2 MISE EN SCÈNE

DreamWorks Pictures

One must compose images as the old masters did their canvases, with the same preoccupation with effect and expression.

—MARCEL CARNÉ, FILMMAKER

Mise en scène (pronounced meez on sen, with the second syllable nasalized) was originally a French theatrical term meaning "placing on stage." The phrase refers to the arrangement of all the visual elements of a theatrical production within a given playing area—the stage. This area can be defined by the proscenium arch, which encloses the stage in a kind of picture frame; or the acting area can be more fluid, extending even into the auditorium. No matter what the confines of the stage may be, its mise en scène is always in three dimensions. Objects and people are arranged in actual space, which has depth as well as height and width. This space is also a continuation of the same space that the audience occupies, no matter how much a theater director tries to suggest a separate "world" on the stage.

In movies, mise en scène is more complicated, a blend of the visual conventions of the live theater with those of painting. Like the stage director, the filmmaker arranges objects and people within a given three-dimensional space. But once this arrangement is photographed, it's converted into a two-dimensional *image* of the real thing. The space in the "world" of the movie is not the same as that occupied by the audience. Only the image exists in the same physical area, like a picture in an art gallery. Mise en scène in the movies resembles the art of painting in that an image of formal patterns and shapes is presented on a flat surface and is enclosed within a **frame**. But cinematic mise en scène is also a fluid choreographing of visual elements that are constantly in flux.

The Frame

Each movie image is enclosed by the frame of the screen, which defines the world of the film, separating it from the actual world of the darkened auditorium. Unlike the painter or still photographer, the filmmaker doesn't conceive of the framed compositions as self-sufficient statements. Like drama, film is a temporal as well as spatial art, and consequently the visuals are constantly in motion. The compositions are broken down, redefined, and reassembled before our eyes. A single-frame image from a movie, then, is necessarily an artificially frozen moment that was never intended to be yanked from its context in time and motion. For critical purposes, it's sometimes necessary to analyze a still frame in isolation, but the viewer ought to make due allowances for the dramatic context.

The frame functions as the basis of composition in a movie image. Unlike the painter or still photographer, however, the filmmaker doesn't fit the frame to the composition, but the composition to a single-sized frame. The ratio of the frame's horizontal and vertical dimensions—known as the **aspect ratio**—remains constant throughout the movie. Screens come in a variety of aspect ratios, especially since the introduction of **widescreen** in the early 1950s. Prior to that time, most movies were shot in a 1.33:1 aspect ratio, though even in the silent era filmmakers were constantly experimenting with different-sized screens (**2–6a**).
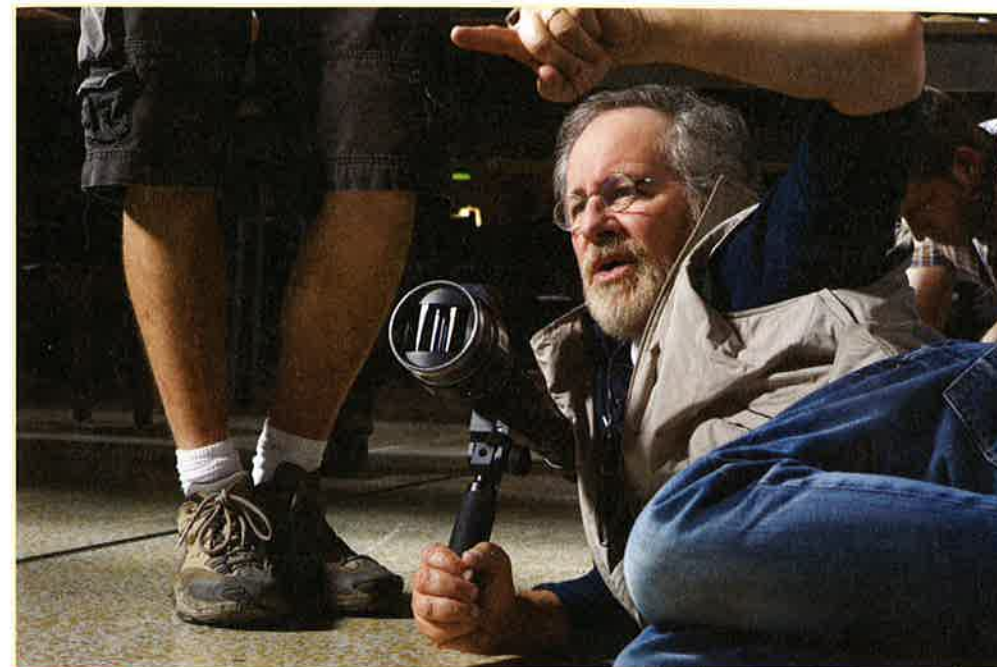
OVERVIEW

Mise en scène: How the visual materials are staged, framed, and photographed. The frame's aspect ratio: dimensions of the screen's height and width. Film, TV, video. Functions of the frame: excluding the irrelevant, pinpointing the particular, symbolizing other enclosures. The symbolic implications of the geography of the frame: top, bottom, center, and edges. What's off frame and why. How images are structured: composition and design. Where we look first: the dominant. The territorial imperative: How space can be used to communicate ideas about power. Staging positions vis-à-vis the camera and what they suggest. How much room for movement: tight and loose framing. Proxemic patterns and how they define the relationships between people. Camera proxemics and the shots. Open and closed forms: window fragments or proscenium-framed images? The fifteen elements of a mise en scène analysis.

Manhattan (U.S.A., 1979), with Woody Allen and Diane Keaton, written and directed by Allen.

Mise en scène is a complex analytical term, encompassing four distinct formal elements: **(1)** the staging of the action, **(2)** the physical setting and décor, **(3)** the manner in which these materials are framed, and **(4)** the manner in which they are photographed. The art of mise en scène is indissolubly linked with the art of cinematography. In this shot, for example, the story content is simple: The characters are conversing, getting to know each other, becoming attracted. Gordon Willis's tender, low-key lighting, combined with the beauty of the setting—the sculpture garden of New York's Museum of Modern Art—provides the scene with an intensely romantic atmosphere. *(United Artists)*

Publicity photo of director Steven Spielberg setting up a low angle shot for *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* **(U.S.A., 2008).**

Filmmakers always think in terms of a framed image. Some of them carry a portable viewfinder (pictured), or simply preframe an image with their hands and fingers, so they can superimpose a boundary over the sprawling materials and to make sure the actors will be properly positioned within the shot.   *(Lucasfilm Ltd. and Paramount Pictures)*

Notorious (U.S.A., 1946), with Leopoldine Konstantine, Ingrid Bergman, and Claude Rains, directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

Hitchcock always regarded himself as a formalist, calculating his effects with an extraordinary degree of precision. He believed that an unmanipulated reality is filled with irrelevancies: "I do not follow the geography of a set, I follow the geography of the screen," he said. The space around actors must be orchestrated from shot to shot. "I think only of that white screen that has to be filled up the way you fill up a canvas. That's why I draw rough setups for the cameraman." Here, the mise en scène is a perfect analogue of the heroine's sense of entrapment, without violating the civilized veneer demanded by the dramatic context. The dialogue in such instances can be perfectly neutral, for the psychological tensions are conveyed by the placement of the camera and the way the characters are arranged in space. This shot might be titled: Feeling Paranoid.   *(RKO)*

Today, most movies are projected in one of two aspect ratios: the 1.85:1 (standard) and the 2.35:1 (widescreen). Some films originally photographed in widescreen are cropped down to a conventional aspect ratio after their initial commercial release. This practice is commonplace in movies that are reduced to fit the television screen. The more imaginatively the widescreen is used, the more a movie is likely to suffer when its aspect ratio is violated in this manner. Generally, at least a third of the image is hacked away by lopping off the edges of the frame. This kind of cropping can result in many visual absurdities: A speaker at the edge of the frame might be totally absent in the "revised" composition, or an actor might react in horror at something that never even comes into view. Television has an aspect ratio of approximately 1.33:1, the same as the pre-1950s screen. When shown in this format, some of the greatest widescreen films can actually seem clumsy and poorly composed.

In the traditional visual arts, frame dimensions are governed by the nature of the subject matter. Thus, a painting of a skyscraper is likely to be vertical in shape and would be

framed accordingly. A vast panoramic scene would probably be more horizontal in its dimensions. But in movies, the frame ratio is standardized and isn't necessarily governed by the nature of the materials being photographed. This is not to say that all film images are therefore inorganic, however, for in this regard the filmmaker can be likened to a sonneteer, who chooses a rigid form precisely because of the technical challenges it presents. Much of the enjoyment we derive in reading a sonnet results from the tension between the subject matter and the form, which consists of fourteen intricately rhymed lines. When technique and subject matter are fused in this way, aesthetic pleasure is heightened. The same principle can be applied to framing in film.

The constant size of the movie frame is especially hard to overcome in vertical compositions. A sense of height must be conveyed in spite of the dominantly horizontal shape of the screen. One method of overcoming the problem is through **masking**. In his 1916 drama, *Intolerance*, D. W. Griffith blocked out portions of his images through the use of black masks. These in effect connected the darkened portions of the screen with the dark-

2–3a *The Good Thief* **(Britain/Ireland/France/Canada, 2003),** with Nick Nolte (center) and Gerard Darmon, written and directed by Neil Jordan.

Where to put the camera? This is perhaps the most important decision a film director makes before shooting a scene. Notice how the original framing of the shot from *The Good Thief* (**2–3a**) suggests a conspiratorial air, as two gangsters discuss a heist. The scene takes place in a nearly empty church, with the unimportant extra on the left (out of earshot) as one of the few other people in the building. (In Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa*, an unsavory character meets another unsavory character in a church because "It's the one place nobody goes to.") If the shot were reframed, as in **2–3b**, the image is now more neutral, merely two men casually looking off frame. The secretive sense of conspiracy is totally lost. Of course, in actual practice, Jordan varies his shots, as most directors would, if for nothing else, to provide some visual variety to the scene. But the most expressive and revealing camera position is **2–3a**. *(Fox Searchlight Pictures)*

2–3b *The Good Thief* **(cropped)**

2–3c *Finding Neverland* **(U.S.A./Britain, 2004),** with Johnny Depp and Freddie Highmore, directed by Marc Forster.

Space as meaning. The differences between these two shots are subtle, yet undeniably meaningful. The story of James M. Barrie (the author of *Peter Pan* and other children's tales), the movie focuses on a period when the eccentric Scotsman was drawn to four young brothers who play in a nearby park, especially a needy and sensitive lad played by Highmore. The period is 1900. In today's more cynical and suspicious world, we might immediately suspect the man of being a child molester. Such an inference could be drawn by the cropped medium shot (**2–3d**) that cocoons the two in an intimately tight frame which virtually excludes the outside world. But in Forster's original framing (**2–3c**), the shot is looser and seems more innocent because the outside world takes up even more space than the two characters. They're in a more public (and safer) environment. *(Buena Vista Home Entertainment)*

2–3d *Finding Neverland* **(cropped)**

2–4a *Lawrence of Arabia* **(Britain, 1962),** with Omar Sharif and Peter O'Toole, directed by David Lean.

The widescreen aspect ratio provides some big problems when transferred to a video format. There are several solutions, but all of them have drawbacks. The crudest solution is simply to slice off the edges of the film image and concentrate on the middle, the assumption being that the center is where the dominant focus is likely to be. This shot would just barely contain the faces of the two characters and nothing past the center of their heads—an uncomfortably tight squeeze. A second solution is called "pan and scan" in which a TV camera scans the scene, panning to one or the other character as each speaks—like watching a tennis match on rough seas. A similar approach is to re-edit the scene by cutting to each character, thus isolating them into their own separate space cubicles. But the essence of the shot demands that we see both characters at the same time. The drama lies in the subtle interactions of the characters, and this interaction would be lost by editing. A fourth solution is called "letter-boxing"—simply to include the entire movie image and block out the top and bottom of the TV screen. Many people object to this method, complaining that nearly half the screen is thus left empty, making an already small screen even smaller. *(Columbia Pictures)*

2–4b *The Honeymooners* **(1955),** with Jackie Gleason and Art Carney, produced by CBS television.

Video and television are actually different mediums. Video is a method of transmission from another medium, usually a movie or a live theater production. In other words, video is a secondhand recording that inevitably diminishes the original artistic form. However, seeing a movie or play on video is better than not seeing it at all. Broadcast television, on the other hand, is an art that has evolved its own set of rules, including an aspect ratio that resembles the pre-1950 movie screen. Note how tightly framed this comic sketch is: The TV camera stays pretty much in the medium-shot range, and the performers confine their movements to just a few square feet of space. Blown up to fit a big movie screen, these images would probably look cramped and visually crude, notwithstanding the brilliance of the actors. Today's flat-screen TVs feature a modified widescreen aspect ratio. *(CBS)*

ness of the auditorium. To emphasize the steep fall of a soldier from a wall, the sides of the image were masked out. To stress the vast horizon of a location, Griffith masked out the lower third of the image—thus creating a widescreen effect. Many kinds of masks are used in this movie, including diagonal, circular, and oval shapes.

In the silent movie era, the **iris** (a circular or oval mask that can open up or close in on a subject) was rather overused. In the hands of a master, however, the iris can be a powerful dramatic statement. In *The Wild Child*, François Truffaut used an iris to suggest the intense concentration of a young boy: The surrounding blackness is a metaphor of how the youngster "blocks out" his social environment while focusing on an object immediately in front of him.

As an aesthetic device, the frame performs in several ways. The sensitive director is just as concerned with what's left out of the frame as with what's included. The frame

2–5a & b *House of Sand and Fog* **(U.S.A., 2003),** with Ben Kingsley, Ron Eldard, and Jonathan Ahdout, directed by Vadim Perelman.

Who's positioned where within the frame is an important source of information. This spatial language is often the principal way that we understand what's really going on in a scene. In the closer, more detailed shot from *House of Sand and Fog* (**2–5a**), for example, the two characters seem to be engaged in an intense conversation, with the policeman talking and the civilian listening closely. In the actual shot from the movie (**2–5b**), the power relationships are much clearer, as the bullying cop pushes an immigrant father literally against the wall, while his young son, slightly blurred into insignificance, looks on, too frozen in fear to know how to help his dad. Notice how the officer dominates the center of the screen, while the older man is squeezed into a tight corner of the image. The shot's mise en scène is a good example of how a picture "means." *(DreamWorks Pictures)*

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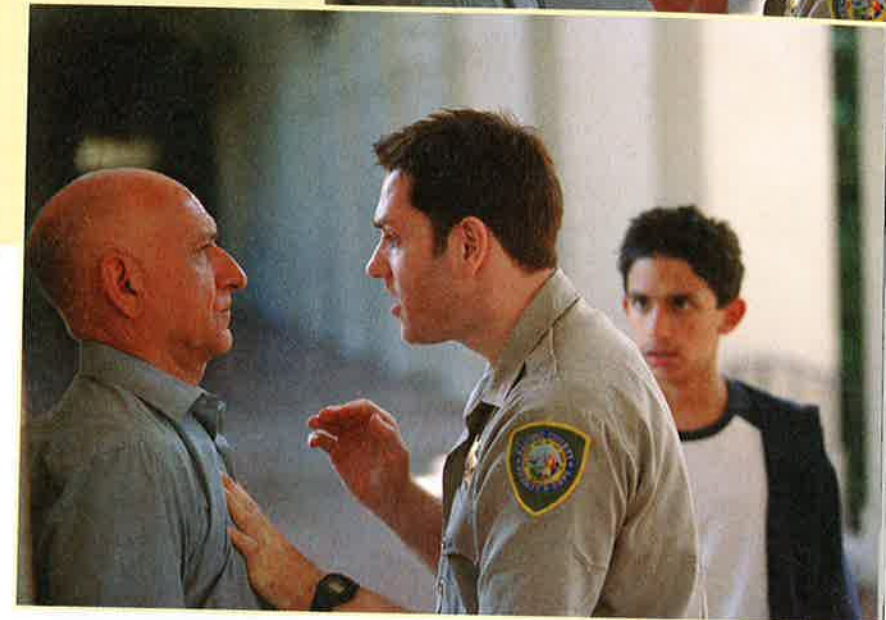
(b)

selects and delimits the subject, editing out all irrelevancies and presenting us with only a "piece" of reality. The materials included within a shot are unified by the frame, which in effect imposes an order on them. The frame is thus essentially an isolating device, a technique that permits the director to confer special attention on what might be overlooked in a wider context.

The movie frame can function as a metaphor for other types of enclosures. Some directors use the frame voyeuristically. In many of the films of Hitchcock, for example, the frame is likened to a window through which the audience may satisfy its impulse to pry into the intimate details of the characters' lives. In fact, *Psycho* and *Rear Window* use this peeping technique literally.

Certain areas within the frame can suggest symbolic ideas. By placing an object or actor within a particular section of the frame, the filmmaker can radically alter his or her comment on that object or character. Placement within the frame is another instance of how form is actually content. Each of the major sections of the frame—center, top, bottom, and sides—can be exploited for such symbolic purposes.

The central portions of the screen are generally reserved for the most important visual elements. This area is instinctively regarded by most people as the intrinsic center of interest. When we take a snapshot of a friend, we generally center his or her figure within the confines of the **viewfinder**. Since childhood, we have been taught that a drawing must

2–6a   *Napoleon* (France, 1927), directed by Abel Gance.

Napoleon is the most famous widescreen experiment of the silent era. Its triptych sequences—such as the French army's march into Italy (pictured)—were shot in what Gance called "Polyvision." The process involved the coordination of three cameras so as to photograph a 160° panorama—three times wider than the conventional aspect ratio.   *(Universal Pictures)*

be balanced, with the middle serving as the focal point. The center, then, is a kind of norm: We *expect* dominant visual elements to be placed there. Precisely because of this expectation, objects in the center tend to be visually undramatic. Central dominance is generally favored when the subject matter is intrinsically compelling. Realist filmmakers prefer central dominance because formally it's the most unobtrusive kind of framing. The viewer is allowed to concentrate on the subject matter without being distracted by visual elements that seem off center. However, even **formalists** use the middle of the screen for dominance in routine expository shots.

The area near the top of the frame can suggest ideas dealing with power, authority, and aspiration. A person placed here seems to control all the visual elements below, and for this reason, authority figures are often photographed in this manner. This dominance can also apply to objects—a palace, the top of a mountain. If an unattractive character is placed near the top of the screen, he or she can seem threatening and dangerous, superior to the other figures within the frame. However, these generalizations are true only when the other figures are approximately the same size or smaller than the dominating figure.

The top of the frame is not always used in this symbolic manner. In some instances, this is simply the most sensible area to place an object. In a medium shot of a figure, for example, the person's head is logically going to be near the top of the screen, but obviously this kind of framing isn't meant to be symbolic. It's merely reasonable, since that's where we'd *expect* the head to appear in medium shots. Mise en scène is essentially an art of the long and extreme long shot, for when the subject matter is detailed in a closer shot, the director has fewer choices concerning the distribution of visual elements.

The areas near the bottom of the frame tend to suggest meanings opposite from the top: subservience, vulnerability, and powerlessness. Objects and figures placed in these positions seem to be in danger of slipping out of the frame entirely. For this reason, these areas are often exploited symbolically to suggest danger. When there are two or more figures in the frame and they are approximately the same size, the figure nearer the bottom of the screen tends to be dominated by those above.

The left and right edges of the frame tend to suggest insignificance, because these are the areas farthest removed from the center of the screen. Objects and figures placed near the edges are literally close to the darkness outside the frame. Many directors use this darkness to suggest those symbolic ideas traditionally associated with the lack of light— the unknown, the unseen, and the fearful. In some instances, the blackness outside the frame can symbolize oblivion or even death. In movies about people who want to remain anonymous and unnoticed, the director sometimes deliberately places them off center, near the "insignificant" edges of the screen (**2–6c**).

Finally, there are some instances when a director places the most important visual elements completely off frame. Especially when a character is associated with darkness, mystery, or death, this technique can be highly effective, for the audience is most fearful of what it can't see. In the early portions of Fritz Lang's *M*, for example, the psychotic child-killer is never seen directly. We can only sense his presence, for he lurks in the darkness outside the light of the frame. Occasionally, we catch a glimpse of his shadow streaking across the set, and we're aware of his presence by the eerie tune he whistles when he's emotionally excited or upset.

There are two other off-frame areas that can be exploited for symbolic purposes: the space behind the set and the space in front of the camera. By not showing us what is happening behind a closed door, the filmmaker can provoke the viewer's curiosity, creating an unsettling effect, for we tend to fill in such vacuums with vivid imaginings. The final shot from Hitchcock's *Notorious* is a good example. The hero helps the drugged heroine past a group of Nazi agents to a waiting auto. The rather sympathetic villain (Claude Rains) escorts the two, hoping his colleagues won't become suspicious. In a **deep-focus long shot**, we see the three principals in the foreground while the Nazi agents remain near the open door of the house in the upper background—watching, wondering. The hero

2–6b *Unleashed* **(France/U.S.A./Britain, 2005),** with Jet Li (center), martial arts choreography by Yuan Wo Ping, directed by Louis Letterrier.

The widescreen is especially effective in scenes that require elaborately choreographed movements, like a dance number, or shown here, a kung fu fight sequence. Most action scenes are edited in quick cuts, to suggest a sense of fragmentation and events that are out of control. When such scenes are shot in lengthier takes, with the action coordinated within the confines of the frame, the impression is that the protagonist is totally in control, flipping off his adversaries like pesky flies. *(Rogue Pictures)*

**2–6c** *Little Children* **(U.S.A., 2006),** with Kate Winslet (far right), directed by Todd Field.

The widescreen can also be used to convey subtler, more psychological ideas. In *Little Children,* for example, the protagonist (Winslet) is an alienated and bored housewife who takes her child to play at a nearby park. A reluctant loner, she's a woman who feels at the edge of things, never the center. Note how the other mothers are slightly out of focus, far removed from her private world at the outer reaches of the frame. *(New Line Home Entertainment)*

(a)

2–7 *2001: A Space Odyssey* **(U.S.A./ Britain, 1968),** directed by Stanley Kubrick.

The widescreen is well suited to capturing the vastness of a locale. If we cropped this image to a television aspect ratio **(b)** much of the feel of the infinity of space would be lost. We tend to scan an image from left to right, and therefore, in Kubrick's composition **(a),** the astronaut seems to be in danger of slipping off into the endlessness of space. If we turn the composition upside down, however **(c),** the astronaut seems to be coming home into the safety of the spacecraft. *(MGM)*
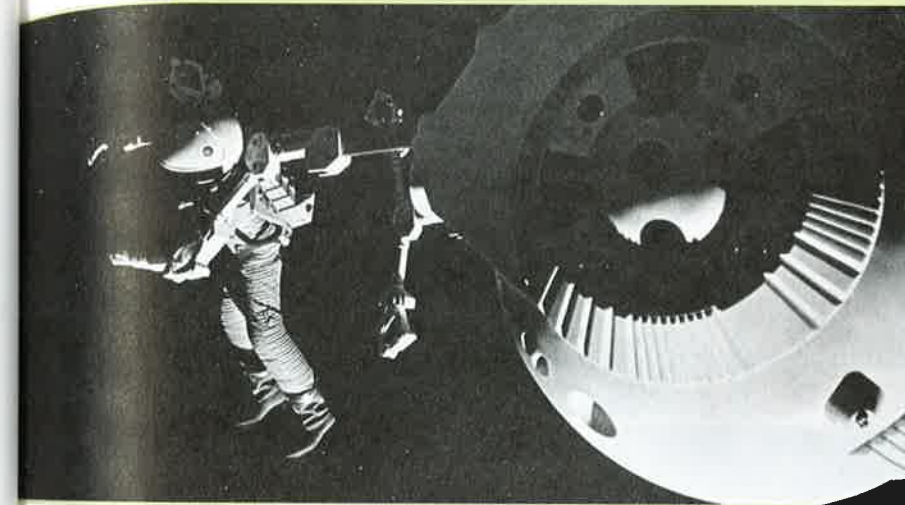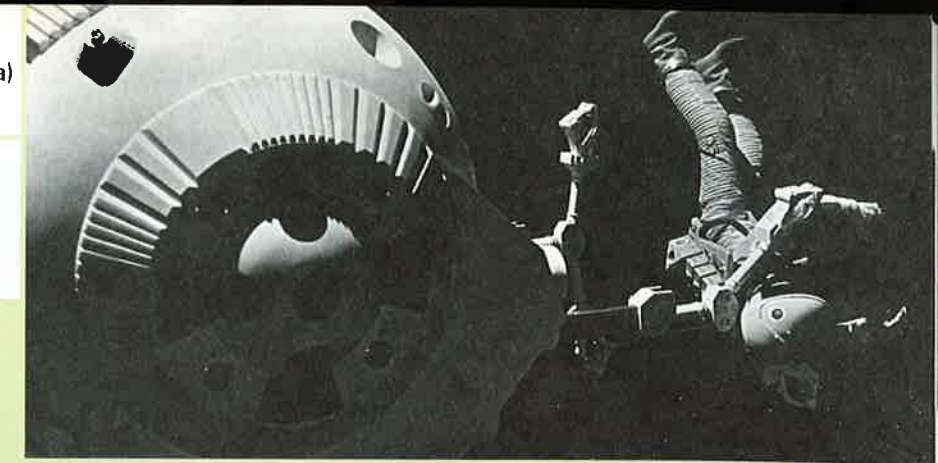
(b)

(c)

2–8 *The Indian in the Cupboard* **(U.S.A., 1995),** with Litefoot, directed by Frank Oz.

The mise en scène of the live theater is usually scaled in proportion to the human figure. Cinematic mise en scène can be microscopic or cosmic **(2–7)** with equal ease, thanks to the magic of special effects. In this photo, for example, the mise en scène represents only a few inches of space. Its scale is defined not by the human figure but by the tennis shoe that the three-inch-tall character is standing on. *(Paramount Pictures/Columbia Pictures)*
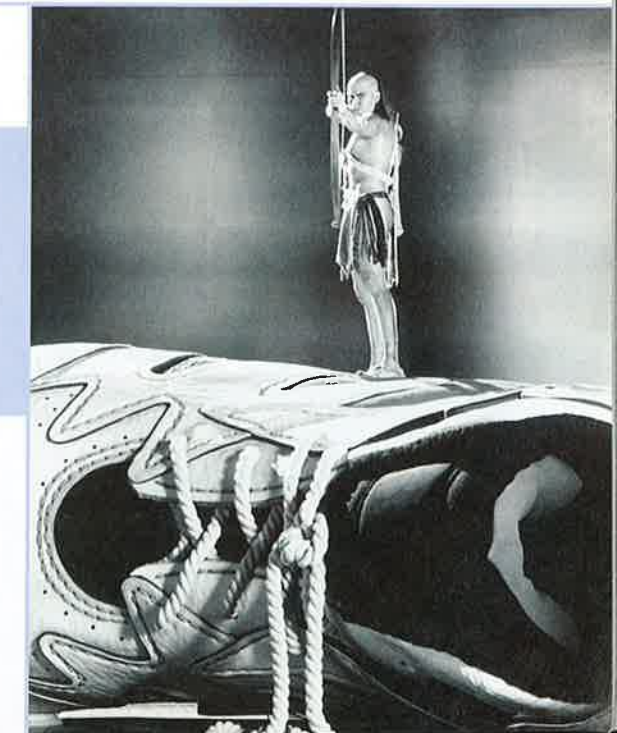
2–9 *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* **(Spain, 1988),** with Carmen Maura, directed by Pedro Almodóvar.

What's wrong with this photo? For one thing, the character is not centered in the composition. The image is asymmetrical, apparently off balance because the "empty" space on the right takes up over half the viewing area. Visual artists often use "negative space" such as this to create a vacuum in the image, a sense of something missing, something left unsaid. In this case, the pregnant protagonist (Maura) has just been dumped by her lover. He is an unworthy swine, but inexplicably, perversely, she still loves him. His abandonment has left a painful, empty place in her life.   *(Orion Pictures)*

2–10a *Greed* **(U.S.A., 1924),** with Gibson Gowland and Jean Hersholt, directed by Erich von Stroheim.

Highly symmetrical designs are generally used when a director wishes to stress stability and harmony. In this photo, for example, the carefully balanced weights of the design reinforce these (temporary) qualities. The visual elements are neatly juxtaposed in units of twos, with the two beer-filled glasses forming the focal point. The main figures balance each other, as do the two converging brick walls, the two pairs of curtains, the two windows, the two people in each window, the shape of the picture above the men, and the shape of the resting dog below them. Such rigid visual symmetry almost begs to be broken.   *(MGM)*

2–10b *Dreamgirls* **(U.S.A., 2006),** with Anika Noni Rose, Beyoncé Knowles, and Jennifer Hudson, directed by Bill Condon.

The Rule of Three is a design concept found in interior decoration, landscaping, and in virtually all the visual arts. Units grouped in threes are thought to be more visually interesting than one (which emphasizes uniqueness) or two (which emphasizes a pair sharing equally). Loosely based on the story of the Motown singing group, The Supremes, this musical dramatizes how Hudson's character, musically the most gifted of the three singers and the trio's leader, is eventually edged out in favor of Knowles's character, who is more sleek and glamourous than Hudson. Notice how Knowles's central placement makes her the dominant performer of the group.   *(DreamWorks Pictures)*

maliciously locks the villain out of the car, then drives out off frame, leaving the villain stranded without an explanation. His colleagues call out his name, and he is forced to return to the house, dreading the worst. He climbs the stairs and reenters the house with the suspicious agents, who then close the door behind them. Hitchcock never does show us what happens behind the door.

The area in front of the camera can also create unsettling effects of this sort. In John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, for example, we witness a murder without ever seeing the killer. The victim is photographed in a **medium shot** as a gun enters the bottom of the frame, just in front of the camera. Not until the end of the movie do we discover the identity of the off-frame killer.

2–11a *Once Were Warriors* **(New Zealand, 1994),** with Temuera Morrison and Rena Owen, directed by Lee Tamahori. *(Fine Line Features)*

2–12a *Mystic River* **(U.S.A., 2003),** with Sean Penn, directed by Clint Eastwood.

All the compositional elements of this shot contribute to a sense of entrapment. The Penn character has just learned that his daughter's body has been found in the woods, and he tries frantically to go to her. But he's totally surrounded by a double ring of police officers who try to restrain him, lest he destroys possible evidence around the corpse. The action is tightly framed, and the camera is placed at a slightly high angle, further reinforcing the sense of confinement. *(Warner Bros.)*

The cinematic frame segments and isolates the photographic fragment from its larger context, providing a subtle commentary on the subject matter. *Once Were Warriors* is a harrowing account of a wife batterer. The frame in this shot suggests a symbolic prison, with the wife trapped in the same confined space with her volatile husband. Note how he dominates most of the playing space, while she is crowded to the right, literally up against the wall in fear. Similarly, the shot from *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* is taken from behind an adult character as he nearly obliterates our view of a scared youngster. Compositions such as this would not be found in the fields of painting or live theater because the frame in those mediums is essentially a neutral surround of the subject matter, providing visual closure. In movies, the frame (temporarily) presents us with a frozen moment of truth, which will soon dissolve into another composition.

2–11b *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* **(Czechoslovakia, 1969),** directed by Jan Schmidt. *(New Line Cinema)*

2–12b *Poster Advertising World Trade Center* **(U.S.A., 2006),** directed by Oliver Stone.

Posters and other publicity materials can be designed with great artistry. The striking design for this poster presents two stylized columns, representing the iconic twin towers of the New York World Trade Center, before they were attacked by Islamic fanatics on September 11, 2001. Barely discernible between the towers are two first responders, symbolizing the New York police and firefighters, many of whom lost their lives in their attempt to rescue the innocent victims trapped in the debris of the collapsed buildings. The poster evokes the stark grandeur of the Modernist architecture of the buildings—symbols of American commerce and enterprise—before their fall. *(Paramount Pictures)*

WORLD TRADE CENTER

Composition and Design

Although the photographable materials of movies exist in three dimensions, one of the primary problems facing the filmmaker is much like that confronting the painter: the arrangement of shapes, colors, lines, and textures on a flat rectangular surface. In the classical cinema, this arrangement is generally held in some kind of balance or harmonious equilibrium. The desire for balance is analogous to people balancing on their feet, and indeed to most manufactured structures, which are balanced on the surface of the earth. Instinctively, we assume that balance is the norm in most human enterprises.

In movies, however, there are some important exceptions to this rule. When a visual artist wishes to stress a *lack* of equilibrium, many of the standard conventions of **classical** composition are deliberately violated. In movies, the dramatic context is usually the determining factor in composition. What is superficially a bad composition might actually be highly effective, depending on its psychological context. (**2–13b**). Many films are concerned with neurotic characters or events that are out of joint. In such cases, the director might well ignore the conventions of classical composition. Instead of centering a character in the image, his or her spiritual maladjustment can be conveyed symbolically by photographing the subject at the edge of the frame. In this manner, the filmmaker throws off the visual balance and presents us with an image that's psychologically more appropriate to the dramatic context.

There are no set rules about these matters. A classical filmmaker like Buster Keaton used mostly balanced compositions. Filmmakers outside the classical tradition tend to favor compositions that are asymmetrical or off center. In movies a variety of techniques can be used to convey the same ideas and emotions. Some filmmakers favor visual methods, others favor dialogue, still others editing or acting. Ultimately, whatever works is right (**2–14**).

The human eye automatically attempts to harmonize the formal elements of a composition into a unified whole. The eye can detect as many as seven or eight major elements of a composition simultaneously. In most cases, however, the eye doesn't wander promiscuously over the surface of an image but is guided to specific areas in sequence. The director accomplishes this through the use of a **dominant contrast**, also known as the **dominant**. The dominant is that area of an image that immediately attracts our attention because of a conspicuous and compelling contrast. It stands out in some kind of isolation from the other elements within the image. In black-and-white movies, the dominant contrast is generally achieved through a juxtaposition of lights and darks. For example, if the director wishes the viewer to look first at an actor's hand rather than his face, the lighting of the hand would be harsher than that of the face, which would be lit in a more subdued manner. In color films, the dominant is often achieved by having one color stand out from the others.

After we take in the dominant, our eye then scans the **subsidiary contrasts** that the artist has arranged to act as counterbalancing devices. Our eyes are seldom at rest with visual compositions, then, even with paintings or still photographs. We look somewhere first, then we look at those areas of diminishing interest. None of this is accidental, for visual artists deliberately structure their images so that a specific sequence is followed. Some film artists are self-conscious about the process, others do it instinctively. In short, movement in film isn't confined only to objects and people that are literally in motion.

In most cases, the visual interest of the dominant corresponds with the dramatic interest of the image. Because films have temporal and dramatic contexts, however, the dominant is often movement itself, and what some aestheticians call **intrinsic interest**. Intrinsic interest simply means that the audience, through the context of a story, knows that an object is more important dramatically than it appears to be visually. Thus, even though a gun might occupy only a small portion of the surface of an image, if we know

2–13a *Four Brothers* **(U.S.A., 2005),** with Garrett Hedlund, André Benjamin, Mark Wahlberg, and Tyrese Gibson, directed by John Singleton.

Order and chaos. Whether a movie director chooses to make the mise en scène messy or neat depends on the nature of the subject matter. In *Four Brothers,* the adopted siblings hold hands as they say grace before a meal. Notice how the lighting fixture above them parallels the placement of the four characters. The image is tightly framed, and shot at eye level, emphasizing the equality of the characters. The mise en scène embodies a sense of balance and harmony. *(Paramount Pictures)*
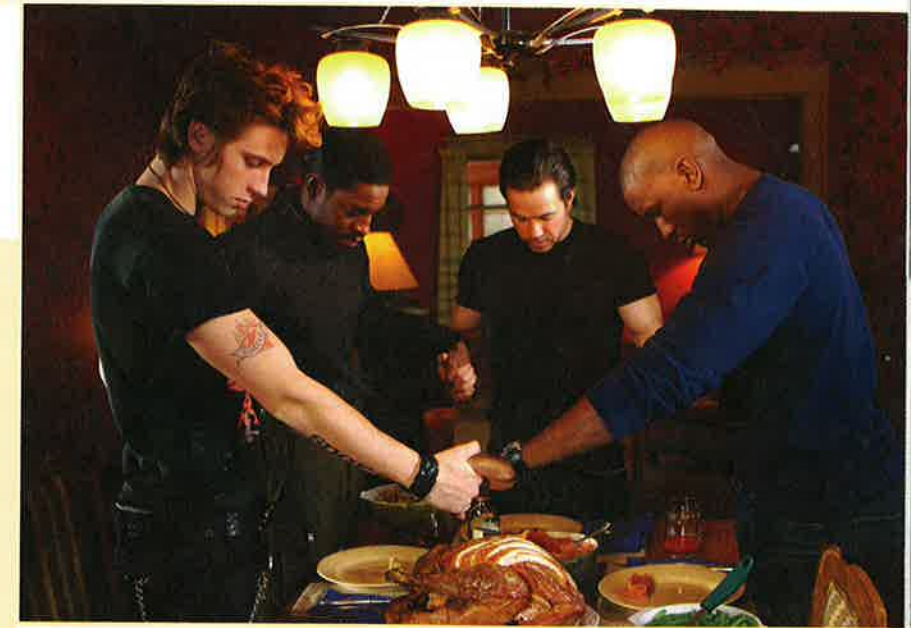
2–13b *Cry Wolf* **(U.S.A., 2005),** directed by Jeff Wadlow.

The bloody assault in *Cry Wolf,* on the other hand, is deliberately off-kilter compositionally. The fatally wounded victim slowly slides downward, into the darkness off-screen. The killer's body is also only partially in view, crowded into the lower left corner of the frame. The entire scene is flooded in a garish blue florescence. The shot is ugly, unharmonious. Precisely the point: chaotic events are rarely visually serene or harmonious.   *(Rogue Pictures)*

that the gun is *dramatically* important, it will assume dominance in the picture despite its visual insignificance.

Movement is almost always an automatic dominant contrast, provided that the other elements in the image are stationary. Even a third-rate director can guide the viewers' eyes through the use of motion. For this reason, lazy filmmakers ignore the potential richness of their images and rely solely on movement as a means of capturing the viewers' attention. On the other hand, most directors will vary their dominants, sometimes emphasizing motion, other times using movement as a subsidiary contrast only. The importance of motion varies with the kind of shot used. Movement tends to be less distracting in the longer shots but highly conspicuous in the closer ranges.

Unless the viewer has time to explore the surface of an image at leisure, visual confusion can result when there are more than eight or nine major compositional elements. If visual confusion is the deliberate intention of an image—as in a battle scene, for example—the director will sometimes overload the composition to produce this effect. In general, the eye struggles to unify various elements into an ordered pattern. For example, even in a complex design, the eye will connect similar shapes, colors, textures, etc. The very repetition of a formal element can suggest the repetition of an experience. These connections form a visual rhythm, forcing the eye to leap over the surface of the design to perceive the overall balance. Visual artists often refer to compositional elements as *weights*. In most cases, especially in classical cinema, the artist distributes these weights harmoniously over the surface of the image. In a totally symmetrical design—almost never found in fiction movies—the visual weights are distributed evenly, with the center of the composition as the axis point. Because most compositions are asymmetrical, however, the weight of one element is counterpoised with another. A shape, for example, counteracts the weight of a color. Psychologists and art theorists have discovered that certain portions of a composition are intrinsically weighted. The German art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, for instance, pointed out that we tend to scan pictures from left to right, all other compositional elements being equal. Especially in classical compositions, the image is often more heavily weighted on the left to counteract the intrinsic heaviness of the right.

The upper part of the composition is heavier than the lower. For this reason, skyscrapers, columns, and obelisks taper upward or they would appear top-heavy. Images seem more balanced when the center of gravity is kept low, with most of the weights in the lower portions of the screen. A landscape is seldom divided horizontally at the midpoint of a composition, or the sky would appear to oppress the earth. Epic filmmakers like Eisenstein and Ford created some of their most thrilling effects with precisely this technique: They let the sky dominate through its intrinsic heaviness. The terrain and its inhabitants seem overwhelmed from above.

Isolated figures and objects tend to be heavier than those in a cluster. Sometimes one object—merely by virtue of its isolation—can balance a whole group of otherwise equal objects. In many movies, the protagonist is shown apart from a hostile group, yet the two seem evenly matched despite the arithmetical differences. This effect is conveyed through the visual weight of the hero in isolation, as in a famous shot from *Yojimbo* (3–13).

Psychological experiments have revealed that certain lines suggest directional movements. Although vertical and horizontal lines seem to be visually at rest, if movement *is* perceived, horizontal lines tend to move from left to right, vertical lines, from bottom to top. Diagonal or oblique lines are more dynamic—that is, in transition. They tend to sweep upward. These psychological phenomena are important to the visual artist, especially the filmmaker, for the dramatic context is not always conducive to an overt expression of emotion. For example, if a director wishes to show a character's inward agitation within a calm context, this quality can be conveyed through the dynamic use of line: An image composed of tense diagonals can suggest the character's inner turmoil, despite the apparent lack of drama in the action. Some of the most expressive cinematic effects can be

2–14a Macbeth (U.S.A./Britain, 1971), with Francesca Annis and Jon Finch, directed by Roman Polanski.

Movie images are generally scanned in a structured sequence of eye-stops. The eye is first attracted to a dominant contrast that compels our most immediate attention by virtue of its conspicuousness, and then travels to the subsidiary areas of interest within the frame. In this photo, for example, the eye is initially attracted to the face of Lady Macbeth, which is lit in high contrast and is surrounded by darkness. We then scan the brightly lit "empty" space between her and her husband. The third area of interest is Macbeth's thoughtful face, which is lit in a more subdued manner. The visual interest of this photo corresponds to the dramatic context of the film, for Lady Macbeth is slowly descending into madness and feels spiritually alienated and isolated from her husband.   *(Columbia Pictures)*

2–14b Macbeth (U.S.A., 1948), with Peggy Webber, directed by Orson Welles.

Realists and formalists solve problems in different ways, with different visual techniques. Polanski's presentation of Lady Macbeth's madness is conveyed in a relatively realistic manner, with emphasis on acting and subtle lighting effects. Here, Orson Welles took a more formalistic approach, using physical correlatives to convey interior states, such as the iron fence's knifelike blades, which almost seem to pierce Webber's body. The fence is not particularly realistic or even functional: Welles exploited it primarily as a symbolic analogue of her inner torment. *(Republic Pictures)*

2–15a *The Decline of the American Empire* **(Canada, 1986),** with (clockwise from upper left) Louise Portal, Dominique Michel, Dorothée Berryman, Geneviève Rioux, directed by Denys Arcand.

A group of women work out, talk, and laugh in a health club while the men in their lives prepare a gourmet meal in an apartment. The circular design in this shot reinforces the air of camaraderie among the women. The shot's design embodies their shared experiences and interconnectedness: literally, a relaxed circle of friends. *(Cineplex Odeon Films)*

2–15b *Swimming Pool* **(France/Britain, 2003),** with Charlotte Rampling, directed by François Ozon.

Rampling plays a writer who is artistically and emotionally blocked. This shot is an apt visualization of her sense of constriction, her inability to break free and get her creative juices flowing again. Ozon composes the image almost as though it were an abstract painting by Ellsworth Kelly, with the frustrated writer trapped between the vertical slabs of red and white. *(Focus Features)*

2–16 *Rush Hour 3* **(U.S.A., 2007),** with Chris Tucker and Jackie Chan, directed by Brett Ratner.

Parallelism is a common principle of design, implying similarity, unity, and mutual reinforcement. Much of the comedy in the *Rush Hour* movies derives from the fact that, for all their funny differences, these two bumbling cops are remarkably similar. This shot might almost be entitled: Made for Each Other. *(New Line Cinema)*

achieved precisely through this tension between the compositional elements of an image and its dramatic context (**2–21**).

A skeletal structure underlies most visual compositions. Throughout the ages, artists have especially favored S and X shapes, triangular designs, and circles. These designs are often used simply because they are thought to be inherently beautiful. Visual artists also use certain compositional forms to emphasize symbolic concepts. For example, binary structures emphasize parallelism—virtually any two-shot will suggest the couple, doubles, shared space (**2–31**). Triadic compositions stress the dynamic interplay among three main elements (**2–23**). Circular compositions can suggest security, enclosure, the female principle (**2–15a**).

Design is generally fused with a thematic idea, at least in the best movies. In *Jules and Jim*, for example, Truffaut consistently used triangular designs, for the film deals with a trio of characters whose relationships are constantly shifting yet always interrelated. The form of the images in this case is a symbolic representation of the romantic triangle of the dramatic content. These triangular designs dynamize the visuals, keeping them off balance, subject to change (**2–18**). Generally, designs consisting of units of three, five, and seven tend to produce these effects. Designs composed of two, four, or six units seem more stable and balanced (**2–10a**).

2–17 *Superman*
(U.S.A./Britain, 1978),
with Glenn Ford (seated),
directed by Richard
Donner.

Because the top half of the frame
tends to be intrinsically heavier than
the bottom, directors usually keep
their horizon well above the middle of
the composition. They also place
most of the visual weights in the
lower portions of the screen. When a
filmmaker wishes to emphasize the
vulnerability of the characters, how-
ever, the horizon is often lowered,
and sometimes the heaviest visual
elements are placed above the char-
acters. In this witty shot, for example,
the parents of little Clark Kent are as-
tonished—and visually imperiled—
by the superhuman strength of their
adopted son. *(Warner Bros.)*

2–18 *Jules and Jim*
(France, 1961), with
Henri Serre, Jeanne
Moreau, and Oskar
Werner, directed by
François Truffaut.

Compositions grouped into units
of three, five, and seven tend to
suggest dynamic, unstable
relationships. Those organized in
units of two, four, or six, on the
other hand, tend to imply fixed,
harmonious relationships (see
2–10a). This triangular composi-
tion is organically related to the
theme of the movie, which deals
with the shifting love relationships
between the three characters.
The woman is almost invariably at
the apex of the triangle: She likes
it that way. *(Janus Films)*

Territorial Space

So far we've been concerned with the art of mise en scène primarily as it relates to the structuring of patterns on a two-dimensional surface. But since most movie images deal with the illusion of volume and depth, the film director must keep these spatial considerations in mind while composing the visuals. It's one thing to construct a pleasing arrangement of shapes, lines, colors, and textures; but movie images must also tell a story in time, a story that generally involves human beings and their problems. Unlike notes of music, then, forms in film are not usually pure—they refer specifically to objects in reality.

Directors generally emphasize volume in their images precisely because they wish to avoid an abstract, flat look in their compositions. In most cases, filmmakers compose on three visual planes: the foreground, the midground, and the background. Not only does this technique suggest a sense of depth, it can also radically alter the dominant contrast of an image, serving as a kind of qualifying characteristic, either subtle or conspicuous. For example, a figure is often placed in the midground of a composition. Whatever is placed in the foreground will comment on the figure in some way (**2–21**). Some foliage, for instance, is likely to suggest a naturalness and blending with nature. A gauzy curtain in the foreground can suggest mystery, eroticism, and femininity. The crosshatching of a window frame can suggest self-division. And so on, with as many foreground qualifiers as the director and cinematographer can think of. These same principles apply to backgrounds, although objects placed in rear areas tend to yield in dominance to mid- and foreground ranges.

One of the most elementary, yet crucial, decisions the film director makes is what shot to use vis-à-vis the materials photographed. That is, how much detail should be included within the frame? How close should the camera get to the subject—which is another way of saying how close should *we* get to the subject, since the viewer's eye tends to identify with the camera's lens. These are not minor problems, for the amount of space included within the frame can radically affect our response to the photographed materials (**2–3**). With any given subject, the filmmaker can use a variety of shots, each of which includes or excludes a given amount of surrounding space. But how much space is just right in a shot? What's too much or too little?

Space is a medium of communication, and the way we respond to objects and people within a given area is a constant source of information in life as well as in movies. In virtually any social situation, we receive and give off signals relating to our use of space and those people who share it. Most of us aren't particularly conscious of this medium, but we instinctively become alerted whenever we feel that certain social conventions about space are being violated. For example, when people enter a movie theater, they tend to seat themselves at appropriate intervals from each other. But what's appropriate? And who or what defines it? Why do we feel threatened when someone takes a seat next to us in a nearly empty theater? After all, the seat isn't ours, and the other person has paid for the privilege of sitting wherever he or she wishes. Is it paranoid to feel anxiety in such a situation, or is it a normal instinctive response?

A number of psychologists and anthropologists—including Konrad Lorenz, Robert Sommers, and Edward T. Hall—have explored these and related questions. Their findings are especially revealing in terms of how space is used in cinema. In his study *On Aggression,* for example, Lorenz discusses how most animals—including humans—are territorial. That is, they lay claim to a given area and defend it from outsiders. This territory is a kind of personal haven of safety and is regarded by the organism as an extension of itself. When living creatures are too tightly packed into a given space, the result can be stress, tension, and anxiety. In many cases, when this territorial imperative is violated, the intrusion can provoke aggressive and violent behavior, and sometimes a battle for dominance ensues over control of the territory.

2–19a *The Graduate* **(U.S.A., 1967),** with Anne Bancroft and Dustin Hoffman, directed by Mike Nichols.

Scary ladies. Viewers can be made to feel insecure or isolated when a hostile foreground element (Bancroft) comes between us and a figure we identify with. In this scene, our hero, Benjamin Braddock, college graduate, feels threatened. An older woman, a friend of his parents, tries to seduce him—he thinks. He's not sure. His feelings of entrapment and imminent violation are conveyed not by his words, which are stammering and embarrassed, but by the mise en scène. Blocked off in front by her seminude body, he is also virtually confined at his rear by the window frame—an enclosure within an enclosure (the room) within the enclosure of the movie frame. *(Avco Embassy Pictures)*

2–20a *Michael Clayton* **(U.S.A., 2007),** with George Clooney and Tom Wilkinson, directed by Tony Gilroy.

Clooney plays a "fixer," a high-priced attorney in a corporate law firm who is sent to "rescue" his colleague Wilkinson. The older man suffers from bipolar disorder and refuses to take his meds. As a result, he begins to act crazy, threatening to take their law firm down with his incriminating, guilty knowledge. In this scene, he paces nervously, refusing to cooperate, putting as much space between him and his toxic colleague as possible. Space becomes a symbolic buffer, a safety zone. *(Warner Bros.)*

2–19b *The Grifters* **(U.S.A., 1990),** with John Cusack and Anjelica Huston, directed by Stephen Frears.

Every shot can be looked at as an ideological cell, its mise en scène a graphic illustration of the power relationships between the characters. Where the characters are placed within the frame is more than an aesthetic choice—it's profoundly territorial. In this film, the protagonist (Cusack) has an unresolved Oedipal conflict with his mother (Huston). They are in an almost constant struggle for dominance. The mise en scène reveals who's the stronger. In a predominantly light field, the darker figure dominates. The right side of the frame is heavier—more dominant—than the left. The standing figure towers over the seated figure. The top of the frame (Huston's realm) dominates the center and bottom. She's a killer. *(Miramax Films)*

2–20b *A History of Violence* **(U.S.A., 2005),** with Ashton Holmes and Viggo Mortensen, directed by David Cronenberg.

A teenage son confronts his father—a man he admires, respects, and loves—because the father has been lying to his family and community, pretending to be someone he isn't. The confrontation is territorial as well as vocal, for the youth invades his father's personal space, challenging his dad to tell him the truth about his past. *(New Line Cinema)*

Territories have a spatial hierarchy of power. That is, the most dominant organism of a community is literally given more space, whereas the less dominant are crowded together. The amount of space an organism occupies is generally proportioned to the degree of control it enjoys within a given territory. These spatial principles can be seen in many human communities as well. A classroom, for example, is usually divided into a teaching area and a student seating area, but the proportion of space allotted to the au-

2–21 *The 400 Blows* **(France, 1959),** with Jean-Pierre Léaud, directed by François Truffaut.

The space between the main characters and the camera is usually kept clear so we can view the characters without impediment. But sometimes filmmakers deliberately obscure our view to make a dramatic or psychological point. The reckless 13-year-old protagonist of *The 400 Blows* tries to act tough most of the time, and that usually means stay cool, and don't let them see you cry. When the dramatic context or the character's nature doesn't permit the film artist to express emotions openly, they can sometimes be conveyed through purely visual means. Here, the youth's anxiety and tenseness are expressed through a variety of formal techniques. His inward agitation is conveyed by the diagonal lines of the fence. His sense of entrapment is suggested by the tight framing (sides, top, bottom), the shallow focus (rear), and the obstruction of the fence itself (foreground). This boy's going nowhere.   *(Janus Films)*

thority figure is greater than that allotted to each of those being instructed. The spatial structure of virtually any kind of territory used by humans betrays a discernible concept of authority. No matter how egalitarian we like to think ourselves, most of us conform to these spatial conventions. When a distinguished person enters a crowded room, for example, most people instinctively make room for him or her. In fact, they're giving that person far more room than they themselves occupy.

But what has all this got to do with movies? A great deal, for space is one of the principal mediums of communication in film. The way that people are arranged in space can tell us a lot about their social and psychological relationships. In film, dominant characters are almost always given more space to occupy than others—unless the film deals with the loss of power or the social insignificance of a character. The amount of space taken up by a character in a movie doesn't necessarily relate to that person's actual social dominance, but to his or her dramatic importance. Authoritarian figures like kings generally occupy a larger amount of space than peasants; but if a film is primarily about peasants,

2–22a & b *Broken Flowers* **(U.S.A., 2005),** with Bill Murray and Sharon Stone, written and directed by Jim Jarmusch.

(b)

(a)

The frame temporarily defines the psychic territory of an image. In the cropped photo (2–22a), the Murray character seems to be waking up after a blissful night of lovemaking. But in the movie's full image (b), he looks to be in mortal danger of being swallowed up by his bed companion: She's taken up over two-thirds of the space, and her hand is splayed across his face like an open jaw—a phenomenon psychiatrists refer to as the *vagina dentata* (vagina with teeth) anxiety syndrome. *Broken Flowers* won the prestigious Grand Prix award at the Cannes International Film festival.   *(Focus Features)*

2–23 *Igby Goes Down* **(U.S.A., 2002),** with Ryan Phillippe, Susan Sarandon, and Jeff Goldblum, written and directed by Burr Steers.

There's not much love lost between an alienated son (Phillippe) and his mother's boyfriend (Goldblum). The seating arrangement is revealing. The triangular composition is weighted with the mother-from-hell and her boyfriend-from-beyond-hell sharing the same territory. The son is isolated on the left, an afterthought. *(United Artists)*

2-24a *The Blue Angel* **(Germany, 1930),** with Marlene Dietrich (left foreground), directed by Josef von Sternberg. *(Janus Films)*

Density of texture refers to the amount of visual detail in a picture. How much information does the filmmaker pack into the image and why? Most movies are moderately textured, depending on the amount of light thrown on the subject matter. Some images are stark, whereas others are densely textured. The degree of density is often a symbolic analogue of the quality of life in the world of the film. The cheap cabaret setting of *The Blue Angel* is chaotic and packed, swirling in smoke and cluttered with tawdry ornaments. Everybody looks for sale. The atmosphere reeks of overkill. The stark futuristic world of *THX 1138* is sterile, empty.

2-24b *THX 1138* **(U.S.A., 1971),** with Robert Duvall and Donald Pleasence, directed by George Lucas.   *(Warner Bros.)*

2-25a *Grand Illusion* **(France, 1937),** with (center to right) Erich von Stroheim, Pierre Fresnay, and Jean Gabin, written and directed by Jean Renoir.

Tight and loose framing derive their symbolic significance from the dramatic context: they're not intrinsically meaningful. In Renoir's World War I masterpiece, for example, the tight frame, in effect, becomes a symbolic prison, a useful technique in films dealing with entrapment, confinement, or literal imprisonment.   *(Janus Films)*

2-25b *The Prize Winner of Defiance Ohio* **(U.S.A., 2005),** with Julianne Moore, written and directed by Jane Anderson.

Based on a true story, this film is about a small-town Ohio housewife in the 1950s, a woman with ten children and a drunken lout for a husband. Her children are a drain on her energies, but also her greatest comfort in life, a source of love and emotional support. This tightly framed shot provides nurturing intimacy: Her necklace of children suggests a protective buffer against the hostile outside world. The tight framing doesn't confine, but rather cocoons the character. *(DreamWorks Pictures)*

they will dominate spatially. In short, dominance is defined contextually in film—not necessarily the way it's perceived in real life.

The movie frame is also a kind of territory, though a temporary one, existing only for the duration of the shot. The way space is shared within the frame is one of the major tools of the filmmaker, who can define, adjust, and redefine human relationships by exploiting spatial conventions. Furthermore, once a relationship has been established, the director can go on to other matters simply by changing the camera **setup**. The film director, in other words, is not confined to a spatial area that's permanent throughout the scene. A master of mise en scène can express shifting psychological and social nuances with a single shot—by exploiting the space between characters, the depth planes within the images, the intrinsically weighted areas of the frame, and the direction the characters are facing vis-à-vis the camera.

2-26 The full-front position is the most intimate type of staging; the most accessible, direct, and clear; and often the most aggressive, especially if the actors are moving toward the camera.

2-26a **Sons of the Desert (U.S.A., 1933),** with Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, directed by William Seiter.

Actors almost never look at the camera, but there have been a few exceptions, especially among comic performers. Like Eddie Murphy in our own time, Oliver Hardy was a supreme master of this technique. Whenever Stan does something really dumb (which usually results in a loss of dignity for his partner), Ollie turns to the camera—to us—trying to restrain his exasperation, appealing to our sympathy as fellow superior beings. Only we can truly appreciate the profound depths of his patience. The dimwitted Stanley, totally puzzled as usual, is standing in a quarter-turn position, absorbed by other matters entirely, wondering how he'll defend himself against Ollie's inevitable another-fine-mess accusation. (MGM)

2-26b **The Manchurian Candidate (U.S.A., 2005),** with Liev Schreiber and Meryl Streep, directed by Jonathan Demme.

The full front position offers us an intimate view of the characters, especially in close-up: We can explore their faces as spiritual landscapes. In complex shots such as this, we are privy to more information than the characters themselves. In this shot, for example, a cunning, manipulative mother is unsure whether she's still able to control her troubled son, who is trying to break her hold over him. (Paramount Pictures)

2-26c **George A. Romero's Land of the Dead (U.S.A., 2005),** with Eugene A. Clark (center front), written and directed by George A. Romero.

The full-front position can also be confrontational, for the characters appear to face us straight on, without flinching. What could be more appropriate for a scary horde of evolving zombies as they move toward the camera—toward us—in their attack on the city of the living. These soulless creatures are led in their onslaught by Zombie Big Daddy (Clark) in their unquenchable quest for human prey. (Universal Studios)

An actor can be photographed in any of five basic positions, each conveying different psychological undertones: (1) *full front*—facing the camera; (2) the *quarter turn*; (3) *profile*—looking off frame left or right; (4) the *three-quarter turn*; and (5) *back to camera*. Because the viewer identifies with the camera's lens, the positioning of the actor vis-à-vis the camera will determine many of our reactions. The more we see of the actor's face, the greater our sense of privileged intimacy; the less we see, the more mysterious and inaccessible the actor will seem.

The full-front position is the most intimate—the character is looking in our direction, inviting our complicity. In most cases, of course, actors ignore the camera—ignore us—yet our privileged position allows us to observe them with their defenses down, their vulnerabilities exposed. On those rare occasions when a character acknowledges our presence by addressing the camera, the sense of intimacy is vastly increased, for in effect we agree to become his or her chosen confidants. One of the greatest masters of this technique was Oliver Hardy, whose famous slow burn was a direct plea for sympathy and understanding (2–26a).

The quarter turn is the favored position of most filmmakers, for it provides a high degree of intimacy but with less emotional involvement than the full-front position. The profile position is more remote. The character seems unaware of being observed, lost in his or her own thoughts (2–27). The three-quarter turn is more anonymous. This position is useful for conveying a character's unfriendly or antisocial feelings, for in effect, the character is partially turning his or her back on us, rejecting our interest (2–28). When a character has his or her back to the camera, we can only guess what's taking place internally. This position is often used to suggest a character's alienation from the world. It is useful in conveying a sense of concealment, mystery. We want to see more (2–29).

The amount of open space within the territory of the frame can be exploited for symbolic purposes. Generally speaking, the closer the shot, the more confined the photographed figures appear to be. Such shots are usually referred to as **tightly framed**. Conversely, the longer, **loosely framed** shots tend to suggest freedom. Prison films often use tightly framed **close-ups** and medium shots because the frame functions as a kind of symbolic prison. In *A Condemned Man Escapes,* for example, Robert Bresson begins the movie with a close-up of the hero's hands, which are bound by a pair of handcuffs. Throughout the film, the prisoner makes elaborate preparations to escape, and Bresson preserves the tight framing to emphasize the sense of claustrophobia that the hero finds unendurable. This spatial tension is not released until the end of the movie when the protagonist disappears into the freedom of the darkness outside the prison walls. His

2-27 **Sahara (U.S.A., 2005),** with Penélope Cruz and Matthew McConaughey, directed by Breck Eisner.

The profile position catches characters unaware as they face each other or look off frame left or right. We're allowed unimpeded freedom to stare, to analyze. Less intimate than the full-front or quarter-turn position, the profile view is also less emotionally involving. We view the characters from a detached, neutral perspective. (Paramount Pictures)

2–28 *All or Nothing* **(Britain, 2002),** with Timothy Spall (extreme right, in three-quarter-turn position), directed by Mike Leigh.

The three-quarter-turn position is a virtual rejection of the camera, a refusal to cooperate with our desire to see more. This type of staging tends to make us feel like voyeurs prying into the private lives of the characters, who seem to wish we'd go away. In this family dinner scene, the actors's body language and Leigh's mise en scène embody a sense of profound alienation. Each character seems to be imprisoned in his or her own space cubicle: They look buried alive. *(United Artists)*

2–29 *Red Desert* **(Italy, 1964),** with Carlo Chionetti, Monica Vitti, and Richard Harris (back to camera), directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.

When characters turn their backs to the camera, they seem to reject us outright or to be totally unaware of our existence. We want to see and analyze their facial expressions, but we're not permitted this privilege. The character remains an enigma. Antonioni is one of the supreme masters of mise en scène, expressing complex interrelationships with a minimum of dialogue. The protagonist in this film (Vitti) is just recovering from an emotional breakdown. She is still anxious and fearful, even of her husband (Chionetti). In this shot, she seems trapped, like a wounded and exhausted animal, between her husband and his business associate. Note how the violent splashes of red paint on the walls suggest a hemorrhaging effect. *(Rizzoli Film)*

triumphant escape is photographed in a loosely framed long shot—the only one in the film—which also symbolizes his sense of spiritual release. Framing and spatial metaphors of this kind are common in films dealing with the theme of confinement—either literal, as in Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (**2–25a**), or psychological, as in *The Graduate* (**2–19a**).

Often a director can suggest ideas of entrapment by exploiting perfectly neutral objects and lines on the set. In such cases, the formal characteristics of these literal objects tend to close in on a figure, at least when viewed on the flat screen (see **2–36a**). Territorial space within a frame can be manipulated with considerable psychological complexity. When a figure leaves the frame, for example, the camera can adjust to this sudden vacuum in the composition by **panning** slightly to make allowances for a new balance of weights. Or the camera can remain stationary, thus suggesting a sense of loss symbolized by the empty space that the character formerly occupied. Hostility and suspicion between two characters can be conveyed by keeping them at the edges of the composition, with a maximum of space between them (**2–31d**), or by having an intrusive character force his or her physical presence into the other character's territory, which is temporarily defined by the confines of the frame.

2–30 **Publicity photo for** *Much Ado About Nothing* **(Britain, 1993),** with Michael Keaton, Keanu Reeves, Robert Sean Leonard, Kate Beckinsale, Emma Thompson, Kenneth Branagh, and Denzel Washington, directed by Branagh.

Publicity photos often feature performers who look directly into the camera, inviting us to join their world, seducing us with their friendly smiles. Of course, during the movie itself, actors almost never look into the camera. We are merely allowed to be voyeurs while they studiously ignore our existence. *(The Samuel Goldwyn Company)*

2–31a   *Hustle & Flow* **(U.S.A., 2005),** with Taryn Manning and Terrence Howard, directed by Craig Brewer.   *(Paramount Pictures)*

2–31a, b, c, d. Although all these photos portray a conversation between a man and a woman, each is staged at a different proxemic range, suggesting totally different undertones. The intimate proxemics of *Hustle & Flow* are charged with erotic energy. The characters are literally flesh to flesh. In *Garden State* the characters are strongly attracted to each other, but they remain at a more discreet personal proxemic range, with each respecting the other's space. The social proxemic distance between a long married husband and wife (she is descending into Alzheimer's disease) in *Away from Her* suggests her increasing remoteness from him and his anguished sense of loss of the woman he loves. The characters in *Zabriskie Point* are barely on speaking terms. The nearly public proxemic range between them implies a lot of suspicion and reserve. Psychologically, they're miles apart. Each of these shots contains similar subject matter, but the main content of each is defined by its form—the proxemic ranges between the actors.

2–31b   *Garden State* **(U.S.A., 2004),** with Natalie Portman and Zach Braff, written and directed by Braff. *(Twentieth Century Fox)*

2–31c   *Away from Her* **(Canada, 2007),** with Julie Christie and Gordon Pinsent, directed by Sarah Polley. *(Lionsgate)*

2–31d   *Zabriskie Point* **(U.S.A., 1970),** with Rod Taylor and Daria Halprin, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.   *(MGM)*

Proxemic Patterns

Spatial conventions vary from culture to culture, as anthropologist Edward T. Hall demonstrated in such studies as *The Hidden Dimension* and *The Silent Language*. Hall discovered that **proxemic patterns**—the relationships of organisms within a given space—can be influenced by external considerations. Climate, noise level, and the degree of light all tend to alter the space between individuals. People in Anglo-Saxon and Northern European cultures tend to use more space than those in warmer climates. Noise, danger, and lack of light tend to make people move closer together. Taking these cultural and contextual considerations into account, Hall subdivided the way people use space into four major proxemic patterns: (1) the *intimate*, (2) the *personal*, (3) the *social*, (4) the *public* distances.

Intimate distances range from skin contact to about eighteen inches away. This is the distance of physical involvement—of love, comfort, and tenderness between individuals. With strangers, such distances would be regarded as intrusive. Most people would

2-32 *Persona* **(Sweden, 1966),** with Liv Ullmann, written and directed by Ingmar Bergman.

Throughout this scene, which contains no dialogue, Bergman uses space to communicate his ideas—space within the frame and the space implied between the camera (us) and the subject. The character is in a hospital room watching the news on television **(a)**. Suddenly, she sees a horrifying scene of a Buddhist monk setting himself on fire to protest the war in Vietnam. Still confined to the full shot, she retreats to the corner of the room, to the very edge of the frame **(b)**. Bergman then cuts to a medium shot **(c)**, intensifying our emotional involvement. The full horror of her reaction is conveyed by the extreme close-up **(d)**, forcing us into an intimate proximity with her. *(United Artists)*
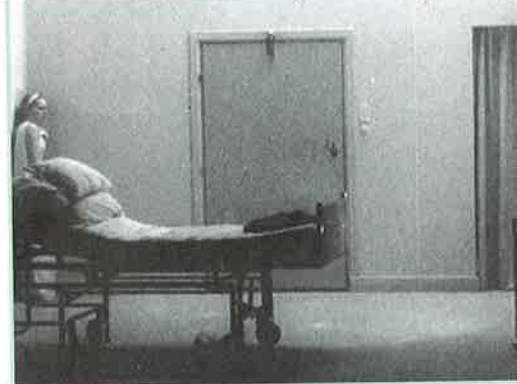
react with suspicion and hostility if their space were invaded by someone they didn't know very well. In many cultures, maintaining an intimate distance in public is considered bad taste.

The personal distance ranges roughly from eighteen inches away to about four feet away. Individuals can touch if necessary, since they are literally an arm's-length apart. These distances tend to be reserved for friends and acquaintances rather than lovers or members of a family. Personal distances preserve the privacy between individuals, yet these ranges don't necessarily suggest exclusion, as intimate distances almost always do.

Social distances range from four feet to about twelve feet. These are the distances usually reserved for impersonal business and casual social gatherings. It's a friendly range in most cases, yet somewhat more formal than the personal distance. Ordinarily, social distances are necessary when there are more than three members of a group. In some cases, it would be considered rude for two individuals to preserve an intimate or personal distance within a social situation. Such behavior might be interpreted as standoffish.

Public distances extend from twelve feet to twenty-five feet and more. This range tends to be formal and rather detached. Displays of emotion are considered bad form at these distances. Important public figures are generally seen in the public range, and because a considerable amount of space is involved, people generally must exaggerate their gestures and raise their voices to be understood clearly.

Most people adjust to proxemic patterns instinctively. We don't usually say to ourselves, "This person is invading my intimate space" when a stranger happens to stand eighteen inches away from us. However, unless we're in a combative mood, we involuntarily tend to step back in such circumstances. Obviously, social context is also a determining factor in proxemic patterns. In a crowded subway car, for example, virtually everyone is in an intimate range, yet we generally preserve a public attitude by not speaking to the person whose body is literally pressed against our own.

Proxemic patterns are perfectly obvious to anyone who has bothered to observe the way people obey certain spatial conventions in actual life. But in movies, these patterns are also related to the **shots** and their distance ranges. Although shots are not always defined by the literal space between the camera and the object photographed, in terms of psychological effect, shots tend to suggest physical distances.

Usually, filmmakers have a number of options concerning what kind of shot to use to convey the action of a scene. What determines their choice—though usually instinctively rather than consciously—is the emotional impact of the different proxemic ranges. Each proxemic pattern has an approximate camera equivalent. The intimate distances, for example, can be likened to the close and **extreme close shot** ranges. The personal distance is approximately a medium close range. The social distances correspond to the medium and **full shot** ranges. And the public distances are roughly within the long and **extreme long shot** ranges. Because our eyes identify with the camera's lens, in effect we are placed within these ranges vis-à-vis the subject matter. When we are offered a close-up of a character, for example, in a sense we feel that we're in an intimate relationship with that character. In some instances, this technique can bind us to the character, forcing us to care about her and to identify with her problems. If the character is a villain, the close-up can produce an emotional revulsion in us; in effect, a threatening character seems to be invading our space.

In general, the greater the distance between the camera and the subject, the more emotionally neutral we remain. Public proxemic ranges tend to encourage a certain detachment. Conversely, the closer we are to a character, the more we feel that we're in proximity with him and hence the greater our emotional involvement. "Long shot for comedy, close-up for tragedy" was one of Chaplin's most famous pronouncements. The proxemic principles are sound, for when we are close to an action—a person slipping on a banana peel, for example—it's seldom funny, because we are concerned for the person's safety. If we see the same event from a greater distance, however, it often strikes us as comical. Chaplin used close-ups sparingly for this very reason. As long as Charlie remains in long shots, we tend to be amused by his antics and absurd predicaments. In scenes of greater emotional impact, however, Chaplin resorted to closer shots, and their effect is often devastating on the audience. We suddenly realize that the situation we've been laughing at is no longer funny.

Perhaps the most famous instance of the power of Chaplin's close-ups is found at the conclusion of *City Lights*. Charlie has fallen in love with an impoverished flower vendor who is blind. She believes him to be an eccentric millionaire, and out of vanity he allows her to continue in this delusion. By engaging in a series of monumental labors—love has reduced him to work—he manages to scrape together enough money for her to receive an operation that will restore her sight. But he is dragged off to jail before she can hardly thank him for the money. The final scene takes place several months later. The young woman can now see and owns her own modest flower shop. Charlie is released from prison, and disheveled and dispirited, he meanders past her shop window. She sees him gazing at her wistfully and jokes to an assistant that she's apparently made a new

2–33a *The Gold Rush* (U.S.A., 1925), with Charles Chaplin and Georgia Hale, directed by Chaplin.

Both these scenes involve a fear of rejection by a woman Charlie holds in awe. The scene from *The Gold Rush* is predominantly comical. The tramp has belted his baggy pants with a piece of rope, but he doesn't realize it is also a dog's leash, and while dancing with the saloon girl, Charlie is yanked to the floor by the jittery dog at the other end of the rope. Because the camera remains relatively distant from the action, we tend to be more objective and detached and we laugh at his futile attempts to preserve his dignity. On the other hand, the famous final shot from *City Lights* isn't funny at all and produces a powerful emotional effect. Because the camera is in close, *we* get close to the situation. The proxemic distance between the camera and the subject forces us to identify more with his feelings, which we can't ignore at this range. This guy's in agony. *(rbc Films)*

2–33b *City Lights* (U.S.A., 1931), with Charles Chaplin, directed by Chaplin.

convey what's going on, most filmmakers will opt for clarity and gain their emotional impact through some other means. But there are many times when shot choice isn't necessarily determined by functional considerations.

Open and Closed Forms

The concepts of **open** and **closed forms** are generally used by art historians and critics, but these terms can also be useful in film analysis. Like most theoretical constructs, they are best used in a relative rather than absolute sense. There are no movies that are completely open or closed in form, only those that tend toward these polarities. Like other critical terms, these should be applied only when they're relevant and helpful in understanding what actually exists in a movie.

Open and closed forms are two distinct attitudes about reality. Each has its own stylistic and technical characteristics. The two terms are loosely related to the concepts of realism and formalism as they have been defined in these chapters. In general, realist

2–34 *Mrs. Soffel* (U.S.A., 1984), with Diane Keaton (center), directed by Gillian Armstrong.

Period films have a tendency to look stagey and researched, especially when the historical details are too neatly presented and the characters are posed in a tightly controlled setting. Armstrong avoided this pitfall by staging many of her scenes in open form, almost like a documentary caught on the run. Note how the main character (Keaton) and her children are almost obscured by the unimportant extra at the left. A more formal image would have eliminated such "distractions" as well as the cluttered right side of the frame and brought the principal characters toward the foreground. Armstrong achieves a more realistic and spontaneous effect by deliberately avoiding an "arranged" look in her mise en scène. *(MGM/United Artists)*

conquest. Out of pity she goes out to the street and offers him a flower and a small coin. Instantly, she recognizes his touch. Hardly able to believe her eyes, she can only stammer, "You?" In a series of alternating close-ups, their embarrassment is unbearably prolonged (2–33b). Clearly, he is not the idol of her romantic fantasies, and he's painfully aware of her disappointment. Finally, he stares at her with an expression of shocking emotional nakedness. The film ends on this image of sublime vulnerability.

The choice of a shot is generally determined by practical considerations. Usually, the director selects the shot that most clearly conveys the dramatic action of a scene. If there is a conflict between the effect of certain proxemic ranges and the clarity needed to

filmmakers tend to use open forms, whereas formalists lean toward closed. Open forms tend to be stylistically recessive, whereas closed forms are generally self-conscious and visually appealing.

In terms of design, open form emphasizes informal, unobtrusive compositions. Often, such images seem to have no discernible structure and suggest a random form of organization. Objects and figures seem to have been found rather than deliberately arranged (2–35). Closed form emphasizes a more stylized design. Although such images can suggest a superficial realism, seldom do they have that accidental, discovered look that typifies open forms. Objects and figures are more precisely placed within the frame, and the balance of weights is elaborately worked out.

Open forms stress apparently simple techniques, because with these unselfconscious methods the filmmaker is able to emphasize the immediate, the familiar, the intimate aspects of reality. Sometimes such images are photographed in only partially controlled situations, and these **aleatory** conditions can produce a sense of spontaneity and directness that would be difficult to capture in a rigidly controlled context.

Closed forms are more likely to emphasize the unfamiliar. The images are rich in textural contrasts and compelling visual effects. Because the mise en scène is more precisely controlled and stylized, there is often a deliberate artificiality in these images—a sense of visual improbability. Closed forms also tend to be more densely saturated with visual information; richness of form takes precedence over considerations of surface realism. If a conflict should arise, formal beauty is sacrificed for truth in open forms; in closed forms, on the other hand, literal truth is sacrificed for beauty.

Compositions in open and closed forms exploit the frame differently. In open-form images, the frame tends to be de-emphasized. It suggests a window, a temporary masking, and implies that more important information lies outside the edges of the composition. Space is continuous in these shots, and to emphasize its continuity outside the frame, directors often favor panning their camera across the locale. The shot seems inadequate, too narrow in its confines to contain the copiousness of the subject matter. Like many of the paintings of Edgar Degas (who usually favored open forms), objects and even figures are arbitrarily cut off by the frame to reinforce the continuity of the subject matter beyond the formal edges of the composition, like a haphazard snapshot.

In closed forms, the shot represents a miniature proscenium arch, with all the necessary information carefully structured within the confines of the frame. Space seems enclosed and self-contained rather than continuous. Elements outside the frame are irrelevant, at least in terms of the formal properties of the individual shot, which is isolated from its context in space and time.

For these reasons, still photos taken from movies that are predominantly in open form are not usually very pretty. There is nothing intrinsically striking or eye-catching about them. Books about movies tend to favor photos in closed form because they're more obviously beautiful, more "composed." The beauty of an open-form image, on the other hand, is more elusive. It can be likened to a snapshot that miraculously preserves some candid rare expression, a kind of haphazard instant of truth.

In open-form movies, the dramatic action generally leads the camera. In *Traffic*, for example, Steven Soderburgh emphasized the fluidity of the camera as it dutifully follows the actors wherever they wish to go, seemingly placed at their disposal (see 1–34b). Such films suggest that chance plays an important role in determining visual effects. Needless to say, it's not what actually happens on a set that's important, but what *seems* to be happening on the screen. In fact, many of the most "spontaneous" effects in an open-form movie are achieved after much painstaking labor and manipulation.

In closed-form films, on the other hand, the camera often anticipates the dramatic action. Objects and actors are visually blocked out within the confines of a predetermined camera setup. **Anticipatory setups** tend to imply fatality or determinism, for in effect, the camera seems to know what will happen even before it occurs. In some of

2–35 *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (**Italy, 1970**), with Dominique Sanda (center), directed by Vittorio De Sica.

Realist directors are more likely to prefer open forms, which tend to suggest fragments of a larger external reality. Design and composition are generally informal. Influenced by the aesthetic of the documentary, open-form images seem to have been discovered rather than arranged. Excessive balance and calculated symmetry are avoided in favor of an intimate and spontaneous effect. Still photos in open form are seldom picturesque or obviously artful. Instead, they suggest a frozen instant of truth—a snapshot wrested from the fluctuations of time. This scene deals with the exportation of Italian Jews to Nazi Germany. Their lives are suddenly thrown into chaos. *(Cinema 5)*

2–36a & b *The Weather Man* (**U.S.A., 2005**), with Michael Caine and Nicolas Cage, directed by Gore Verbinski.

The more detailed medium shot (**2–36b**) seems less confining, despite its tight framing. The original framing (**2–36a**) is looser, but the form is closed, thanks to the doorway frame, which emphasizes a sense of visual imprisonment. Filmmakers often exploit doorways and windows to suggest enclosure, confinement, and a lack of physical freedom. *(Paramount Pictures)*

(a)

(b)

2–37   *The Brave One* **(U.S.A., 2007),** with Jodie Foster, directed by Neil Jordan.

Why is this shot threatening? Mostly because of the slightly high angle and the closed form, imprisoning the Foster character between the two tattooed thugs who seal off any avenue of escape at the edges of the frame. In closed form, the frame is a self-sufficient miniature universe with all the formal elements held in careful balance. Though there may be more information outside the frame, for the duration of any given shot this information is visually irrelevant. Closed forms are often used in scenes dealing with entrapment or confinement.   *(Warner Bros.)*

Hitchcock's movies, a character is seen at the edge of the composition, and the camera seems to be placed in a disadvantageous position, too far removed from where the action is apparently going to occur. But then the character decides to return to that area where the camera has been waiting. When such setups are used, the audience also tends to anticipate actions. Instinctively, we expect something or someone to fill in the visual vacuum of the shot. Philosophically, open forms tend to suggest freedom of choice, a multiplicity of options open to the characters. Closed forms, conversely, tend to imply destiny and the futility of the will: The characters don't seem to make the important decisions; the camera does—and in advance.

Open and closed forms are most effective in movies where these techniques are appropriate to the subject matter. A prison film using mostly open forms is not likely to be emotionally convincing. Most movies use both open and closed forms, depending on the specific dramatic context. Renoir's *Grand Illusion,* for example, uses closed forms for the prison camp scenes and open forms after two of the prisoners escape.

A systematic mise en scène analysis of any given shot includes the following fifteen elements:

1. *Dominant*   Where is our eye attracted first? Why?
2. *Lighting key*   High key? Low key? High contrast? Some combination of these?
3. *Shot and camera proxemics*   What type of shot? How far away is the camera from the action?

4. *Angle*   Are we (and the camera) looking up or down on the subject? Or is the camera neutral (eye level)?
5. *Color values*   What is the dominant color? Are there contrasting foils? Is there color symbolism?
6. *Lens/filter/stock*   How do these distort or comment on the photographed materials?
7. *Subsidiary contrasts*   What are the main eye-stops after taking in the dominant?
8. *Density*   How much visual information is packed into the image? Is the texture stark, moderate, or highly detailed?
9. *Composition*   How is the two-dimensional space segmented and organized? What is the underlying design?
10. *Form*   Open or closed? Does the image suggest a window that arbitrarily isolates a fragment of the scene? Or a proscenium arch, in which the visual elements are carefully arranged and held in balance?
11. *Framing*   Tight or loose? Do the characters have no room to move around, or can they move freely without impediments?
12. *Depth*   On how many planes is the image composed? Does the background or foreground comment in any way on the midground?
13. *Character placement*   What part of the framed space do the characters occupy? Center? Top? Bottom? Edges? Why?
14. *Staging positions*   Which way do the characters look vis-à-vis the camera?
15. *Character proxemics*   How much space is there between the characters?

These visual principles, with appropriate modifications, can be applied to any image analysis. Of course, while we're actually watching a movie, most of us don't have the time or inclination to explore all fifteen elements of mise en scène in each shot. Nonetheless, by applying these principles to a still photo, we can train our eyes to "read" a movie image with more critical sophistication.

For example, the image from *M* (2–40) is a good instance of how form (mise en scène) is actually content. The shot takes place near the end of the movie. A psychotic child-killer (Lorre) has been hunted down by the members of the underworld. These "normal" criminals have taken him to an abandoned warehouse where they intend to prosecute and execute the psychopath for his heinous crimes and in doing so take the police heat off themselves. In this scene, the killer is confronted by a witness (center) who holds an incriminating piece of evidence—a balloon. The components of the shot include the following:

1. *Dominant*   The balloon, the brightest object in the frame. When the photo is turned upside down and converted to a pattern of abstract shapes, its dominance is more readily discernible.
2. *Lighting key*   Murky low key, with high-key spotlights on the balloon and the four main figures.
3. *Shot and camera proxemics*   The shot is slightly more distant than a full shot. The camera proxemic range is social, perhaps about ten feet from the dominant.
4. *Angle*   Slightly high, suggesting an air of fatality.
5. *Color values*   The movie is in black and white.
6. *Lens/filter/stock*   A standard lens is used, with no apparent filter. Standard slow stock.
7. *Subsidiary contrasts*   The figures of the killer, the witness, and the two criminals in the upper left.
8. *Density*   The shot has a high degree of density, especially considering the shadowy lighting. Such details as the texture of the brick walls, the creases in the clothing, and the expressive faces of the actors are highlighted.

(a)

2–38 *Full Metal Jacket* **(Britain/U.S.A., 1987),** directed by Stanley Kubrick.

Even within a single scene, filmmakers will switch from open to closed forms, depending on the feelings or ideas that are being stressed in each individual shot. For example, both of these shots take place during a battle scene in the Vietnamese city of Hue. In **(a)**, the characters are under fire, and the wounded soldier's head is not even in the frame. The form is appropriately open. The frame functions as a temporary masking device that's too narrow in its scope to include all relevant information. Often, the frame seems to cut figures off in an arbitrary manner in open form, suggesting that the action is continued off screen, like newsreel footage that was fortuitously photographed by a camera operator who was unable to superimpose an artistic form on the runaway materials. It's as though the camera is pinned down too. In **(b)**, the form is closed, as four soldiers rush to their wounded comrade, providing a protective buffer from the outside world. Open and closed forms aren't intrinsically meaningful, then, but derive their significance from the dramatic context. In some cases, closed forms can suggest entrapment (2–37); in other cases, such as **(b)**, closed form implies security, camaraderie.   *(Warner Bros.)*

(b)

2–39a *Pieces of April* **(U.S.A., 2003),** with Katie Holmes, written and directed by Peter Hedges.

Filmmakers choose their backgrounds carefully for each shot because backgrounds comment indirectly on what's in front of them. The flakey, ne'er-do-well daughter (Holmes) of a comically dysfunctional family is here defined by what's behind her: trash. The cheap Lower East Side apartment she shares with her boyfriend in a run-down New York neighborhood can most charitably be described as not very inviting (i.e., Mom is going to hate it). *(United Artists)*

2–39b *A Nightmare on Elm Street* **(U.S.A., 2006),** with Heather Langenkamp and Robert Englund, directed by Wes Craven.

Unspeakable dangers can also lurk in the background. In this shot, for example, the young woman, sitting in the full front position, is totally unaware that she is in mortal danger from behind. A serial killer, the notorious Freddy Krueger, is steps away from pouncing on his unsuspecting prey. *(New Line Home Entertainment)*

2–40   *M* (Germany, 1931), with Peter Lorre (extreme right), directed by Fritz Lang. *(Janus Films)*

9. *Composition*   The image is divided into three general areas—left, center, and right—suggesting instability and tension.
10. *Form*   Definitely closed: The frame suggests a constricting cell, with no exit for the prisoner.
11. *Framing*   Tight: The killer is trapped in the same territory with his threatening accusors.
12. *Depth*   The image is composed on three depth planes: the two figures in the foreground, the two figures on the stairs in the midground, and the brick wall of the background.
13. *Character placement*   The accusers and balloon tower above the killer, sealing off any avenue of escape, while he cowers below at the extreme right edge, almost falling into the symbolic blackness outside the frame.
14. *Staging positions*   The accusers stand in a quarter-turn position, implying a greater intimacy with us than the main character, who is in the profile position, totally unaware of anything but his own terror.
15. *Character proxemics*   Proxemics are personal between the foreground characters, the killer's immediate problem, and intimate between the men on the stairs, who function as a double threat. The range between the two pairs is social.

Actually, a complete mise en scène analysis of a given shot is even more complex. Ordinarily, any **iconographical** elements, in addition to a costume and set analysis, are considered part of the mise en scène. But since these elements are discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively, we confine ourselves only to these fifteen formal characteristics.

In these first two chapters, we've been concerned with the most important source of meaning in the movies—the visual image. But of course movies exist in time and have many other ways of communicating information. Photography and mise en scène are merely two language systems of many.

A filmmaker has literally hundreds of different ways to convey meanings. Like the painter or still photographer, the movie director can emphasize visual dominants. In a scene portraying violence, for example, he or she can use diagonal and zigzagging lines, aggressive colors, close-ups, extreme angles, harsh lighting contrasts, unbalanced compositions, large shapes, and so on. Unlike most other visual artists, the filmmaker can also suggest violence through movement, either of the subject itself, the camera, or both. The film artist can suggest violence through editing, by having one shot collide with another in a kaleidoscopic explosion of different perspectives. Furthermore, through the use of the soundtrack, violence can be conveyed by loud or rapid dialogue, harsh sound effects, or strident music. Precisely because there are so many ways to convey a given effect, the filmmaker will vary the emphasis, sometimes stressing image, sometimes movement, other times sound. Occasionally, especially in climactic scenes, all three are used at the same time.

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