

4 INVESTIGATIONS IN THE CRITICAL HISTORY OF MISE-EN-SCÈNE

This chapter examines a number of examples of the role of mise-en-scène within the history of writing about film. This is a subject of considerable interest of itself — mise-en-scène has played a crucial part in the development of serious film criticism — but it is particularly important to us because a sense of history will enable us to further develop our understanding of what is at stake in the concept of mise-en-scène. The chapter, therefore, does not attempt to give an exhaustive chronology but rather it makes its priority the selection of examples which illustrate the range of ideas in play.

Cahiers and Movie

Although one can quite properly refer to the mise-en-scène of any film, in film criticism mise-en-scène has a particular association with Hollywood cinema. Also, mise-en-scène is intimately connected to arguments about why the director, rather than the scriptwriter, should be considered the artist responsible for a film. These associations — which are themselves related — can be investigated by looking at ideas that had their most famous expression in the 1950s in France, and in the early 1960s in Britain. In France the advocates of the significance of mise-en-scène were the critics of the famous journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, a number of whom (including François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric

Rohmer and Claude Chabrol) subsequently became the film-makers of the *Nouvelle Vague*. In Britain, the journal *Movie* was where these ideas were most systematically explored, although this account will also look at passages from some of the other small British film journals of the early 1960s including *Oxford Opinion*, a student magazine for which three of the four founder-editors of *Movie* wrote whilst undergraduates.

This was not the first flowering of these debates, but it has become the most famous. The journal *Sequence* had in the late 1940s, expounded a number of critical ideas that were very similar to those developed by *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Movie*. However, *Sequence* is not quite so interesting to this enquiry because the journal did not refer to ‘mise-en-scène’, tending instead to write about ‘film poetry’. There is a section in the Appendix which points the reader in the direction of further reading on this area of criticism.

Mise-en-scène and film authorship

The concept of mise-en-scène is intimately concerned with arguments contending that the director, rather than the scriptwriter, should be considered the artist responsible for a film. This association relies on the fact that mise-en-scène encompasses the areas of decision making for which the director is responsible.

The relationship between mise-en-scène and direction is very clearly illustrated in a definition of the term offered by Robin Wood in an article from the beginning of his critical career. The article appeared amongst the pages of *Definition*, one of a number of small film journals of the early 1960s which, following the intervention of *Oxford Opinion*, were engaged in a furious battle about the significance of film style and the weight which it should properly be accorded in film criticism.¹ It is neither the first or the last word on the subject, but it is amongst the clearest and most articulate evocations of mise-en-scène. Wood writes:

A director is about to make a film. He has before him a script, camera, lights, décor, actors. What he does with them is mise-en-

scène, and it is precisely here that the artistic significance of the film, if any, lies. The director's business is to get the actors (with their co-operation and advice) to move, speak, gesture, register expressions in a certain manner, with certain inflections, at a certain tempo: whether he uses the actors to fulfil precisely a preconceived vision (one thinks of Hitchcock) or releases their ability to express *themselves* and creates through them (one thinks of Renoir) is a matter for the individual genius. It is his business to place the actors significantly within the décor, so that the décor itself becomes an actor; with the advice and co-operation of the cameraman, to compose and frame the shots; regulate the tempo and rhythm of movement within the frame and of the movement of the camera; to determine the lighting of the scene. In all this the director's decision is final. All this is *mise-en-scène*.

And much more, for we have so far considered only one shot. The movement of the film from shot to shot, the relation of one shot to all the other shots already taken or not, which will make up the finished film, cutting, montage, all this is *mise-en-scène*. And still more. For *mise-en-scène* is not all these things considered as separate and detachable items: it is also what fuses all these into one organic unity, and consequently more, much more, than the sum of its parts. The tone and atmosphere of the film, visual metaphor, the establishment of relationships between characters, the relation of all parts to the whole: all this is *mise-en-scène*. It is this final consideration of the quality that fuses all the parts into a unity that led Astruc to define *mise-en-scène* as "a certain way of extending the élans of the soul in the movements of the body: a song, a rhythm, a dance". It is this that makes the film, as an art, so much closer to music than to literature. One can sum up by defining *mise-en-scène*, with Doniol-Valcroze, quite simply as "the organisation of time and space". (1960/61: 10)

A series of important points immediately arise, which touch on a number of areas which are central to this chapter:

SHORT CUTS

1. Here, *mise-en-scène* is almost synonymous with direction.
2. It is, in Wood's view, the quality of the *mise-en-scène* that determines the artistic merits of the film.
3. The script, on the other hand, is only one creative element among many at the director's disposal.
4. The relationship *between* different elements is very important. The director's role is not only to co-ordinate the contributions of the different artists collaborating on a film, but to fuse the different elements into 'one organic unity'. The definition also demonstrates an interest in what was described in the last chapter as coherence across a work.²
5. Atypically for a definition of *mise-en-scène*, editing and elements of the soundtrack are included.
6. The passage illustrates the sharing of ideas from both sides of the channel. Doniol-Valcroze was one of the founder editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and the director of *L'Eau à la Bouche* (1960). Astruc was an important figure in French film criticism. His article 'La Camera Stylo', makes an early comparison of the director with author: 'The film-maker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen. ... How can one possibly distinguish between the man who conceives the work and the man who writes it? Could one imagine a Faulkner novel written by someone other than Faulkner? And would *Citizen Kane* be satisfactory in any other form than that given to it by Orson Welles?' (1948: 22)

Wood's definition is characteristic of writing concerned with *mise-en-scène* in its refusal to regard the script as central to the film-making process. It is clear that for Wood, the script is only one of a number of elements at the director's disposal, only one ingredient that will contribute to the finished film. In articles in *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie*, V.F. Perkins quotes a remark by the director Nicholas Ray that makes this point rather well: "It was all in the script" a disillusioned writer will tell you. But it was never all in the script. If it were, why make the movie?' (1956: 71).

Perkins develops Ray's remark, in the *Movie* article, arguing that:

The disillusioned writer and the insensitive critic are alike in discounting the very thing for which one goes to the cinema: the extraordinary resonances which a director can provoke by his use of actors, decor, movement, colour, shape, of all that can be seen and heard. (1963b: 5)

This sense of the transformative affect of film style is extremely important. It is by means of the *mise-en-scène* that the director turns a script into a film.

Comparatively, Wood and Perkins are measured in their remarks: many of the writers of *Cahiers du Cinéma* have gone further than this in their celebration of direction over scriptwriting. Fereydoun Hoveyda's review of *Party Girl* (Nicholas Ray, 1958) makes a similar case more polemically:

Party Girl has an idiotic story. So what? If the substratum of cinematic work was made up simply of plot convolutions unraveling on the screen, then we could just annex the Seventh Art to literature, be content with illustrating novels and short stories (which is precisely what happens with a great many films we do not admire), and hand over *Cahiers* to literary critics. ... *Party Girl* comes just at the right moment to remind us that what constitutes the essence of cinema is nothing other than *mise en scène*. It is *mise en scène* which gives expression to everything on the screen, transforming, as if by magic, a screenplay written by someone else into something which is truly an author's film. (1960a: 123)

An example of the transformative effect of mise-en-scène

If we take a momentary break from the historical discussion, we can reflect on the transformative power of *mise-en-scène* in some of the examples already encountered. In the example from *Notorious*, the meanings of the

scene were not contained in the script, but in the treatment. In terms of plot and dialogue, the scene might be summarised as ‘Devlin (Cary Grant) insinuates himself into one of Alicia’s (Ingrid Bergman’s) parties in order to get to know her’. Rather, it is the way in which the scene has been filmed that is significant: the lighting, the organisation of space, the blocking of the performers, the action of characters. It is the *realisation* that is important.

John Sayles wrote as well as directed and edited *Lone Star* and so one might imagine that the creative process was essentially one that happened at the writing stage. However, it is revealing that in the published screenplay many of the details which were important to the interpretation set out in Chapter 2 do not appear. The dialogue remains much the same, but in the screenplay Chuchó draws the line with his heel rather than with the bottle of *CocaCola* (from which he is nevertheless drinking). Moreover, Sam ‘obliges’ when he is asked to step over the line, and later, smiling, ‘plays with the line with his toe’ (Sayles 1998: 194). Not only the tone but also the meanings of the scene have been established in production. As Sayles writes in the introduction to the screenplays (it is published together with the script of Sayles’ subsequent film *Men With Guns*):

Reading these [screenplays] without having reference to the movies made from them may be a little stark. The music is not here, the acting, the visceral power of the locations, no camera movement or lighting — all the things that make a movie a movie. So try to take them as the blueprints they are, outlines that helped people come together and make a story. (1998: x)

Mise-en-scène and the medium

As Hoveyda’s remarks on *Party Girl* suggest, *mise-en-scène* is bound up with arguments about a criticism which is sensitive to the way film works as a medium, rather than regarding film merely an adjunct to the novel. *Mise-en-scène* is unique to the cinema, and it is the way in which cinema is uniquely expressive. Jim Hillier, who has edited two collections of

criticism from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, has called this aspect the ‘cinematographic specificity’ of mise-en-scène (1985: 10). In doing so he is making reference to another article by Hoveyda, called ‘Les Taches du Soleil’, in which the critic, reflecting on *Cahiers’* criticism, writes, ‘when we say [in the journal] that the specificity of the cinematographic work lies in its technique and not in its content, in its mise-en-scène and not in the screenplay and the dialogue, we raise a storm of protest’ (1960b: 138).

Perkins, Hoveyda, and Wood share the opinion that critics will not be able to understand films unless they are sensitive to mise-en-scène. More challengingly perhaps, all argue that the quality of a film is based in the mise-en-scène. As Wood writes, ‘it is precisely here that the artistic significance of the film, if any, lies’ (1960/61: 10). Importantly, the critics of *Cahiers* and *Movie* are basing their critical judgements on the grounds of mise-en-scène. V.F. Perkins again, this time from the article on Nicholas Ray in *Oxford Opinion*:

[Ray is], in English-speaking countries, the most under-rated of all contemporary directors. The reasons for this are obvious enough: the majority of his films have been assignments — of the seventeen Ray films so far seen in England only three have been overtly serious in intention. Moreover they are melodramas whose importance derives not from what their characters do and say, but from the way in which they do and say it, the way in which they move, talk and look at one another. Thus the quality of the films is not literary, since it owes little to the original script, but cinematic; it results from the subjection of a frequently banal narrative to an idiosyncratic *mise-en-scène*. (1960a: 31)

In this passage, Perkins is not only grounding his claims for the films’ quality in the mise-en-scène, but also his estimation of the director. It does not matter that Ray has not originated the stories because the quality of the films is not literary, it does not matter if Ray did not write all of his scripts, because it is not the scripts that the sensitive critic is admiring. Mise-en-scène can form the basis of an argument about

authorship because if one recognises the expressive value of the mise-en-scène then the director must logically be the artist responsible.

Some of the other consequences of basing critical judgements on film style also become clear from Perkins' argument, particularly the challenge to traditional reasons for not taking popular films seriously. The implications of style-based criticism are most markedly shown in relation to Hollywood films, both because it is a cinema where directors may be assigned to projects rather than originate them, and because it is a cinema which works with stories which are not evidently 'art'. Mise-en-scène, in short, enabled the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Movie* to discuss areas of cinema which had previously been dismissed out of hand.

Considered in terms of their plots and dialogue, films such as *Psycho*, *Rio Bravo*, *River of No Return* and *Party Girl* may not impress. Whilst *The Seventh Seal* appears to be 'concerned with such fundamentals as the nature of faith and the mystery of death', these American films are tales about cowboys or gangsters.³ However, if the critic is attuned to the mise-en-scène, very different conclusions will be reached. To quote Robin Wood:

If we regard *Rio Bravo* as words on paper, as a plot and dialogue merely, we shall see little beyond a well-constructed cowboy yarn. Analyse the *film* and you discover a profound sense of complex moral values, you find yourself analysing a powerful, supremely balanced, objective empirical intelligence. (1960/61: 11)

This point about the popular cinema is very important. Even the idea of authorship was only really contentious in relation to directors working in the 'commercial' cinema. A conception of film as the director's art had considerable currency in earlier criticism, but only in relation to certain kinds of cinema. Before the advent of *Cahiers* or *Movie*, critics were perfectly prepared to regard Eisenstein or Bergman as artists, but it was a very different situation when it came to Hollywood directors. Mise-en-scène criticism challenged deeply entrenched cultural values.

If the attention to stylistic detail and the emphasis on the director were controversial, then that was nothing to the films that were admired by critics following these approaches. Attacking the traditional ‘insistence on the cinema as solely an intellectual medium rather than as a visual and sensual one’ (Shivas 1960a: 39), the *Oxford Opinion* critics, for example, addressed Fuller’s *The Crimson Kimono*, Minnelli’s *Home from the Hill* and Boetticher’s *Comanche Station* with a seriousness reserved elsewhere for *The Seventh Seal* or *L’Avventura*. Hitchcock was described as a ‘tragedian’ by Perkins on the strength of *Psycho* (1960b: 35), and Ian Cameron contributed a study of the major concerns of the films of Frank Tashlin.⁴

Impact

It is difficult to get a sense of the outrage that these ideas engendered. Charles Barr, later to be associated with *Movie* but then writing about film for *Granta*, has described his first encounter with *Oxford Opinion*:

I remember going to a bookshop in Cambridge, probably in my second year or so, and picking up this magazine *Oxford Opinion* and glancing through it and thinking, ‘Oh it’s got some writing about films, I’d better buy this’. And then reading the first issue of *Oxford Opinion* with the writing on film, and being rather outraged by it, rather shocked. It was obviously powerful writing but it seemed so wrong. ... Here were a lot of films that I either hadn’t heard of or just assumed were very minor, like a Randolph Scott B-western. It was exciting but it seemed deeply wrong, unsettling, rather outrageous.⁵

Famously, Penelope Houston, the longstanding editor of *Sight and Sound*, responded to the challenge of *Oxford Opinion* with the rebuttal, ‘Cinema is about the human situation, not about “spatial relationships”’ (1960: 163). The silliness of this maxim was noted by a number of writers at the time. Raymond Durnat, in a witty and irreverent article for the journal *Motion*, pointed out that: ‘The only formulation that begins to make sense is to

say that the “spatial relationships” in Ray, Lang, Antonioni, Mizoguchi et al are the human relationships in metaphor’ (1963: 39).⁶

Houston’s remark is typical of *Sight and Sound*, and perhaps more widely of the orthodoxy of British film culture of this time, in its refusal to recognise the relationship between form and content, between style and meaning that the critics of *Cahiers* and *Movie* advocated. Her marked presumption is that an interest in ‘spatial relationships’ precludes an interest in ‘subject’. Whereas the tenor of mise-en-scène-sensitive criticism is that style determines meaning, that ‘How is What’, that ‘tracking shots’, as Godard once provocatively remarked, ‘are a question of morality’ (Hillier 1985: 62).⁷

Editing and sound

Examining this history also helps us make sense of some of mise-en-scène’s stranger characteristics. Wood’s definition of mise-en-scène is unusual in that it includes editing, and sound (even if only in terms of the intonation that the cast give to the dialogue). It is more usual for mise-en-scène to refer exclusively to *visual* style, and not to cater for the range of decision-making involved in the creation of the soundtrack. The traditional deafness of mise-en-scène may be partly explained as part of the polemical desire to celebrate what is visual, what is non-literal, precisely those elements which are *not* the dialogue. But it may also relate to the fact that the commissioned director would not always have full control over the soundtrack.

There are notable cases where this is the case: Douglas Sirk’s 1953 film *All I Desire* is a good example. In a fine article on the film in one of the more recent issues of *Movie*, Michael Walker points out that ‘apart from one musical theme, the score is cobbled together from bits of previous scores. ... We hear not only the Liszt piano theme used in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), but, more disconcertingly, parts of Frank Skinner’s score for *Black Angel* (1946) and parts of Miklos Rozsa’s score for *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947) at various points in the movie’ (1990: 32).

The exclusion of editing also relates to the polemical arguments which sought to find value in the work of Hollywood directors. In the worst case scenario, where the director does not have control over the cutting, the casting, the script or the soundtrack of a film, what she or he *does* control is the mise-en-scène. Thus Charles Barr, whilst discussing the way in which a number of Ray's films were re-cut by the studio, can argue:

Of course it would be wonderful to see *The James Brothers* and *Bitter Victory* and *Wind Across the Everglades* in the form Ray intended ... but Ray's films, like Stroheim's, are weakened comparatively little, because of [his] control over texture. (1962a: 25)

It should be clear that in practice considering mise-en-scène without also thinking about sound and dialogue may prove rather limiting. So often it is the interaction between these different channels of communication that is stimulating. It may not even be possible, in some situations, to talk about elements of mise-en-scène without also referring to editing, as the discussion of the scene from *Lone Star* reveals. When discussing a long take, when does one stop talking about mise-en-scène and start talking about editing? After all, one of the most significant artistic decisions about a long take is when to bring it to an end. Nevertheless, if mise-en-scène had a polemical edge at this time, it was because it was so necessary to focus attention on the elements of which it is comprised. One of the most important functions of mise-en-scène as a critical concept remains the way in which it draws attention to, and makes easier to discuss, all of those elements which communicate non-verbally.

Conclusion

Mise-en-scène's particular association with Hollywood film has two bases, therefore. Firstly, through its historical role in opening up popular

cinema to serious consideration. Secondly, because Hollywood films may *only* reveal their qualities if one is thinking about them in terms of mise-en-scène.

At the same time, one should not make the mistake of thinking that mise-en-scène is only relevant to popular cinema. Although the debate about Hollywood demonstrates what is at stake in mise-en-scène particularly clearly, these ideas are just as relevant to other forms of cinema. Nor should one assume, for that matter, that the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Movie* were only interested in Hollywood films – both journals devoted as much space (and the same approaches) to European cinema as North American.

Ultimately, the concept of mise-en-scène may be more important than the arguments about authorship which it supported. It enabled critics to understand film as a visual and sensory experience rather than just a literary one, to engage with film as medium in its own right, and to consider the determining influence of style upon meaning. And, in the case of *Movie* particularly, it formed the basis of a detailed criticism, which strove to understand the relationship between a film's meanings and the evidence on the screen. Mise-en-scène criticism made possible a more profound sense of how films work.