

4



The Shot: Mise-en-Scene

Of all the techniques of cinema, **mise-en-scene** is the one with which we are most familiar. After seeing a film, we may not recall the cutting or the camera movements, the dissolves or the offscreen sound. But we do remember the costumes in *Gone with the Wind* and the bleak, chilly lighting in Charles Foster Kane's Xanadu. We retain vivid impressions of the misty streets in *The Big Sleep* and the labyrinthine, fluorescent-lit lair of Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*. We recall Harpo Marx clambering over Edgar Kennedy's peanut wagon (*Duck Soup*), Katharine Hepburn defiantly splintering Cary Grant's golf clubs (*The Philadelphia Story*), and Michael J. Fox escaping high-school bullies on an improvised skateboard (*Back to the Future*). In short, many of our most sharply etched memories of the cinema turn out to center on mise-en-scene.

What Is Mise-en-Scene?

In the original French, *mise en scène* (pronounced meez-ahn-sen) means "putting into the scene," and it was first applied to the practice of directing plays. Film scholars, extending the term to film direction, use the term to signify the director's control over what appears in the film frame. As you would expect, mise-en-scene includes those aspects of film that overlap with the art of the theater: setting, lighting, costume, and the behavior of the figures. In controlling the mise-en-scene, the director *stages the event* for the camera.

Mise-en-scene usually involves some planning, but the filmmaker may be open to unplanned events as well. An actor may add a line on the set, or an unexpected change in lighting may enhance a dramatic effect. While filming a cavalry procession through Monument Valley for *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, John Ford took advantage of an approaching lightning storm to create a dramatic backdrop for the action (4.1). The storm remains part of the film's mise-en-scene even though Ford neither planned it nor controlled it; it was a lucky accident that helped create one of the film's most affecting passages. Jean Renoir, Robert Altman, and other directors have allowed their actors to improvise their performances, making the films' mise-en-scene more spontaneous and unpredictable.



4.1 *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*: a thunderstorm in Monument Valley.

Realism

Before we analyze mise-en-scene in detail, one preconception must be brought to light. Just as viewers often remember this or that bit of mise-en-scene from a film, so they often judge mise-en-scene by standards of realism. A car may seem to be realistic for the period the film depicts, or a gesture may not seem realistic because “real people don’t act that way.”

Realism as a standard of value, however, raises several problems. Notions of realism vary across cultures, over time, and even among individuals. Marlon Brando’s acclaimed realist performance in the 1954 film *On the Waterfront* looks stylized today. American critics of the 1910s praised William S. Hart’s Westerns for being realistic, but equally enthusiastic French critics of the 1920s considered the same films to be as artificial as a medieval epic. Most important, to insist rigidly on realism for all films can blind us to the vast range of mise-en-scene possibilities.

Look, for instance, at the frame from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (4.2). Such a depiction of rooftops certainly does not accord with our conception of normal reality. Yet to condemn the film for lacking realism would be inappropriate, because the film uses stylization to present a madman’s fantasy. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* borrows conventions of Expressionist painting and theater, and then assigns them the function of suggesting the madman’s delusion.

It is best, then, to examine the *functions* of mise-en-scene in the films we see. While one film might use mise-en-scene to create an impression of realism, others might seek very different effects: comic exaggeration, supernatural terror, understated beauty, and any number of other functions. We should analyze mise-en-scene’s function in the total film—how it is motivated, how it varies or develops, how it works in relation to other film techniques.



4.2 An Expressionist rooftop scene created from jagged peaks and slanted chimneys in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

The Power of Mise-en-Scene

Confining the cinema to some notion of realism would impoverish mise-en-scene. This technique has the power to transcend normal conceptions of reality, as we can see from a glance at the cinema’s first master of the technique, Georges Méliès. Méliès’s mise-en-scene enabled him to create a totally imaginary world on film.

A caricaturist and magician, Méliès became fascinated by the Lumière brothers’ demonstration of their short films in 1895. (For more on the Lumières, see pp. 182–183.) After building a camera based on an English projector, Méliès began filming unstaged street scenes and moments of passing daily life. One day,

“When Buñuel was preparing *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, he chose a tree-lined avenue for the recurring shot of his characters traipsing endlessly down it. The avenue was strangely stranded in open country and it perfectly suggested the idea of these people coming from nowhere and going nowhere. Buñuel’s assistant said, ‘You can’t use that road. It’s been used in at least ten other movies.’ ‘Ten other movies?’ said Buñuel, impressed. ‘Then it must be good.’”

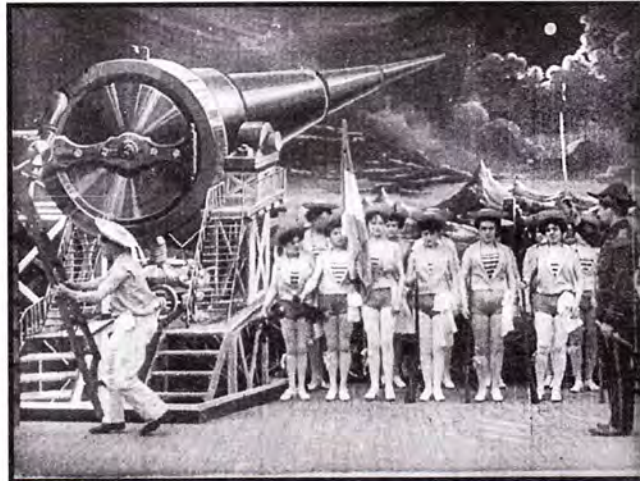
the story goes, he was filming at the Place de l’Opéra, and his camera jammed as a bus was passing. After some tinkering, he was able to resume filming, but by this time, the bus had gone and a hearse was passing in front of his lens. When Méliès screened the film, he discovered something unexpected: a moving bus seemed to transform instantly into a hearse. Whether or not the anecdote is true, it at least illustrates Méliès’s recognition of the magical powers of mise-en-scene. He would devote most of his efforts to cinematic conjuring.

To do so would require preparation, since Méliès could not count on lucky accidents like the bus–hearse transformation. He would have to plan and stage action for the camera. Drawing on his experience in theater, Méliès built one of the first film studios—a small, crammed affair bristling with theatrical machinery, balconies, trapdoors, and sliding backdrops. He sketched shots beforehand and designed sets and costumes. The correspondence between his detailed drawings and the finished shots is illustrated in 4.3 and 4.4. As if this were not enough, Méliès starred in his own films (often in several roles per film). His desire to create magical effects led Méliès to control every aspect of his films’ mise-en-scene.

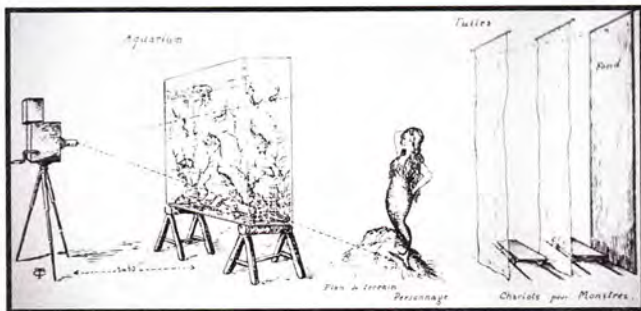
Such control was necessary to create the fantasy world he envisioned. Only in a studio could Méliès produce *The Mermaid* (4.5). He could also surround himself (playing an astronomer) with a gigantic array of cartoonish cut-outs in *La Lune à un mètre* (4.6).



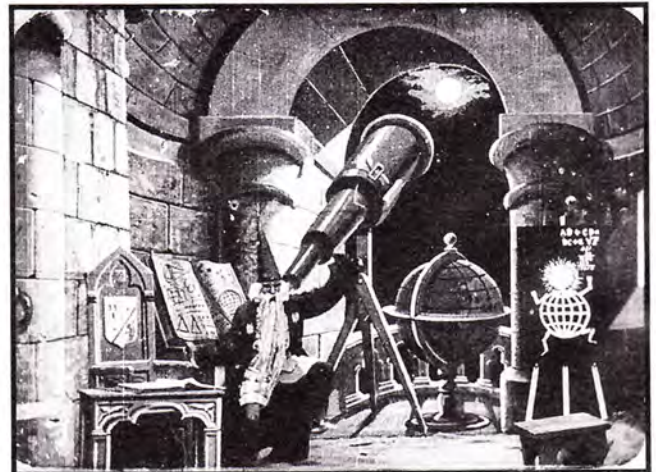
4.3 Georges Méliès’s design for the rocket-launching scene in *A Trip to the Moon* and . . .



4.4 . . . the scene in the film.



4.5 *The Mermaid* created an undersea world by placing a fish tank between the camera and an actress, some backdrops, and “carts for monsters.”



4.6 The telescope, globe, and blackboard are all flat, painted cut-outs in *La Lune à un mètre*.

Méliès's "Star-Film" studio made hundreds of short fantasy and trick films based on such a control over every element in the frame, and the first master of mise-en-scene demonstrated the great range of technical possibilities it offers. The legacy of Méliès's magic is a delightfully unreal world wholly obedient to the whims of the imagination.

Aspects of Mise-en-Scene

What possibilities for selection and control does mise-en-scene offer the filmmaker? We can mark out four general areas: setting, costumes and makeup, lighting, and staging.

Setting

Since the earliest days of cinema, critics and audiences have understood that setting plays a more active role in cinema than it usually does in the theater. André Bazin writes,

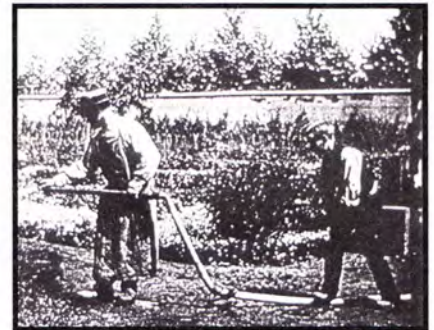
The human being is all-important in the theatre. The drama on the screen can exist without actors. A banging door, a leaf in the wind, waves beating on the shore can heighten the dramatic effect. Some film masterpieces use man only as an accessory, like an extra, or in counterpoint to nature, which is the true leading character.

Cinema setting can come to the forefront; it need not be only a container for human events but can dynamically enter the narrative action. (See 4.124, 4.127, 6.114, 6.124, 6.125, 8.135, and 8.136 for examples of settings without characters.)

The filmmaker may control setting in many ways. One way is to select an already existing locale in which to stage the action, a practice stretching back to the earliest films. Louis Lumière shot his short comedy *L'Arroseur arrosé* ("The Waterer Watered," 4.7) in a garden, and Jean-Luc Godard filmed the exteriors for *Contempt* on the resort island of Capri, off the coast of Italy (4.8). At the close of World War II, Roberto Rossellini shot *Germany Year Zero* in the rubble of Berlin (4.9). Today filmmakers often go on location to shoot.

Alternatively, the filmmaker may construct the setting. Méliès understood that shooting in a studio increased his control, and many filmmakers followed his lead. In France, Germany, and especially the United States, the possibility of creating a wholly artificial world on film led to several approaches to setting.

Some directors have emphasized authenticity. For example, Erich von Stroheim prided himself on meticulous research into details of locale for *Greed* (4.10). *All the President's Men* (1976) took a similar tack, seeking to duplicate the *Washington Post* office on a soundstage (4.11). Even wastepaper from the actual office



4.7 *L'Arroseur arrosé*.



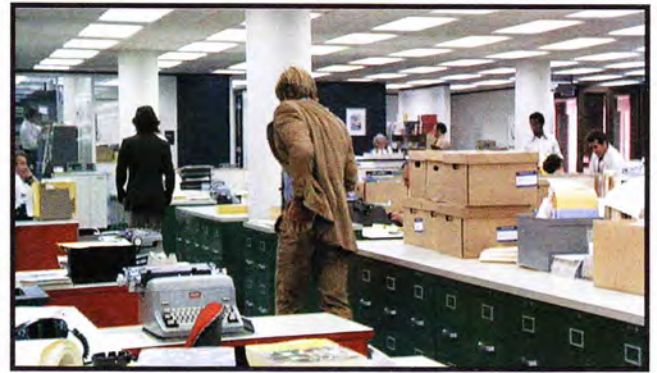
4.9 *Germany Year Zero*.



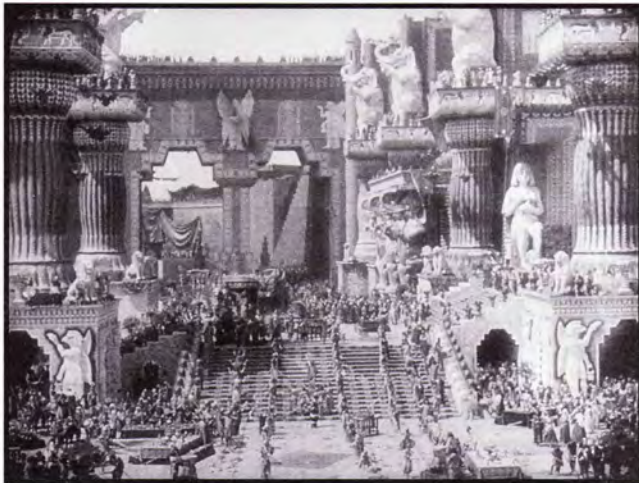
4.8 The filmmakers constructed none of the setting in this shot from *Contempt*, but control of character placement and framing turn it into a nearly abstract composition.



4.10 Details like hanging flypaper and posters create a tavern scene in *Greed*.



4.11 Replicating an actual newsroom in *All the President's Men*.



4.12 The Babylonian sequences of *Intolerance* combined influences from Assyrian history, 19th-century biblical illustration, and modern dance.



4.13 In *Ivan the Terrible, Part 2*, the decor makes the characters seem to wriggle from one space to another.



4.14 In *Wings of Desire*, busy, colorful graffiti on a wall draw attention away from the man lying on the ground.



4.15 In *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, apart from the candles, the setting of this scene has been obliterated by darkness.

was scattered around the set. Other films have been less committed to historical accuracy. Though D. W. Griffith studied the various historical periods presented in *Intolerance*, his *Babylon* constitutes a personal image of that city (4.12). Similarly, in *Ivan the Terrible*, Sergei Eisenstein freely stylized the decor of the czar's palace to harmonize with the lighting, costume, and figure movement, so that characters crawl through doorways that resemble mouseholes and stand frozen before allegorical murals (4.13).

Setting can overwhelm the actors, as in Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* (4.14), or it can be reduced to nothing, as in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (4.15).

The overall design of a setting can shape how we understand story action. In Louis Feuillade's silent crime serial *The Vampires*, a criminal gang has killed a courier on his way to a bank. The gang's confederate, Irma Vep, is also a bank employee, and just as she tells her superior that the courier has vanished, an imposter, in beard and bowler hat, strolls in behind them (4.16). They turn away from us in surprise as he comes forward (4.17). Working in a period when cutting to closer shots was rare in a French film, Feuillade draws our attention to the man by centering him in the doorway.

Something similar happens in a more crowded setting in Juzo Itami's *Tampopo*. The plot revolves around a widow who is trying to improve the food and service she offers in her restaurant. In one scene, a truck driver (in a cowboy hat) helps her by taking her to another noodle shop to study technique. Itami has staged the scene so that the kitchen and the counter serve as two arenas for the action. At first, the widow watches the noodle-man take orders, sitting by her mentor on the edge of the kitchen (4.18). Quickly, the counter fills with customers calling out orders. The truck driver challenges her to match the orders with the customers, and she steps closer to the center of the kitchen (4.19). After she calls out the orders correctly, she turns her back to us, and our interest shifts to the customers at the counter, who applaud her (4.20).

As the *Tampopo* example shows, color can be an important component of settings. The dark colors of the kitchen surfaces make the widow's red dress stand out. Robert Bresson's *L'Argent* creates parallels among its various settings by the recurrence of drab green backgrounds and cold blue props and costumes (4.21–4.23). In contrast, Jacques Tati's *Play Time* displays sharply changing color schemes. In the first portion of *Play Time*, the settings and costumes are mostly gray, brown, and black—cold, steely colors. Later in the film, however, beginning in the restaurant scene, the settings start to sport cheery reds, pinks, and greens. This change in the settings' colors supports a narrative development that shows an inhuman city landscape that is transformed by vitality and spontaneity.

A full-size setting need not always be built. Through much of the history of the cinema, filmmakers used miniature buildings to create fantasy scenes or simply to economize. Parts of settings could also be rendered as paintings and combined photographically with full-sized sections of the space. Now, digital special effects are used to fill in portions of the setting, such as cities in *The Phantom Menace* and *The Fifth Element* (4.24). Since such special effects also involve cinematography, we look at them in the next chapter.

In manipulating a shot's setting, the filmmaker may create *props*—short for *property*. This is another term borrowed from theatrical mise-en-scene. When an object in the setting has a function within the ongoing action, we can call it a prop. Films teem with examples: the snowstorm paperweight that shatters at the beginning of *Citizen Kane*, the little girl's balloon in *M*, the cactus rose in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Sarah Connor's hospital bed turned exercise machine in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Comedies teem with props used for humorous purposes (4.25).

In the course of a narrative, a prop may become a motif. The shower curtain in *Psycho* is at first an innocuous part of the setting, but when the killer enters the bathroom, the curtain screens her from our sight. Later, after the murder, Norman Bates uses the curtain to wrap up the victim's body.

Alexander Payne created a story motif by repeating one type of prop in *Election*. The fussy, frustrated high-school teacher begins his day by cleaning out the



4.16 In *Les Vampires*, a background frame created by a large doorway . . .



4.17 . . . emphasizes the importance of an entering character.

"The best sets are the simplest, most 'decent' ones; everything should contribute to the feeling of the story and anything that does not do this has no place. Reality is usually too complicated. Real locations contain too much that is extreme or contradictory and always require some simplifying: taking things away, unifying colors, etc. This strength through simplicity is much easier to achieve on a built set than in an existing location."

— Stuart Craig, art director, *Notting Hill*



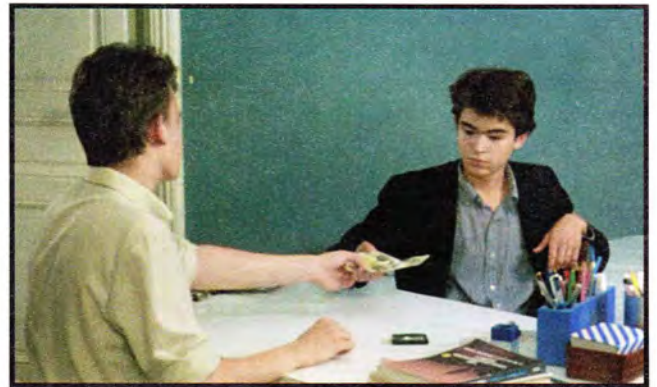
4.18 In *Tampopo*, at the start of the scene, the noodle counter, with only two customers, occupies the center of the action. The widow and her truck driver mentor stand inconspicuously at the left.



4.19 After the counter is full, the dramatic emphasis shifts to the kitchen when the widow rises and takes the challenge to name the customers' orders. Her red dress helps draw attention to her.



4.20 When she has triumphantly matched the orders, she gets a round of applause. By turning her away from us, Itami once more emphasizes the counter area, now filled with customers.



4.21 Color links the home in *L'Argent* . . .



4.22 . . . to the school . . .



4.23 . . . and later to the prison.

faculty refrigerator (4.26). Soon afterward, he picks up hallway litter (4.27). At a major turning point in the plot, he decides to conceal a decisive ballot, which he crumples and secretly drops into a wastebasket (4.28). Payne calls this the motif of trash, "of throwing things away, since that's in fact the climax of the film. . . . So we establish it early on."

When the filmmaker uses color to create parallels among elements of setting, a color motif may become associated with several props, as in Souleymane Cissé's



4.24 *The Fifth Element* creates a collagelike city using computer graphics to join images from various sources.



4.25 The irresponsible protagonist of *Groundhog Day* eats an enormous breakfast made up of props that dominate the foreground of the diner setting.

Finye (*The Wind*, 4.29–4.31). In these and other scenes, the recurrent use of orange creates a cluster of nature motifs within the narrative. Later in this chapter, we shall examine in more detail how elements of setting can weave through a film to form motifs within the narrative.

Costume and Makeup

Like setting, costume can have specific functions in the total film, and the range of possibilities is huge. Erich von Stroheim, for instance, was as passionately committed to authenticity of dress as of setting, and he was said to have created underwear that would instill the proper mood in his actors even though it was never to be seen in the film. In Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, a poignant moment occurs when the Little Sister decorates her dress with “ermine” made of cotton dotted with spots of soot (4.32). The costume displays the poverty of the defeated Southerners at the end of the Civil War.

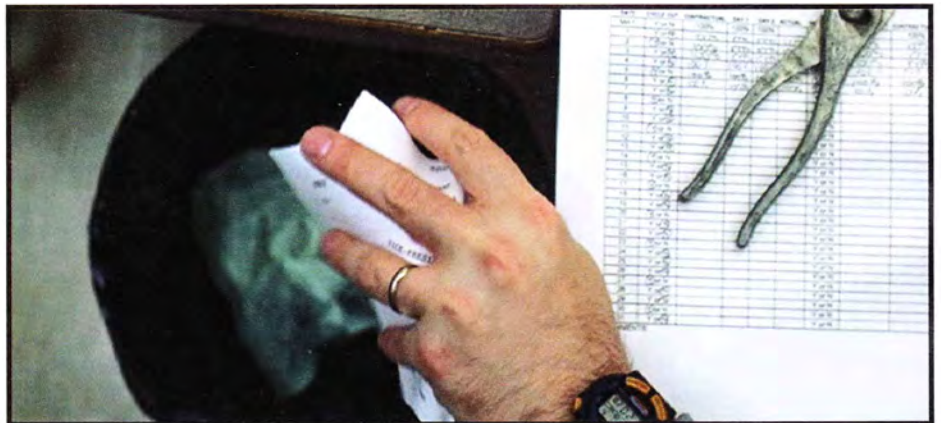
In other films, costumes may be quite stylized, calling attention to their purely graphic qualities. Throughout *Ivan the Terrible*, costumes are carefully orchestrated with one another in their colors, their textures, and even their movements. One shot of Ivan and his adversary gives their robes a plastic sweep and dynamism (4.33). In *Freak Orlando*, Ulrike Ottinger (herself a costume designer) boldly



4.26 In *Election*, as he discards spoiled leftovers, the teacher is suspiciously watched by the custodian—who will play an important role in his downfall.



4.27 He tosses a scrap of paper into the corridor trash bin.



4.28 A close-up of the teacher's hand discarding the crucial vote for student council president.



4.29 *Finye* begins with a woman carrying an orange calabash as the wind rustles through weeds.



4.30 Later, the vengeful grandfather prepares to stalk his grandson's persecutor by dressing in orange and making magic before a fire.



4.31 At the end, the little boy passes his bowl to someone offscreen—possibly the couple seen earlier.



4.32 In *The Birth of a Nation*, the Little Sister realizes how shabby her dress remains despite her attempts to add festive trimming.



4.33 The sweeping folds of a priest's lightweight black robe contrast with the heavy cloak and train of the czar's finery in *Ivan the Terrible*.



4.34 Stylized costumes in *Freak Orlando*.



4.35 In *8 1/2*, sunglasses shield Marcello from the world.

uses costumes to display the spectrum's primary colors in maximum intensity (4.34).

Costumes can play important motivic and causal roles in narratives. The film director Guido in Fellini's *8 1/2* persistently uses his dark glasses to shield himself from the world (4.35). To think of Dracula is to recall how his billowing cape enwraps his victims. When Hildy Johnson, in *His Girl Friday*, switches from her role of aspiring housewife to that of reporter, her hats change as well (4.36, 4.37). In the runaway bus section of *Speed*, during a phone conversation with Jack, the villain Howard refers to Annie as a "Wildcat"; Jack sees Annie's University of Arizona sweater and realizes that Howard has hidden a video camera aboard the bus. A costume provides the clue that allows Jack to outwit Howard.

As we have already seen in *Tampopo* and *L'Argent* (p. 118), costume is often coordinated with setting. Since the filmmaker usually wants to emphasize the human figures, setting may provide a more or less neutral background, while costume helps pick out the characters. Color design is particularly important here. The *Freak Orlando* costumes (4.34) stand out boldly against the neutral gray background of an artificial lake. In *The Night of the Shooting Stars*, luminous wheat fields set off the hard black-and-blue costumes of the fascists and the peasants (4.38). The director may instead choose to match the color values of setting and costume more closely. One shot in Fellini's *Casanova* creates a color gradation that runs from bright red costumes to paler red walls, the whole composition capped by a small white accent (4.39). This "bleeding" of the costume into the setting is carried to a kind of limit in the prison scene of *THX 1138*, in which George Lucas strips both locale and clothing to stark white on white (4.40).

Ken Russell's *Women in Love* affords a clear example of how costume and setting can contribute to a film's overall narrative progression. The opening scenes portray the characters' shallow middle-class life by means of saturated primary and complementary colors in costume and setting (4.41). In the middle portions of the film, as the characters discover love on a country estate, pale pastels predominate (4.42). The last section of *Women in Love* takes place around the Matterhorn, and the characters' ardor has cooled. Now the colors have become even paler, dominated by pure black and white (4.43). By integrating with setting, costume may function to reinforce narrative and thematic patterns.

Many of these points about costume apply equally to a closely related area of mise-en-scene, the actors' makeup. Makeup was originally necessary because actors' faces would not register well on early film stocks. Up to the present, it has been used in various ways to enhance the appearance of actors on the screen. Over



4.36 Hildy's stylish hat with a low-dipping brim worn early in *His Girl Friday* . . .



4.37 . . . is replaced by a "masculine" hat with its brim pushed up, journalist-style, when she returns to work.



4.38 The climactic skirmish of *The Night of the Shooting Stars*.



4.39 *Casanova*: subtle color gradations and a dramatic accent in the distance.



4.40 Heads seem to float in space as white costumes and settings blend in *THX 1138*.



4.41 Bright colors in an early scene of *Women in Love* give way . . .



4.42 . . . to the softer hues of trees and fields . . .



4.43 . . . and finally to a predominantly white-and-black scheme.



4.44 Light, blank backgrounds focus attention on the actors' faces in many shots of *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*.



4.45 In *Ivan the Terrible, Part I*, makeup shapes the eyebrows and hollows the eye sockets to emphasize Ivan's piercing gaze.

the course of film history, a wide range of possibilities has emerged. Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* was famous for its complete avoidance of makeup (4.44). This film relied on close-ups and tiny facial changes to create an intense religious drama. On the other hand, Nikolai Cherkasov did not look particularly like Eisenstein's conception of Czar Ivan IV, so he wore a wig and false beard, nose, and eyebrows for *Ivan the Terrible* (4.45). Changing actors to look like historical personages has been one common function of makeup.

Today makeup usually tries to pass unnoticed, but it also accentuates expressive qualities of the actor's face. Since the camera may record cruel details that would pass unnoticed in ordinary life, any unsuitable blemishes, wrinkles, and sagging skin will have to be hidden. The makeup artist can sculpt the face, making it seem narrower or broader by applying blush and shadow. Viewers expect that female performers will wear lipstick and other cosmetics, but the male actors are often wearing makeup, too (4.46, 4.47).

Film actors rely on their eyes to a very great extent (see box, p. 134), and makeup artists can often enhance eye behavior. Eyeliner and mascara can draw attention to the eyes and emphasize the direction of a glance. Nearly every actor will also have expressively shaped eyebrows. Lengthened eyebrows can enlarge the face, while shorter brows make it seem more compact. Eyebrows plucked in a slightly rising curve add gaiety to the face, while slightly sloping ones hint at sadness. Thick, straight brows, commonly applied to men, reinforce the impression of a hard, serious gaze. Thus eye makeup can assist the actor's performance (4.48, 4.49).

In recent decades, the craft of makeup has developed in response to the popularity of horror and science fiction genres. Rubber and plasticine compounds create bumps, bulges, extra organs, and layers of artificial skin in such films as David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (4.50). In such contexts, makeup, like costume, becomes important in creating character traits or motivating plot action.

Lighting

Much of the impact of an image comes from its manipulation of lighting. In cinema, lighting is more than just illumination that permits us to see the action. Lighter and darker areas within the frame help create the overall composition of each shot and thus guide our attention to certain objects and actions. A brightly illuminated patch may draw our eye to a key gesture, while a shadow may conceal a detail or build up suspense about what may be present. Lighting can also articulate textures: the curve of a face, the grain of a piece of wood, the tracery of a spider's web, the sheen of glass, the sparkle of a gem.



4.46 In *Heat*, Al Pacino's makeup gives him slightly rounded eyebrows and, with the help of the lighting, minimizes the bags under his eyes.



4.47 In *The Godfather Part III*, made five years before *Heat*, Pacino looks older. Not only has his hair been whitened, but the makeup, again assisted by the lighting, gives him more sunken and baggy eyes, more hollow cheeks, and a longer, flatter chin.



4.48 In *Speed*, Sandra Bullock's eyeliner, shadow, and arched brows make her eyes vivid and give her an alert expression.



4.50 Jeff Goldblum, nearly unrecognizable under grotesque makeup, during his transformation into *The Fly*.



4.51 In *The Cheat*, Cecil B. DeMille suggested a jail cell by casting a bright light on a man's face and body through unseen bars.



4.49 For the same scene, the eyeliner on Keanu Reeves makes the upper edges of his eyes stand out. Note also the somewhat fierce curve of the eyebrows, accentuating his slight frown.



4.52 Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*.

Lighting shapes objects by creating highlights and shadows. A highlight is a patch of relative brightness on a surface. The man's face in **4.51** and the edge of the fingers in **4.52** display highlights. Highlights provide important cues to the texture of the surface. If the surface is smooth, like glass or chrome, the highlights tend to gleam or sparkle; a rougher surface, like a coarse stone facing, yields more diffuse highlights.

There are two basic types of shadows, each of which is important in film composition: *attached* shadows, or *shading*, and *cast* shadows. An attached shadow occurs when light fails to illuminate part of an object because of the object's shape or surface features. If a person sits by a candle in a darkened room, patches of the face and body will fall into darkness. Most obviously, the nose often creates a patch of darkness on an adjoining cheek. This phenomenon is shading, or attached shadow. But the candle also projects a shadow on the wall behind. This is a cast shadow, because the body blocks out the light. The shadows in **4.51**, for example, are cast shadows, made by bars between the actor and the light source. But in **4.52**, the small, dark patches on the hand are attached shadows, for they are caused by the three-dimensional curves and ridges of the hand itself.

"Light is everything. It expresses ideology, emotion, colour, depth, style. It can efface, narrate, describe. With the right lighting, the ugliest face, the most idiotic expression can radiate with beauty or intelligence."

— Federico Fellini, director



4.53 Attached shadows on faces create a dramatic composition in John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle*.

As these examples suggest, highlights and shadows help create our sense of a scene's space. In 4.51, a few shadows imply an entire prison cell. Lighting also shapes a shot's overall composition. One shot from John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle* welds the gang members into a unit by the pool of light cast by a hanging lamp (4.53). At the same time, it sets up a scale of importance, emphasizing the protagonist by making him the most frontal and clearly lit figure.

A shot's lighting affects our sense of the shape and texture of the objects depicted. If a ball is lit straight on from the front, it appears round. If the same ball is lit from the side, we see it as a half-circle. Hollis Frampton's short film *Lemon* consists primarily of light moving around a lemon, and the shifting shadows create dramatically changing patterns of yellow and black. This film almost seems designed to prove the truth of a remark made by Josef von Sternberg, one of the cinema's masters of film lighting: "The proper use of light can embellish and dramatize every object."

For our purposes, we can isolate four major features of film lighting: its quality, direction, source, and color.

Lighting *quality* refers to the relative intensity of the illumination. *Hard* lighting creates clearly defined shadows, crisp textures, and sharp edges, whereas *soft* lighting creates a diffused illumination. In nature, the noonday sun creates hard light, while an overcast sky creates soft light. The terms are relative, and many lighting situations will fall between the extremes, but we can usually recognize the differences (4.54, 4.55).

The *direction* of lighting in a shot refers to the path of light from its source or sources to the object lit. "Every light," wrote von Sternberg, "has a point where it is brightest and a point toward which it wanders to lose itself completely. . . . The journey of rays from that central core to the outposts of blackness is the adventure and drama of light." For convenience we can distinguish among frontal lighting, sidelighting, backlighting, underlighting, and top lighting.

Frontal lighting can be recognized by its tendency to eliminate shadows. In 4.56, from Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise*, the result of such frontal lighting is a fairly flat-looking image. Contrast 4.57, from *Touch of Evil*, in which Orson Welles uses a hard **sidelight** (also called a *crosslight*) to sculpt the character's features.

Backlighting, as the name suggests, comes from behind the subject filmed. It can be positioned at many angles: high above the figure, at various angles off to the side, pointing straight at the camera, or from below. Used with no other sources of light, backlighting tends to create silhouettes, as in 4.58. Combined with more frontal sources of light, the technique can create an unobtrusively illuminated contour. This use of backlighting is called *edge lighting* or *rim lighting* (4.59).

As its name implies, **underlighting** suggests that the light comes from below the subject. In 4.60, the underlighting suggests an offscreen flashlight. Since



4.54 In this shot from Satyajit Ray's *Aparajito*, Apu's mother and the globe she holds are emphasized by hard lighting, while . . .



4.55 . . . in another shot from the same film, softer lighting blurs contours and textures and makes for more diffusion and gentler contrasts between light and shade.



4.56 In *La Chinoise*, frontal lighting makes the actress's shadow fall directly behind her, where we cannot see it.



4.57 In *Touch of Evil*, sidelight creates sharp attached shadows by the character's nose, cheek, and lips, while long cast shadows appear on the file cabinets at the left.



4.58 In Godard's *Passion*, the lamp and window provide backlighting that presents the woman almost entirely in silhouette.



4.59 In *Wings*, a narrow line of light makes each actor's body stand out from the background.



4.60 In *The Sixth Sense*, a flashlight lights the boy's face from below, enhancing our empathy with his fright as he feels the presence of a ghost.



4.61 Top lighting in Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express*.



4.62 Apparent and hidden light sources in *The Miracle Worker*.

underlighting tends to distort features, it is often used to create dramatic horror effects, but it may also simply indicate a realistic light source, such as a fireplace. As usual, a particular technique can function differently according to context.

Top lighting is exemplified by **4.61**, where the spotlight shines down from almost directly above Marlene Dietrich's face. Von Sternberg frequently used such a high frontal light to bring out the line of his star's cheekbones. (Our earlier example from *Asphalt Jungle* in Figure 4.53 provides a less glamorous instance of top lighting.)

Lighting can also be characterized by its *source*. In making a documentary, the filmmaker may be obliged to shoot with the light available in the actual surroundings. Most fictional films, however, use extra light sources to obtain greater control of the image's look. In most fictional films, the table lamps and streetlights you see in the mise-en-scene are not the principal sources of illumination for the filming. But these visible sources of light will motivate the lighting decisions made in production. The filmmaker will usually strive to create a lighting design that is consistent with the sources in the setting. In **4.62**, from *The Miracle Worker*, the window in the rear and the lantern in the right foreground are purportedly the sources of illumination, but you can see the many studio lights used in this shot reflected as tiny white dots in the glass lantern.

Directors and cinematographers manipulating the lighting of the scene will start from the assumption that any subject normally requires two light sources:



4.63 Strong key and soft fill light combined in *The Bodyguard*.



4.64 *Bezhin Meadow*.

a **key light** and a **fill light**. The key light is the primary source, providing the dominant illumination and casting the strongest shadows. The key light is the most directional light, and it usually corresponds to the motivating light source in the setting. A fill is a less intense illumination that “fills in,” softening or eliminating shadows cast by the key light. By combining key and fill, and by adding other sources, lighting can be controlled quite exactly.

The key lighting source may be aimed at the subject from any angle, as our examples of lighting direction have indicated. As one shot from *Ivan the Terrible* shows (4.77), underlighting may be the key source, while a softer and dimmer fill falls on the setting behind the figure.

Lights from various directions can be combined in any way. A shot may use key and fill lights without backlighting. In the frame from *The Bodyguard* (4.63), a strong key light from offscreen left throws a dramatic shadow on the wall at the right. The dim fill light inconspicuously shows the back wall and ceiling of the set, but leaves the right side of the actor’s head dark.

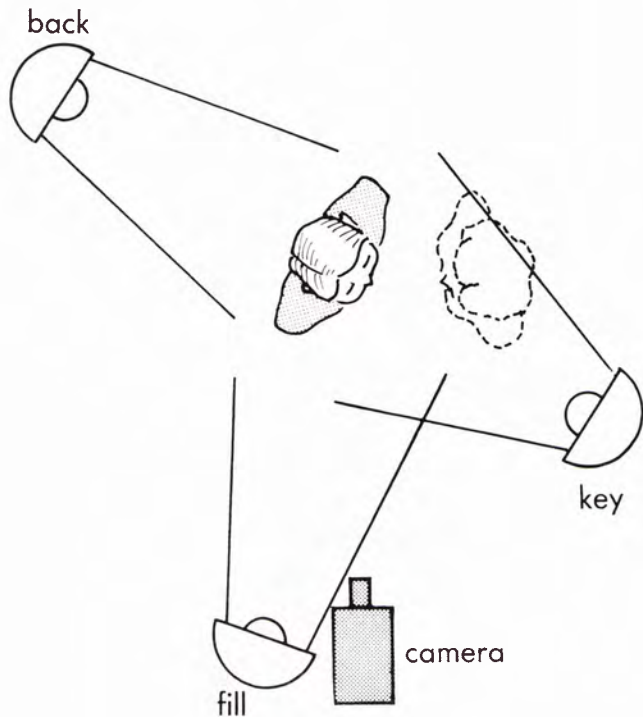
In 4.64, from *Bezhin Meadow*, Eisenstein uses a number of light sources and directions. The key light falling on the figures comes from the left side, but it is hard on the face of the old woman in the foreground and softened on the face of the man because a fill light comes in from the right. This fill light falls on the woman’s forehead and nose.

Classical Hollywood filmmaking developed the custom of using at least three light sources per shot: key light, fill light, and backlight. The most basic arrangement of these lights on a single figure is shown in 4.65. The *backlight* comes from behind and above the figure, the *key light* comes diagonally from the front, and a *fill light* comes from a position near the camera. The key will usually be closer to the figure or brighter than the fill. Typically, each major character in a scene will have his or her own key, fill, and backlight. If another actor is added (as in the dotted figure in 4.65), the key light for one can be altered slightly to form the backlight for the other, and vice versa, with a fill light on either side of the camera.

In 4.66, the Bette Davis character in *Jezebel* is the most important figure, and the **three-point lighting** centers attention on her: a bright backlight from the rear upper right highlights her hair and edge-lights her left arm. The key light is off left, making her right arm brightly illuminated. A fill light comes from just to the right of the camera. It is less bright than the key. This balanced lighting creates mild shading, modeling Davis’s face to suggest volume rather than flatness. (Note the slight shadow cast by her nose.) Davis’s backlight and key light serve to illuminate the woman behind her at the right, but less prominently. Other fill lights, called *background* or *set lighting*, fall on the setting and on the crowd at the left rear. Three-point lighting emerged during the studio era of Hollywood filmmaking, and it is still widely used, as in 4.67, from Steven Spielberg’s *Catch Me If You Can*.

“When taking close-ups in a colour picture, there is too much visual information in the background, which tends to draw attention away from the face. That is why the faces of the actresses in the old black and white pictures are so vividly remembered. Even now, movie fans nostalgically recall Dietrich . . . Garbo . . . Lamarr . . . Why? Filmed in black and white, those figures looked as if they were lit from within. When a face appeared on the screen over-exposed—the high-key technique, which also erased imperfections—it was as if a bright object was emerging from the screen.”

— Nestor Almendros, cinematographer



4.65 Three-point lighting, one of the basic techniques of Hollywood cinema.



4.66 The three-point system's effect as it looks on the screen in *Jezebel*.



4.67 In *Catch Me If You Can*, the ne'er-do-well father can't suppress a grin at his son's impersonation, and the high-key lighting accentuates the upbeat tone of the scene.



4.68 *Back to the Future*: day . . .



4.69 . . . versus night.

You may have already noticed that this three-point lighting system demands that the lamps be rearranged virtually every time the camera shifts to a new framing of the scene. In spite of the great cost involved, most Hollywood films have a different lighting arrangement for each camera position. Such variations in the light sources do not conform to reality, but they do enable filmmakers to create clear compositions for each shot.

Three-point lighting was particularly well suited for the high-key lighting used in classical Hollywood cinema and other filmmaking traditions. **High-key lighting** refers to an overall lighting design that uses fill light and backlight to create low contrast between brighter and darker areas. Usually, the light quality is soft, making shadow areas fairly transparent. The frames from *Jezebel* (4.66) and from *Catch Me If You Can* (4.67) exemplify high-key lighting. Hollywood directors and cinematographers have relied on this for comedies, adventure films, and most dramas.



4.70 In *Kanal*, low-key lighting creates a harsh highlight on one side of the woman's face, a deep shadow on the other.

"When I started watching films in the 1940s and 1950s, Indian cinematography was completely under the influence of Hollywood aesthetics, which mostly insisted on the 'ideal light' for the face, using heavy diffusion and strong backlight. I came to resent the complete disregard of the actual source of light and the clichéd use of backlight. Using backlight all the time is like using chili powder in whatever you cook."

— Subrata Mitra, cinematographer

High-key lighting is not used simply to render a brightly lit situation, such as a dazzling ballroom or a sunny afternoon. High-key lighting is an overall approach to illumination that can suggest different lighting conditions or times of day. Consider, for example, two frames from *Back to the Future*. The first shot (4.68) uses high-key illumination matched to daylight and a brightly lit malt shop. The second frame (4.69) is from a scene set in a room at night, but it still uses the high-key approach, as can be seen from the lighting's softness, its low contrast, and its detail in shadow areas.

Low-key illumination creates stronger contrasts and sharper, darker shadows. Often the lighting is hard, and fill light is lessened or eliminated altogether. The effect is of *chiaroscuro*, or extremely dark and light regions within the image. An example is 4.70, from Andrzej Wajda's *Kanal*. Here the fill light and background light are significantly less intense than in high-key technique. As a result, shadow areas on the left third of the screen remain hard and opaque. In 4.71, a low-key shot from Leos Carax's *Mauvais sang*, the key light is hard and comes from the side. Carax eliminates both fill and background illumination, creating very sharp shadows and a dark void around the characters.

As our examples indicate, low-key lighting has usually been applied to somber or mysterious scenes. It was common in horror films of the 1930s and films noirs (dark films) of the 1940s and 1950s. The low-key approach was revived in the 1980s in such films as *Blade Runner* and *Rumble Fish* and continued in the 1990s in films noirs like *Se7en* and *The Usual Suspects*. In *El Sur* (4.72), Victor Erice's low-key lighting yields dramatic chiaroscuro effects that portray the adult world as a child imagines it.

When the actors move, the director must decide whether to alter the lighting. By overlapping several different key lights, the filmmaker can maintain a constant intensity as actors move around the set. Although constant lighting is not particularly realistic, it has advantages, the main one being that distracting shadows and highlights do not move across actors. At the end of Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*, for example, the heroine moves diagonally toward us, accompanied by a band of singing young people (4.73, 4.74). Alternatively, the filmmaker may have his or her figures move through patches of light and shadow. The sword fight in *Rashomon* is intensified by the contrast between the ferocious combat and the cheerfully dappled lighting pouring into the glade (4.75).

We tend to think of film lighting as limited to two colors—the white of sunlight or the soft yellow of incandescent interior lamps. In practice, filmmakers who choose to control lighting typically work with as purely white a light as they can. By use of filters placed in front of the light source, the filmmaker can color the onscreen illumination in any fashion. There may be a realistic source in the scene



4.71 In *Mauvais sang*, a single key light without any fill on the actress's face leaves her expression nearly invisible.



4.72 Low-key lighting in *El Sur* suggests a child's view of the adult world as full of mystery and danger.



4.73 In *Nights of Cabiria*, the heroine is surrounded by a band young street musicians.



4.74 As she walks, the lighting on her face does not change, enabling us to notice slight changes in her expression.



4.75 Dappled lighting in *Rashomon*.



4.76 An orange filter suggests that all the light in this scene from *The Green Room* comes from candles.



4.77 In *Ivan the Terrible*, a character's fear registers on his face . . .

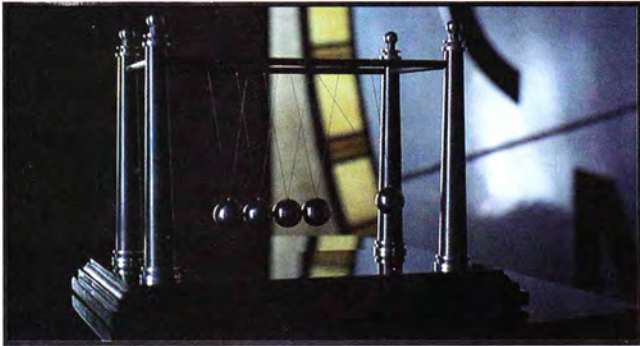


4.78 . . . but a blue light also suddenly and briefly shines on it until it disappears and the scene continues.

to motivate the hue of the light. For example, cinematographers often use filters over lighting equipment to suggest the orange tint of candlelight, as in François Truffaut's *The Green Room* (4.76). But colored light can also be unrealistic in its motivation. Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, Part 2, uses a blue light suddenly cast on an actor, nondiegetically, to suggest the character's terror and uncertainty (4.77, 4.78). Such a shift in stylistic function—using colored light to perform a function usually confined to acting—is all the more effective because it is so unexpected.

Most film lighting is applied during shooting, but computer-generated imagery allows filmmakers to create virtual lighting designs. Powerful 3D programs enable filmmakers to add broad overall illumination or strongly directional effects. Spotlights can sprinkle highlights on shiny metal, while “shader” tools model objects with attached shadows. In normal filming, filmmakers must reduce the vast amount of visual information in front of the camera, using lighting to clarify and simplify the space. In contrast, digital lighting is built up little by little from simple elements. For this reason, it is very time-consuming; a program may need a day and a night to render moving cast shadows in a single shot. Still, new software and faster computers are likely to accelerate the work process.

We are used to ignoring the illumination of our everyday surroundings, so film lighting is also easy to take for granted. Yet the look of a shot is centrally controlled by light quality, direction, source, and color. The filmmaker can manipulate and combine these factors to shape the viewer's experience in a great many ways. No component of mise-en-scene is more important than “the drama and adventure of light.”



4.79 In *The Hudsucker Proxy*, when the mailboy Norville proposes his new toy idea, the clicking balls on his boss's desktop suddenly and inexplicably stop.



4.80 The abstract film *Parabola* uses lighting and a pure background to emphasize sculptural forms.



4.81 The actors strike weary poses in *Seven Samurai*.



4.82 In *White Heat*, Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) bursts up from the prison mess table after learning of his mother's death.

Staging: Movement and Performance

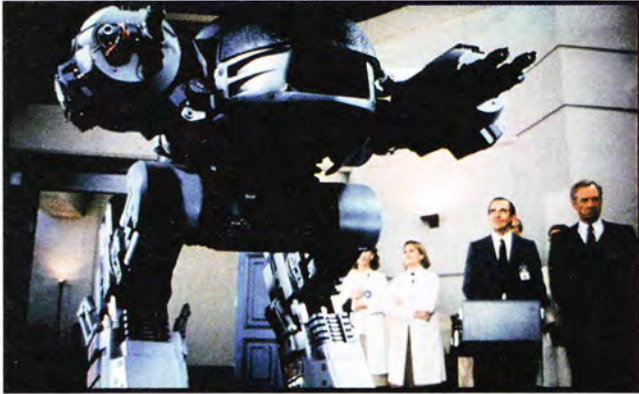
The director may also control the behavior of various figures in the mise-en-scene. Here the word *figures* covers a wide range of possibilities, since the figure may represent a person but could also be an animal (Lassie, the donkey Balthazar, Donald Duck), a robot (R2D2 and C3PO in the *Star Wars* series), an object (4.79), or even a pure shape (4.80). Mise-en-scene allows such figures to express feelings and thoughts; it can also dynamize them to create various kinetic patterns.

In 4.81, from *Seven Samurai*, the samurai have won the battle with the bandits. Virtually the only movement in the frame is the driving rain, but the slouching postures of the men leaning on their spears express their tense weariness. In contrast, in *White Heat*, explosive movement and ferocious facial expression present an image of psychotic rage (4.82).

In cinema, facial expression and movement are not restricted to human figures. Chapter 10 will discuss animation's flexibility in combining abstract drawings or three-dimensional objects with highly dynamic movement. For example, in science fiction and fantasy films, monsters and robots may be given expressions and gestures through the technique of *stop-action* (also called *stop-motion*). Typically, a small-scale model is made with articulated parts. In filming, it is posed as desired, and a frame or two is shot. Then the figure is adjusted slightly and another frame or two is exposed, and so on. The result on screen is a continuous, if sometimes jerky, movement. The horrendous onslaught of ED-209, the crime-fighting robot in *Robocop*, was created by means of a 12-inch miniature filmed in stop-action (4.83). (A full-scale but unmoving model was also built for long shots.) Stop-action can also be used for more abstract and unrealistic purposes, as in Jan Švankmajer's *Dimensions of Dialogue* (4.84).

The filmmaker can stage action without three-dimensional objects moving in real space. Drawings of characters who never existed, like Aladdin or Daffy Duck, can be used in animated films. Dinosaurs and fabulous monsters created only as models can be scanned and made to move in a lifelike fashion through computer-generated imagery (see 1.29).

Acting and Actuality Although abstract shapes and animated figures can become important in the mise-en-scene, the most intuitively familiar cases of figure expression and movement are actors playing roles. Like other aspects of mise-en-scene, the performance is created in order to be filmed. An actor's performance



4.83 A miniature used in *Robocop*.



4.84 A conversation between clay figures degenerates as they begin to claw each other to bits in *Dimensions of Dialogue*.

consists of visual elements (appearance, gestures, facial expressions) and sound (voice, effects). At times, of course, an actor may contribute only visual aspects, as in the silent era. Similarly, an actor's performance may sometimes exist only on the sound track of the film; in *A Letter to Three Wives*, Celeste Holm's character, Addie Ross, speaks a narration over the images but never appears on the screen.

Acting is often approached as a question of realism. But concepts of realistic acting have changed over film history. Today we may think that the performances of Russell Crowe and Renee Zellweger in *Cinderella Man* or those given by Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain* are reasonably close to people's real-life behavior. Yet in the early 1950s, the New York Actors Studio style, as exemplified by Marlon Brando's performances in *On the Waterfront* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was also thought to be extremely realistic. Fine though we may still find Brando's work in these films, it seems deliberate, heightened, and quite unrealistic. The same might be said of the performances, by professional and amateur actors alike, in post-World War II Italian neorealist films. These were hailed when they first appeared as almost documentary depictions of Italian life, but many of them now seem to us to contain polished performances suitable to Hollywood films. Already, major naturalistic performances of the 1970s, such as Robert De Niro's protagonist in *Taxi Driver*, seem quite stylized. Who can say what the acting in *The Insider*, *In the Bedroom*, and other recent films will look like in a few decades?

Changing views of realism are not the only reason to be wary of this as a concept for analyzing acting. Often, when people call a performance unrealistic, they are evaluating it as bad. But not all films try to achieve realism. Since the performance an actor creates is part of the overall mise-en-scene, films contain a wide variety of acting styles. Instead of assuming that acting must be realistic, we should try to understand what kind of acting style the film is aiming at. If the functions of acting in the film are best served by a nonrealistic performance, that is the kind that the skillful actor will strive to present. Obvious examples of nonrealistic acting style can be found in *The Wizard of Oz*, for fantasy purposes. (How would a real Wicked Witch behave?) Moreover, realistic performance will always be only one option in film acting. In mass-production filmmaking from Hollywood, India, Hong Kong, and other traditions, overblown performances are a crucial source of the audience's pleasure. Viewers do not expect narrowly realistic acting from Jim Carrey or from martial-arts stars such as Jet Li or Jackie Chan.

Finally, when we watch any fictional film, we are to some degree aware that the performances on the screen are the result of the actors' skills and decisions. (See "A Closer Look.") When we use the phrase "larger than life" to describe an effective performance, we seem to be tacitly acknowledging the actor's deliberate craft. In analyzing a particular film, it is usually necessary to go beyond assumptions about realism and consider the functions and purposes that the actor's craft serves.

"I get impatient with many Hollywood films because there's this assumption that meaning or emotion is contained in those few square inches of an actor's face and I just don't see it that way at all. I think there's a power in withholding information, revealing things gradually. Letting the audience discover things within the frame in time, in the way they stand."

— Alison Maclean, director, *Crush*