder* shot, which is just what it sounds like: the camera is positioned slightly behind and to one side of the man, so we can see most of what he sees, as well as his position relative to it.

Another cut gives us a *point-of-view* shot: we now can't see the monk, but if we have any experience of film at all, we will instantly recognize this as giving us his perspective. A point-of-view shot is like an eyeline-match shot except that it's from the same position. In this case, all we can see are dimly illuminated woods, but then the scene cuts again to an exterior shot — this one from a lower position looking up at the window, where we see the silhouette of the man apparently looking out toward us — so we recognize this as a *reverse shot*: we are looking back toward him from exactly the place he is looking at.

However, he then goes out of focus, and now we clearly see a few branches around the edges of the frame that we could not see before. This is a technique called *rack focus*, in which the focus during a shot changes. We particularly notice the change in this case because of the *shallow focus*, in which only one plane of depth (meaning a specific distance from our vantage point) in the image is clear and the rest are blurry.

The sound of heavy, animalistic breathing comes through on the soundtrack, and the musical score gives us a sudden, discordant burst of cello strings. We get the idea: someone or something is hiding at the edge of the woods, it has some intention toward the man, and he is terrified of it.

This entire sequence likely has taken less than a minute.