Exploring a Material World: Mise-en-Scène

If the average film-goer saw his favorite star on the screen last night, it is safe to wager that today he does not remember much about the settings in the picture. The story and the stars, he will tell you, were so interesting, he did not really notice anything else. Exactly. It was so interesting that he was not conscious of the background. Most people have the same experience, no matter how observant they may ordinarily be.

—Cedric Gibbons, art director for 1,500 films, including *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Gaslight* (1944), and *An American in Paris* (1951)

KEY OBJECTIVES

A film's sets and settings, costumes and make-up, and other elements depicted by its images are its mise-en-scène. This chapter describes how the mise-en-scène organizes and directs much of our film experience by putting us in certain places and by arranging the people and objects of those places in specific ways. Most mise-en-scènes orchestrate a rich and complex variety of formal and material elements inherited from theater. In this chapter, we consider

- how settings create meaningful environments for a film
- how the cultural and historical backgrounds of the mise-en-scène remain alive today
- how sets and props relate to the film's story
- how actors and performance styles function in a mise-en-scène
- how lighting is used to evoke certain meanings
- how costumes contribute to our understanding of a character
- how mise-en-scène puts in play values associated with specific film traditions

From the French term meaning "placed in a scene" or "onstage," **mise-en-scène** refers to those elements of a movie scene that are put in position before the filming actually begins and are employed in certain ways once the filming does begin. The mise-en-scène contains the scenic elements of a movie, including actors, lighting, sets and settings, costumes, make-up, and other features of the image that exist independent of the camera and the processes of filming and editing.

Outside the movies, mise-en-scène surrounds us every day. The architecture of a town might be described as a public mise-en-scène. How a person arranges and decorates a room could be called a private mise-en-scène.

Figure 2.1 *The Elephant Man* (1980). Recognizing the human beneath the power of make-up.

Courtrooms construct a mise-en-scène that expresses institutional authority. The placements of the judge above the court, of the attorneys at the bar, and of the witnesses in a partially sequestered area express the distribution of power in this mise-en-scène. The flood of light through the vast and darkened spaces of a cathedral creates an atmospheric mise-en-scène aimed to inspire contemplation and humility. The clothes, jewelry, and make-up a person chooses to wear are, in one sense, the functional costuming all individuals don as part of inhabiting a particular mise-en-scène: businessmen wear suits, clergy dress in black, and service people in fast-food restaurants wear uniforms with company logos.

In many ways, we live through our responses to these physical and material surfaces and objects and the sensations associated with them. Bright morning light might intensify the objects around us. A certain arrangement of furniture in a room might offer real comfort or discomfort. Whether these responses involve actually touching the materials or simply imagining their texture and volume, this tactile experience of the world is a continual part of how we engage and understand the people and places around us.

In the movies, too, we respond to the spaces and textures of mise-en-scène. Characters attract or repulse us through the clothing and make-up they wear: in *Some Like It Hot* (1959), Marilyn Monroe's eroticism is inseparable from her slinky dresses; *The Elephant Man* (1980) hinges on the deforming make-up of Joseph Carey Merrick and the drama of recognizing a sensitive human being inside a hideous shape **[Figure 2.1]**. Actions set in open or closed spaces can generate feelings of portent or hopelessness: in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), the open desert shimmers with possibility and danger; in the Japanese film *Woman in the Dunes* (1964), a woman and a man are trapped in a sandpit, gasping with desperation **[Figure 2.2]**.

A movie mise-en-scène can often approximate a tactile or corporeal experience of the world, whereby we encounter places, objects, and people through actual or imagined sensual contact. In simplified terms, the human nervous system transmits signals from the surface of the body (for instance, from the skin of the fingertips) to the brain where they are processed as different sensations and reactions, from the pain of a burn to the pleasure of a caress. Usually
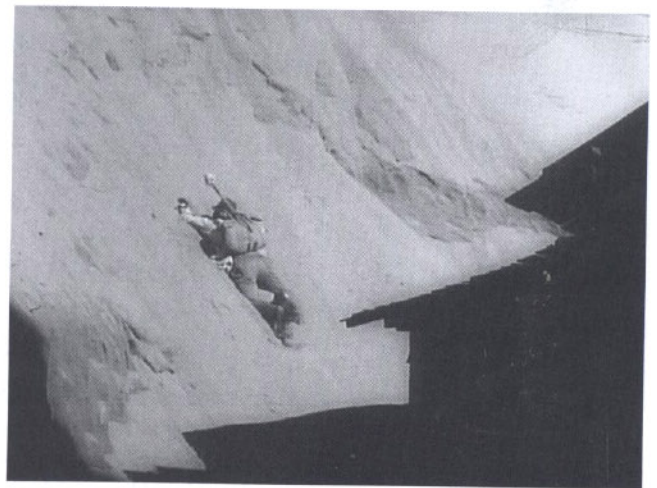

Figure 2.2 *Woman in the Dunes* (1964). The arid heat of a sandpit.

this process involves actual physical contact, but scientific research also recognizes that tactile experiences can be indirectly triggered as a kinetic memory, in which the physical experience is provoked as an imagined contact or response. For example, a person with a missing limb may reexperience sensations associated with that part of the body (such as an itch). Similarly, in *Vertigo* (1958), the protagonist relives again and again the dizzying fear of heights that he first discovered when he watched a partner fall from a roof. The physiology of these tactile experiences can be culturally modified, influenced, or emphasized in very different ways by specific films. A taste for the texture and smell of food (especially chocolate) has rarely been re-created so intensely as it is in *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) **[Color Plate 1]**.

The artistic precedent for cinematic mise-en-scène is primarily the theatrical stage, where our sensual and tactile engagement is naturally more real: the audience actually participates in the movements of real actors in real time. Film engages us in a different way. A film's material world may be actual objects and people set in actual locations, like the stunning slopes of the Himalayas in *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997). Or it may include objects and settings constructed by art designers to appear fantastic or realistic, such as the cramped spaces within a submarine in *U-571* (2000) **[Color Plate 2]**. In any case, mise-en-scène—a film's places and spaces, people and objects, lights and shadows—is a dimension of our movie experience that we always value but usually take for granted.

The Foundations of Mise-en-Scène

The first movies were literally "scenes." Sometimes they were quaint public or domestic scenes (a baby being fed or a couple kissing); often they were dramatic scenes re-created on a stage for a movie camera. The ancient sites and holy objects seen in *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898) fascinated audiences with their realistic appearance. A mixture of slides and short films, *Old Mexico and Her Pageants* used native scenes and costumes to enliven and illustrate an 1899 lecture. While the first films usually presented what could be accomplished in a one-room studio or a confined outdoor setting, by 1907 mise-en-scène had become more elaborate. Movies like *The Automobile Thieves* (1906) and *On the Stage; or, Melodrama from the Bowery* (1907) began to coordinate two or three interior and exterior settings, using make-up and costumes to create different kinds of characters and exploiting the stage for visual tricks and gags. In D. W. Griffith's monumental *Intolerance* (1916), the sets that reconstructed ancient Babylon and other places in history were, in many ways, the main attraction **[Color Plate 3]**. In this section, we will identify the foundations of mise-en-scène, introduce some of the central terms and concepts underpinning the notion of mise-en-scène, and sketch some of the historical paths associated with the first cinematic use of mise-en-scène, from which were developed cinematic mise-en-scènes throughout the twentieth century.

Settings and Sets

Settings and sets are the most fundamental features of mise-en-scène. The **setting** refers to a fictional or real place where the action and events of the film occur. The **set** is, strictly speaking, a constructed setting, often on a studio soundstage, but both the setting and the set can combine natural and constructed elements. For example, one setting in *Citizen Kane* (1941) is a

fictional mansion located in Florida (based on an actual Hearst estate in California), which, in this case, is a set constructed on an RKO soundstage.

Historically and culturally, the kinds and significance of sets and settings have changed with regularity. The first films were made either on stage sets or in outdoor settings, using the natural light from the sun. Films gradually began to integrate both constructed and natural mise-en-scènes into a single movie, where many sets and settings function as important backgrounds for the story. Today's cinematic mise-en-scènes continue to use elaborate stages, such as the studio re-creation of Vietnam battlefields for *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), as well as actual locations, such as the Philadelphia streets and neighborhoods of *The Sixth Sense* (1999). Models and computer enhancements of these mise-en-scènes are increasingly popular for many movies, including the recent *A.I.* (2001), which digitally re-creates a futuristic New York City after it has been destroyed by rising ocean waters **[Color Plate 4]**.

In creating a mise-en-scène for a film, settings and sets can establish scenic realism and scenic atmosphere. One of the most common, complicated, and elusive yardsticks for the cinema, **realism** is the term most viewers use to describe the extent to which a movie creates a truthful picture of a society, person, or some other dimension of life. Realism can refer to psychological or emotional accuracy (in characters), recognizable or logical actions and developments (in a story), or convincing views and perspectives of those characters or events (in the composition of the image). The most prominent vehicle for cinematic realism, however, is the **scenic realism** of the mise-en-scène, which enables us to recognize sets and settings as accurate evocations of actual places. A combination of selection and artifice, scenic realism is most commonly associated with:

- the physical accuracy of the backgrounds, objects, and other figures
- the cultural accuracy of the backgrounds, objects, and other figures
- the historical accuracy of the backgrounds, objects, and other figures

Indeed, our measure of a film's realism is often more a product of the authenticity of this scenic realism than of the other features of the film, such as the psychology or actions of characters. Movies like the animated *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and the science fiction film *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) dramatize authentic human emotions (the blossoming of an unexpected love in the first and the relentless anxiety of the hunted in the second), but these films would probably not be considered realistic films because of the fantastic nature of their settings in magical castles and futuristic laboratories. Other movies, such as *Michael Collins* (1996), which depicts the Irish revolution at the turn of the century, establish a convincing realism through the physical, historical, and cultural verisimilitude of the sets and settings (in *Michael Collins*, Dublin and the Irish countryside), regardless of how the characters or story may be exaggerated or romanticized **[Figure 2.3]**.

Figure 2.3 *Michael Collins* (1996). The Irish countryside at the turn of the century creates a quiet scenic realism torn apart by equally realistic violence.

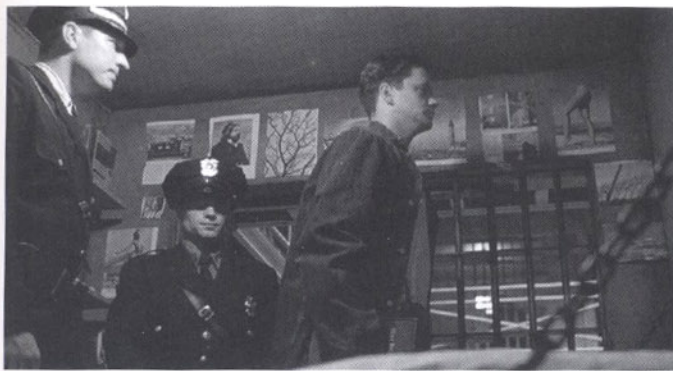Recognition of scenic realism frequently depends, of course, on the historical and cultural point of view of the audience. *Risky Business* (1983), for example, set in an affluent white American suburb of expensive cars and

Figure 2.4 *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). The close confinement of a prison cell offset with props and pictures of an outside world.

designer homes, may seem realistic to many affluent Americans but would appear as a fantastic other world to farmers living in rural China.

In addition to scenic realism, the mise-en-scène of a film also creates **scenic atmosphere and connotations,** those feelings or meanings associated with particular sets or settings in a film. The setting of a ship on the open seas might suggest danger and adventure; a kitchen set may connote comfortable, domestic feelings. Invariably these connotations are developed through the actions of the character and developments of the larger story: the early kitchen set in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) creates an atmosphere of bright, slightly strained warmth; in *E.T.* (1982), a similar set describes the somewhat chaotic space of a modern, single-parent family; in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), Andy's prison cell suggests a stifling confinement but also the signs of hope that predict his eventual escape **[Figure 2.4]**.

A Short History of Mise-en-Scène

Called by some the greatest movie ever made, the French masterpiece *Children of Paradise* (1945) is set in Paris during the 1830s. Opening and closing with the spectacular sets of the Boulevard of Crime (a street named for the violent melodramas staged in the many popular theaters there), the film focuses on a soon-to-be-famous mime, Baptiste, and his love for the vivacious Garance, a woman also loved by Federick, Baptiste's friend and an aspiring Shakespearean actor. Shot almost entirely in studios in Nice and Paris, the constructed sets move between street scenes of romance and crime and the theatrical stages on which many of the characters act out their other passions, with the famous nineteenth-century Theatre des Funambule acting as a centerpiece for much of the drama. A film about one of the grand eras of theater life, *Children of Paradise* is essentially about the complexities of love set within the dramatic changes of its historical mise-en-scène **[Figure 2.5]**.

Figure 2.5 *Children of Paradise* (1945). A film about the theatrics of life.

Like other formal elements of the movies, all cinematic mise-en-scènes are inseparable from their larger history. Indeed, understanding the evolution of mise-en-scène may be especially complicated because it involves the separate histories of painting and costuming; of the construction of social space, from houses to urban planning; and, more recently, of various lighting techniques. Here, we will limit our discussion to the theatrical heritage of mise-en-scène, emphasizing three specific motifs within that history:

- how mise-en-scène maps relations between different parts of society within a larger world or universe
- how mise-en-scène reflects social institutions
- how mise-en-scène describes the possibilities and the limits of human expression, both physical and verbal

The clearest heritage of cinematic mise-en-scène is the theatrical tradition that began with early Greek theater around 500 B.C. and evolved through the nineteenth century. The first stages appeared in and served as places where a community's religious beliefs and truths could be acted out for that community. Centuries later, European medieval theater would celebrate Christian stories as medieval mystery plays in which a small cast of characters would act out, with props or scenery, tales of Adam and Eve or of the shepherds who witnessed the birth of Christ. Both theatrical traditions present the mise-en-scène as a unique place apart from daily existence but open to the world around it, where theatrical figures are larger than life and the objects on stage are both real and symbolic. During the Renaissance of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the sets, costumes, and other elements of mise-en-scène (of William Shakespeare's plays, for instance) began to reflect a secular world of politics and personal relationships through which individuals and communities fashioned their values and beliefs **[Figure 2.6]**.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, lighting and other technological developments rapidly altered the nature of mise-en-scène in ways that began to anticipate the cinema. Spectacular mise-en-scène expanded the pictorial background of plays in ways that often drew attention away from the dramatic action. David Garrick and others began to separate the audience more definitively from the stage and introduced artificial lighting to enforce that separation and highlight scenic sets on stage. In marked contrast to the drawing-room interiors of eighteenth-century mise-en-scène, sets and stages grew much larger; they could now support the sometimes massive panoramic scenery and machinery developed by innovators such as P. J. de Loutherbourg, who created optical scenic illusions that overwhelmed audiences with breathtaking spectacles. At about the same time, groups of interacting actors gave way to single individuals, frequently isolated before a vast scenic world. With this structural change to the stage, there also developed the rising cult of the actor as star (such as British actors Fanny and John Kemble and Ellen Terry) as the necessary center of the mise-en-scène.

As movies developed out of the nineteenth century, the theater would continue to be a central measure of the historical development for cinematic mise-en-scène. Whereas the subjects of the first films were limited by their dependence on natural light, by 1900 indoor stage melodramas became a popular source for filmmakers: *The Downward Path* (1901) was one of the more elaborate sets, using five tableaux converted from the stage play to tell the plight of a country girl who succumbs to the wickedness of the city. A more classical piece of stage drama, the 1904 *Damnation of Faust* was one of many early films that turned to famous playwrights for movie material. In 1912, one of the most famous stage actors of all time, Sarah Bernhardt, appeared in the films *Queen Elizabeth* and *La Dame àux Camélias*. Encouraging this theatrical direction in mise-en-scène in these early years was the implementation around 1906 of **mercury-vapor lamps** and **indoor lighting systems,** innovations that quickly encouraged experiments with lighting to shade and highlight action in a film.

Figure 2.6 *Henry V* (1944). Recreating the Shakespearean stage of the Globe Theatre.

Sets and Settings in
Meet Me in St. Louis (1944)

Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* is a frolicking musical that, in one sense, is about settings and sets: it foregrounds many of the elements of mise-en-scène that may appear less visibly in other movies. The setting is St. Louis in 1903, as the city prepares to host a World's Fair. Within this setting, the film concentrates on a family's large Victorian house whose elaborate stairways, porches, and parlors are the sets that contain most of the film's action. The narrative describes the family harmony of four siblings, their parents, a jovial cook, and a grandfather, and then follows the various crises precipitated when romances disturb this tranquility and the father's career threatens to move them all to New York City. The setting and sets for these actions become the film's center and its stabilizing context: the palpable showiness of the kitchen stove and pots, the comfortable chair that anchors the father, and the spaciously elaborate entryway and oak staircase that signal Victorian solidity and financial comfort.

Figure 2.7 *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). Tootie knocks the head off one of her family of snow people.

More so than many films, *Meet Me in St. Louis* creates a special self-consciousness about the importance of sets. During a party, for example, the parlor becomes an impromptu set for staging musical performances. Here Esther (played by Judy Garland) and her sisters and brother perform for their guests, and the creation of this stage in the home represents a way of bonding people through the entertainment value of a set. Later, when the family seems about to leave for New York, Tootie, the youngest sister, visits the staged scene of snow people she has built on the lawn. It is a family—snowmen, -women, and -children set in the yard outside the house. For Tootie, this set probably represents the harmony of her own family, but in her anger at the impending departure from St. Louis, she smashes and destroys the figures **[Figure 2.7]**. In both scenes, *Meet Me in St. Louis* underlines how important sets and settings are to the meaning of the characters' lives and the themes of the film.

However accurate they are in fact, the sets of *Meet Me in St. Louis* aim at historical and scenic realism. Besides the architecture of the house and

Elaborately constructed sets, carefully designed costumes, and the centrality of actors would define filmic mise-en-scène from early films like *Cabiria* (1914) and *Intolerance* to elaborate musicals like *Chicago* (2002). By 1915, **art directors** or **set designers**, those individuals responsible for supervising the conception and construction of movie sets, became an integral and important part of filmmaking (although in those early years, they were "technical directors" doing "interior decoration"). With the develop-

the costumes of the characters, one set stands out: the trolley car. It creates the illusion of a set in motion and, at the turn of the century, was one of the many remarkable new mechanical and technological progressions in the history of cities. As the site of budding love and adolescent excitement, the crowded, clanging trolley suggests that the place of American progress can also easily accommodate the energy of young love.

Through its historical setting in 1903, *Meet Me in St. Louis* calls attention to the inherited history of mise-en-scène as a way of mapping different community relationships, of reflecting social institutions, and of measuring the powers of individuals to interact with their world—of creating, in short, certain scenic atmospheres and connotations. As a geographical place, St. Louis suggests the center of the United States, and the affluence of the house sets are, with unmistakable nostalgia, meant to connote the middle-class midwestern-America at the turn of the century. The film's location in the middle of the country also comes to represent a global centrality: as one character remarks during the opening of the World's Fair there, St. Louis has now become the center of the world. This movie, made in 1944, when Americans were spread around the world fighting World War II, is about the United States and the enduring institutions of the American mise-en-scène.

Within this setting, the splendor of the house serves to represent the institutional magnificence of the family, a large and varied family that, in this case, corresponds to the many rooms that act as a fluid set through which the characters, mostly women, sing, dance, cry, and love each other. Indeed, *Meet Me in St. Louis* is most intriguing as it weaves a group of confined, melodramatic mise-en-scènes (the rooms within the house) until they eventually open out as a spectacular mise-en-scène (at the harmonious gathering at the World's Fair). Between these two kinds of scenes, the female characters of the film learn, above all else, how to take control of their situations, to overcome fear, to act on desires—to, in short, stage their world to serve their emotions and needs. Esther's initial flirtation with John, for example, begins with her conscious and careful orchestration of mise-en-scène. After a party, she asks him to help extinguish the gas lamps in the foyer of the home, and as she moves him around the set, from lamp to lamp, she brings a new romance to light [Figure 2.8].

Figure 2.8 *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). Esther setting the scene for romance.

Accordingly, the concluding mise-en-scène at the World's Fair becomes a marvelous spectacle that, in terms of the narrative, rewards the family for staying put in St. Louis with a stupendous light show and theatrical display of buildings, restaurants, and monuments. As all the characters rejoice, the setting of St. Louis now becomes, through the global connotations of this glowing World's Fair set, the figurative center of the world [Color Plate 5].

ment and growth of various studio systems through the 1920s (both in Hollywood and Europe), **soundstages**—large soundproofed buildings designed to construct and move sets and props with a new efficiency—added to the rapid expansion of the movie industry. Evident in movies as diverse and historically distant as the futuristic film *Metropolis* (1926), constructed on the soundstage of the German Ufa studios, and *The Gangs of New York* (2002), which utilized the Italian Cinecittà studios, soundstages offer film-

makers the power to shape and control the mise-en-scène more precisely in supporting and expanding the themes of the film. As the movie business expanded through the 1930s, **costume designers,** who plan and prepare how actors will be dressed for parts, also played an increasingly larger role in films, assuring sometimes splendor and sometimes historical accuracy in the appearances of characters. Indeed, for those films in which costumes become central to the story—films about disguises or historical eras, for instance—one could argue that the achievement of the film becomes inseparable from the decisions about costuming.

In the 1930s and 1940s, when cinematic realism became a higher priority for many films, exterior spaces and actual places—identifiable neighborhoods and recognizable cultural sites—appeared more often as the primary mise-en-scène of many films. From Italian neorealist films (see p. 371) through the rise of contemporary documentary filmmaking, **location scouting** then determined places that would work as the most suitable mise-en-scène for different movie scenes. At this historical juncture the confines of a theatrical mise-en-scène opened more and more onto realistic sets and settings. Indeed, few films more explicitly demonstrate this transformation within the history of mise-en-scène than Laurence Olivier's 1944 *Henry V,* where the drama shifts from the stage of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre to the comparatively realistic sets of ships leaving for war in France [Color Plate 6]. In recent decades, the cinematic task of re-creating those realistic environments and mise-en-scène locations has shifted to computerized models, which become the location builders for many modern mise-en-scènes, and **computer-graphics technicians,** who design the models to be digitally transferred onto film.

If we recognize actors as one of the central features of mise-en-scène, the selection and identification of the most suitable actors for a film has been one of the most overlooked but important historical features of mise-en-scène since 1915. **Casting directors,** those who identify which actors would work best in particular roles, followed the advent of the star system around 1910—when the exceedingly popular "Biograph Girl," Florence Lawrence, first demanded to be named and given a screen credit—and be-

---

▶ VIEWING CUES: Sets/Settings

- Describe, with as much detail as possible, one of the sets or settings in the next movie you watch for class. Other than the actors, which features of the film seem most important? Explain why.

- Examine the interaction of two important sets or settings in the film. What is their relationship? Does that interaction suggest important themes in the film?

- Consider the scenic connotations created by one of the most important sets or settings. Are there atmospheric or other suggestions attached to these sets that help you understand the scene in important ways?

- How do the sets or settings add to or detract from the realism of the film? What are the most conspicuous signs of that realism? Or, if the sets and settings seem fake, what most signals that artificiality? How does the realism of the mise-en-scène play a part in your understanding of the film?

- Can you identify any historical precedents for the primary mise-en-scène of this film? A specific kind of theater? A cityscape? An architectural style?

came bigger and bigger players in the determination of this dimension of mise-en-scène. **Agents** (and, today, so-called "super agents"), who negotiate roles for actors with a casting director or filmmaker, have often taken over this function, as they negotiate parts for stars and other actors. Since the 1970s, these super agents, such as Michael Ovitz during his time at Creative Artist Association in the mid-1970s, sometimes predetermine a package of stars and other personnel from which the film and its mise-en-scène must be constructed.

Throughout the twentieth century, the history of filmic mise-en-scène has included real and constructed locations around the world, movies mainly about costumes, and sets and scenes fabricated through computer technologies. Like the spectacular sets of crowded boulevards and the closeted balconies where lovers are reunited in *Children of Paradise*, movies build scenes of all shapes and sizes, mapping the places we live and our physical powers in those places.

The Elements of Mise-en-Scène: Props, Actors, Costumes, and Lights

Unlike other dimensions of film form such as editing and sound, mise-en-scène was in place with the first films. The early decades of film history were explorations in how to best use the materials of mise-en-scène. By 1906, mercury-vapor lamps for indoor lighting added new possibilities to the mise-en-scène, in that lighting could now be manipulated with the same flexibility as furniture and sets. Eventually, as in *Titanic* (1997), movies would travel the globe and search the seas for settings; set builders turned into computer model makers; and costuming became not only more elaborate but also obsessed with the historical accuracy of dresses, shoes, and even buttons. Here we will examine the multiple physical objects and figures that speak through cinematic mise-en-scène.

Props

Props (short for *property*) are objects that function as parts of the sets or as tools used by the actors. Props acquire special significance when they are used to express characters' thoughts and feelings, their powers and abilities in the world, or even the primary themes of the film. In *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), when Gene Kelly transforms an ordinary umbrella into a gleeful expression of his new love, an object whose normal function is to protect a person from rain becomes better used as an extension of a dance: the pouring rain makes little difference to a man in love **[Color Plate 7]**. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941), an ordinary glass of milk, brought to a woman who suspects her husband of murder, suddenly crystallizes the film's unsettling theme of malice hiding in the shape of innocence; in his *Spellbound* (1940), parallel lines in the pattern of a bathrobe trigger a psychotic reaction in the protagonist John Ballantine, and in this film too a glass of milk suddenly appears ominous and threatening **[Figure 2.9]**. Even natural objects or creatures can become props that concentrate the meanings of a

Figure 2.9 *Spellbound* (1940). An ordinary but ominous glass of milk.

movie: in the 1997 Japanese film *The Eel*, the main character's bond with the eel becomes the vehicle for his poignant redemption from despair about human society.

Props appear in movies in two principal forms. **Instrumental props** are those objects displayed and used according to their common function. **Metaphorical props** are those same objects reinvented or employed for an unexpected, even magical, purpose, like Gene Kelly's umbrella, or invested with metaphorical meaning. The distinction is important because the type of prop can characterize the kind of world surrounding the characters and the ability of those characters to interact with that world. In *Babette's Feast* (1987), a movie about the joys of cooking in a small Danish village, a knife functions as an instrumental prop for preparing foods; in *Psycho* (1960) that same prop is transformed into a hideous murder weapon. *The Red Shoes* (1948) might be considered a film about the shifting status of a prop, red dancing slippers: at first these shoes appear as an instrumental prop serving Victoria's rise as a great ballerina, but by the conclusion of the film they have been transformed into a darkly magical prop that dances the heroine to her death **[Color Plate 8]**.

In addition to their function within a film, props may acquire significance in two prominent ways. **Cultural props,** such as a type of car or a piece of furniture, carry meanings associated with their place in a particular society. The hero of *The Love Bug* (1969) drives a tiny Volkswagen Bug and the comedy revolves around the commonplace associations with this inexpensive and youthful car model and its remarkable magical powers; in *Easy Rider* (1969), the two protagonists ride low-slung motorcycles that clearly suggest a countercultural rebellion **[Color Plate 9]**. **Contextualized props** acquire a meaning through their changing place in a narrative. *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (1964) and *The Red Violin* (1998) focus fully on the changing meaning of the central prop: in the first film, three different romances are linked through their connection to a beautiful Rolls-Royce; the second film follows the path of a Nicolo Bussotti violin from seventeenth-century Italy, to an eighteenth-century Austrian monastery, to nineteenth-century Oxford, to the Chinese cultural revolution in the twentieth century, and finally to a contemporary

Figure 2.10 *The Red Violin* (1998). The changing significance of a contextualized prop.

Montreal shop **[Figure 2.10]**. Some films play specifically with the meaning a contextual prop comes to acquire. In *Ronin* (1998), a mysterious briefcase unites a group of mercenaries in a plot about trust and betrayal, but its secret significance becomes ultimately insignificant; Alfred Hitchcock's famous "McGuffins"—props that only appear to be important, like the stolen money in *Psycho* and the uranium in *Notorious* (1946)—are props meant to move a plot forward but are of little importance to the real drama of love, fear, and desire.

Staging: Performance and Blocking

At the center of most mise-en-scènes is a flesh-and-blood **actor** who embodies and performs a film character through gestures and movements. Occupying a borderline region of the mise-en-scène, **performance** describes the actor's use of language, physical expression, and gesture to bring a character to life and to communicate important dimensions of that character to the audience. Because characters help us see and understand the actions

and world of film and because performance is an interpretation of that character by an actor, many films are made or broken by an actor's performance. In a film like *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), in which Alec Guinness plays eight different roles, the shifting performances of the actor may be its greatest achievement.

In a performance, we can distinguish two primary elements: **voice,** which includes the natural sound of an actor's voice along with the various intonations or accents he or she may create for a particular role, and **bodily movement,** which includes physical gestures and, especially important to the movies, eye movements and eye contact. (As in many elements of mise-en-scène, these two features of performance also rely on other dimensions of film form such as sound and camera positions.) Woody Allen has made a career of developing characters through the performance of a strident, panicky voice and bodily and eye movements that dart in uncoordinated directions. At the heart of such movies as *The Blue Angel* (1930) and *Shanghai Express* (1932) is Marlene Dietrich's sultry voice, drooping eyes, and languid body poses and gestures [Figure 2.11].

Additionally, different acting styles define performances. With **stylized acting,** an actor employs emphatic and highly stylized gestures or speaks in pronounced tones with elevated diction; the actor seems fully aware that he or she is acting and addressing an audience. Much less evident today, these stylized performances can be seen in the work of Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), in Joel Grey's role as the master of ceremonies in *Cabaret* (1972) [Figure 2.12], and in virtually any Monty Python movie. More influential since the 1940s, **naturalistic acting** asks an actor to fully and naturally embody the role that he or she is playing in order to communicate that character's essential self. Sometimes associated with a practice called "Method acting," it is famously demonstrated by Marlon Brando as Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), a role in which the actor and character seem almost indistinguishable [Figure 2.13].
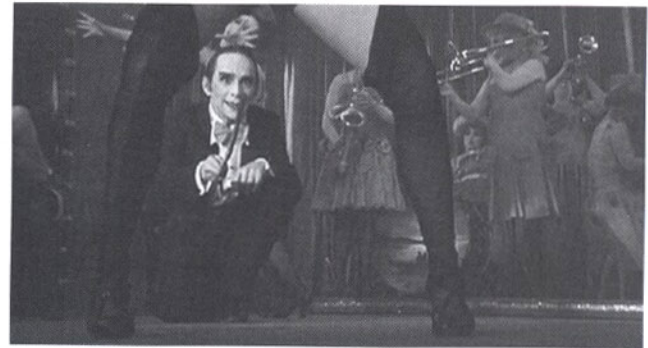
As part of the usual distribution of actors through mise-en-scène, **leading actors**—the two or three actors who appear most often in a film—play the central characters. Recognizable actors associated with particular character types or minor parts are sometimes referred to as **character actors.** They usually appear as secondary characters playing sinister or humorous roles, such as the bumbling cook in a western. **Supporting actors** play secondary characters in a film, serving as foils or companions to the central characters. Supporting actors and character actors add to the complexity of how we become involved in the action or pinpoint a movie's themes. In the hands of a strong actor, such as James Earl Jones in a supporting role in *Field of Dreams* (1989) or Robin Williams as the encouraging professor in *Good Will Hunting* (1997), these supporting
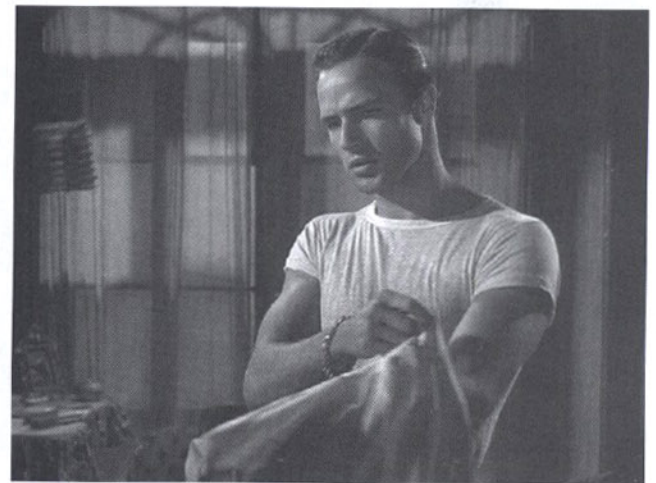

Figure 2.11 *The Blue Angel* (1930). The body and eyes of Marlene Dietrich.

Figure 2.12 *Cabaret* (1972). Joel Grey's stylized performance.

Figure 2.13 *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). Marlon Brando becomes Stanley.

Figure 2.14 *Field of Dreams* (1989). James Earl Jones as Terence Mann, the supporting character with opportunities unavailable to the protagonist.

roles frequently balance our perspective on the main characters, perhaps requiring us to rethink what the main character means and what distinguishes him or her. In *Field of Dreams*, the writer that Jones plays, Terence Mann, fulfills his fantasy of joining the baseball game that the lead actor Kevin Costner's character does not choose to enter because of a more important commitment to his family **[Figure 2.14]**.

The leading actors in many mise-en-scènes are, of course, **stars**—those individuals who, because of their cultural celebrity, bring a powerful aura to their performance, making them the focal points in the mise-en-scène. Unlike less famous actors, star performers

- center and often dominate the action and space of a mise-en-scène
- bring the accumulated history and significance of their past performances to each new film appearance
- acquire a status that transforms their individual physical reality into more abstract or mythical qualities, combining the ordinary and extraordinary

The star's performance focuses the action of the mise-en-scène and draws attention to important events and themes in the film. In *Casablanca* (1942), there are a multitude of individual dramas about different characters trying to escape Casablanca, but Humphrey Bogart's (as the character Rick Blaine) is, in an important sense, the only story: the many other stories become more or less important only as they become part of his life. In *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995), the story of a male photographer and a female immigrant who meet and fall in love in the isolated farmlands of Iowa, there are no characters other than the stars Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep for most of the film, which tends to intensify the story by further emphasizing the focus on them. In a way, this film becomes the story of two stars creating an exclusive world of two people bracketed off from other lives and characters **[Figure 2.15]**.

Moreover, in both those films, much of the power of the characters is a consequence of the star status of the actors, recognized and comprehended in relation to their other roles in other films—and in some cases, in relation to a life off the screen. Recognizing and identifying with Rick in *Casablanca* implies, especially for viewers in the 1940s, a recognition on some level that Rick is more than Rick, that this star-character in *Casablanca* is an extension of characters Bogart has portrayed in such films as *High Sierra* (1941) and *The Maltese Falcon*

Figure 2.15 *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995). A film about two star performances.

(1941). A similar measuring takes place as we watch Eastwood and Streep. With Streep especially, her performance in *The Bridges of Madison County*

is remarkable because it is so unlike the characters she plays in *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *Out of Africa* (1985); part of our appreciation and understanding of her role is the performative skill and range she embodies as a star. We understand these characters as an extension of and departure from other characters associated with the star.

As a result of this extended presence, stars acquire a mythical power whereby we understand and expect from their characters larger-than-life accomplishments and abilities. Star-performers are capable of astonishing acts of intelligence and physical or emotional strength; they can commit acts of kindness and acts of evil that typical individuals would be incapable of. Rick is nobler than the usual individual, more compassionate, braver, and ultimately able to sacrifice his merely human tendencies to the grander, mythical self that closes the film. Because he is a star, we accept Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society* (1989) as both wittier and probably more passionate than the average high-school English teacher; in *It Happened One Night* (1934), we expect Clark Gable to be far more charming and self-confident than a regular reporter would be. Certainly this mythic stature is part of what drives us to identify desires and dreams with stars; it also allows movies to engage in particular confrontations with a viewer's expectations, such as when a film turns on stars' mythical immortality: in *Psycho*, star Janet Leigh is unexpectedly killed halfway through the movie; in *Arlington Road* (1999), the protagonist Jeff Bridges does not, as we expect, survive.

The meaning and importance of stars is only part of the process through which we come to comprehend films. Sometimes we come to films without knowledge of a featured star. Or a film may depart from this way of watching a movie by not featuring any stars or by featuring stars from another film culture, such as the French actor Juliette Binoche in the film *Chocolat* (2000). Some movies, such as Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), may populate the story with an ensemble of supporting actors rather than one or two stars. The result is a movie that is not so much a story as it is a collage of different episodes that parodies our desire for stars in the movies. In François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), a then-unknown actor, Jean-Pierre Léaud, plays the main character, Antoine Doinel, and the innocence of the young actor matches perfectly with the story of a growing boy who must struggle to find an identity on the streets of Paris **[Figure 2.16]**. (Truffaut would continue the relationship between Léaud and Doinel through a series of films that matches the growth of the character with the growth of the actor.)

Whatever the status of the actor, mise-en-scène usually highlights **performative development:** changes in a character described through an

Figure 2.16 *The 400 Blows* (1959). An unknown Jean-Pierre Léaud (*right*) grows into his role.

actor's performance. An actor's performative development may take place from one movie to another or it may occur within the same movie. We may remark on how an actor changes or develops his or her performative style over the course of several movies as a way of understanding each different character. Alternatively, we may note how one performance allows us to comprehend the development of a character through one movie. Katharine Hepburn's many performances had developed a spectrum of characters, from *Stage Door* (1937) through *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962); this stylistic flexibility in her acting allowed her to depict a host of personalities, from the saucy rebel to the weary, drug-addicted mother, a performative range that potentially comes into play in our expectations when we watch any of her roles. In a single film, *On Golden Pond* (1981), a sharp viewer may map Hepburn's development of several of these performative skills: her role as the aging wife of a lonely, confused man communicates, through the changing carriage of her body and facial expressions, a struggle to maintain the strength of a once-youthful rebel despite her own weariness **[Color Plate 10]**.

Actors are frequently cast for parts precisely because of their association with certain **character types** (see p. 227) that they seem especially suited to portray because of their physical features, acting style, or previous roles. Bogart often plays hard-boiled detectives, while Marilyn Monroe reappears in films as the sexy and seductive single woman. To appreciate and understand a character can consequently mean recognizing this intersection of a type and an actor's interpretation or transformation of it. Arnold Schwarzenegger's large and muscular physical stature and clipped, stiff acting style suit well the characters he plays in *The Terminator* (1984) and *Total Recall* (1990), but in *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) his performance and character become more interesting precisely because he must develop that performance type in the role of a kindergarten teacher.

Blocking refers to the arrangement and movement of actors in relation to each other within the single physical space of a mise-en-scène. **Social blocking** describes the arrangement of characters to accentuate relations between them. In *Little Women* (1994), family and friends gather around the wounded father who has just returned from the Civil War, suggesting the importance of the familial bonds at the center of this society **[Figure 2.17]**. **Graphic blocking** arranges characters or groups according to visual patterns to portray spatial harmony, tension, or some other visual atmosphere. Fritz Lang, for instance, is renowned for his blocking of crowd scenes: in *Metropolis* (1926), the oppression of individuality appears instantly in the mechanical movements of rectangles of marching workers **[Figure 2.18]**; in *Fury* (1936), a mob lynching in a small town creates graphic-blocked patterns whose directional arrow suggests a kind of dark fate moving against the lone individual.

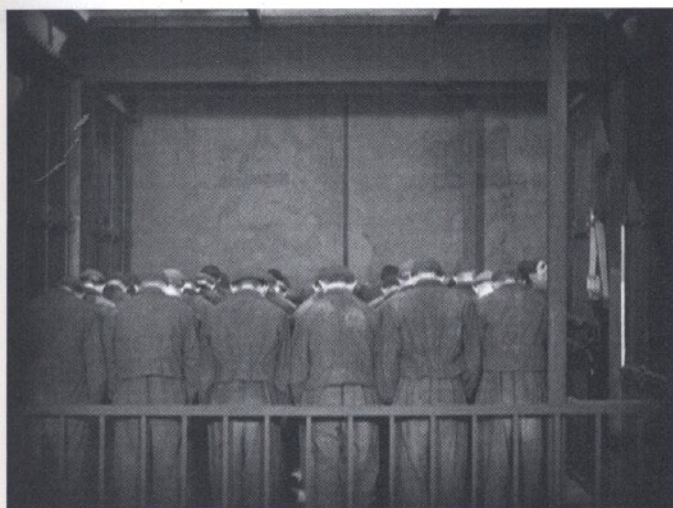**Figure 2.17** *Little Women* (1994). Blocking the family tightly around the father.

Figure 2.18 *Metropolis* (1926). Rectangular masses of futuristic workers.

Costumes and Make-Up

Costumes are the clothing and related accessories that a character wears or that define that character. These can range from common fashions, like a dark suit or dress, to more fantastic costumes. Cosmetics, or **make-up** applied to the actor's face or body, highlight or even disguise or distort certain aspects of the face or body.

How actors are costumed and made up can play a central part in a film as well, describing tensions and changes in the character and the story. Sometimes a character becomes fully identified with one basic look or costume: through his many movie incarnations, James Bond has always appeared in a tuxedo; in *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), the singularity of Paul Hogan in New York City is underlined by his Australian bush hat, rugged clothing, and suntanned skin. Moreover, the dynamic of costuming can be highlighted in a way that makes costuming the center of the movie. *Pygmalion* (1938) and its musical adaptation as *My Fair Lady* (1964) are essentially about a transformation of a girl from the street into an elegant socialite **[Color Plate 11]**; along with language and diction, that transformation is indexed by the changes of costume and make-up from dirt and rags to diamonds and gowns.

Costumes and make-up function in films in three different ways. First, when costumes and make-up support scenic realism they reproduce, as accurately as possible, the clothing and facial features of people living in a specific time and place. Thus, Napoleon's famous hat and jacket, pallid skin, and lock of hair across his brow are a standard costume and the basic make-up for the many films featuring this character from Abel Gance's 1927 *Napoléon* to Sacha Guitry's 1955 *Napoleon*. Second, when make-up and costumes function as **character highlights,** they draw out or point to important parts of a character's personality. Often these highlights are subtle, such as the ascot a pretentious visitor wears; sometimes they are pronounced, as when villains in silent films wear black hats and twirl their moustaches. In Fellini's *Casanova* (1976), the title character wears thick white make-up and dresses in ornate, theatrical outfits to suggest the decadent and excessive nature of his character. In Fellini's *Roma* (1972), an autobiograhical panorama of the title city becomes a bombastic fashion show peopled by the fantasy characters and memories of childhood **[Color Plate 12]**. Finally, when costumes and make-up act as **narrative markers,** their change or lack of change becomes a crucial way to understand and follow a character and the development of the story. Often a film, such as *Citizen Kane* or *The Age of Innocence* (1993), develops through the aging face of the protagonist, gradually whitened and lined, and changing styles of clothing, appearing more modern, as the story advances. In Alan Rudolph's offbeat *Trouble in Mind* (1985), Coop's hairstyles grow increasingly outlandish as he becomes more and more absorbed in the surreal plot. In the adaptation *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945), the entire story concentrates on the lack of change in the facial appearance of the protagonist, who has sold his soul for eternal youth.

Costumes and make-up that appear as natural or realistic in films carry important cultural connotations as well. In *Rocky* (1976), the title character dresses to reflect his working-class background in South Philadelphia, and his somewhat clownish hat particularly accentuates his bumbling but likeable personality **[Figure 2.19]**. When Rocky boxes in the championship fight, however, he becomes

Figure 2.19 *Rocky* (1976). The hats and jackets of South Philadelphia.

a bare and powerful form whose simple trunks and cape contrast with the glitzy costumes of his opponent. As the bout progresses, facial make-up exaggerates the gruesome violence of the fight, yet he continues to deliver his lines with an almost humble dignity and determination. After he has won the championship, his plain girlfriend in nerdy eyeglasses becomes more attractive through the power of make-up and costuming.

Lighting

One of the most subtle and important dimensions of mise-en-scène is **lighting.** Our daily experiences outside the movies demonstrate how lighting can affect our perspective on a person or thing, as when a room hidden in dark shadows evokes feelings of fear, while the same room brightly lit suggests warmth and comfort. *Mise-en-scène lighting* refers specifically to light sources—both natural light and electrical lamps—located within the scene itself. It is used to shade and accentuate the figures, objects, and spaces of the mise-en-scène, but the primary sources of film lighting are usually not visible onscreen.

The interaction of lighting, sets, and actors can create its own drama within a specific mise-en-scène. How a character moves through light or how the lighting on the character changes within a single mise-en-scène can signal important information about the character and story. In *Back to the Future* (1985), the suddenly illuminated face of Marty McFly, from an unseen source, signals a moment of revelation about the mysteries of time travel. More complexly in *Citizen Kane,* the regular movement of characters, particularly of Kane, from shadow to light and then back to shadow might suggest Kane's moral instability.

A mise-en-scène can use both natural and directional lighting. **Natural lighting** usually assumes an incidental role in a scene; it derives from a natural source in a scene or setting, such as the illumination of the daylight sun or the lamps of a room. Spread across a set before more specific lighting emphases are added, **set lighting** distributes an evenly diffused illumination through a scene as a kind of lighting base. **Directional lighting** is more dramatically apparent; it may create the impression of a natural light source but actually directs light in ways that define and shape the object or person being illuminated. As illustrated in the accompanying scenes from *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) **[Figures 2.20–2.26]**, the lighting used in mise-en-scène has developed an even more specific technical grammar to designate its variety of strategies:

Figure 2.20A *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). High-key lighting in the glare of a city coffee shop.

Figure 2.20B Low-key lighting creates the shadowy atmosphere of a sexual encounter.

Figure 2.21A *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Fill lighting works to emphasize, naturally, Sidney Falco in a moment of crisis.

Figure 2.21B A dramatic use of fill lighting isolates the face of J. J. Hunsecker and, to a slightly lesser extent, Sidney Falco.

Figure 2.22 *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Subtle highlighting (along with the low angle of the camera) dramatizes the powerful figure of J. J. Hunsecker.
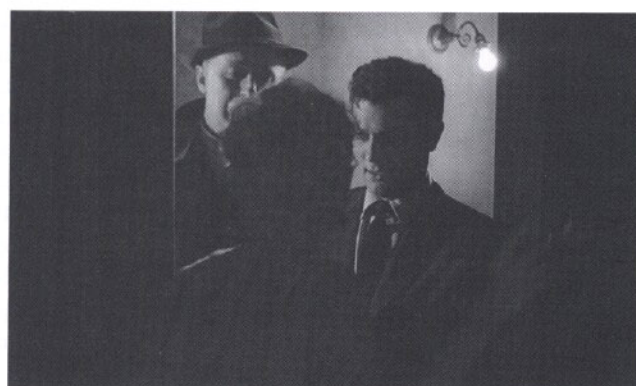

Figure 2.23 *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). The backlighting of Frank and Sidney as they enter Rita's apartment.

- **Key lighting** is the main source of lighting from a lamp; it may be bright with few contrasts (or "high") or shadowy with sharp contrasts between light and dark (or "low"), depending on the ratio of key to fill lighting and the effect desired **[Figures 2.20A and B]**.
- **Fill lighting** can be used to balance the key lighting or to emphasize other spaces and objects in the scene **[Figures 2.21A and B]**.
- **Highlighting** describes the use of the different lighting sources to emphasize certain characters or objects or to charge them with special significance **[Figure 2.22]**.
- **Backlighting** (sometimes called **edgelighting**) is a highlighting technique that illuminates the person or object from behind; it tends to silhouette the subject **[Figure 2.23]**.
- **Three-point lighting** combines key lighting, fill lighting, and backlighting to blend naturally the distribution of light in a scene **[Figure 2.24]**.
- **Frontal lighting, sidelighting, underlighting,** and **top lighting** are used to illuminate the subject from different directions in order to draw out features or create specific atmospheres around the subject **[Figure 2.25 and 2.26]**.
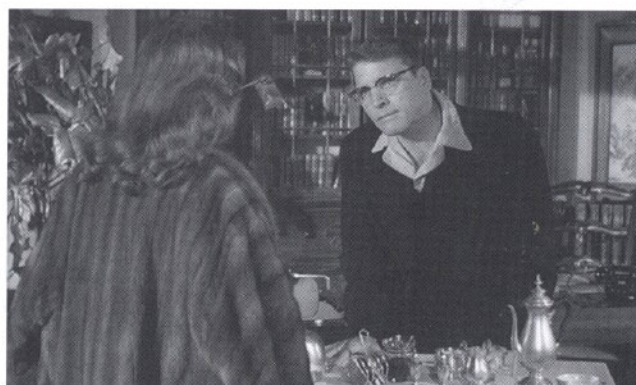

Figure 2.24 *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Three-point lighting blends naturally various parts of the scene.

Figure 2.25 *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Sidelighting highlights Frank D'Angelo during his seduction of Rita, the cigarette girl.
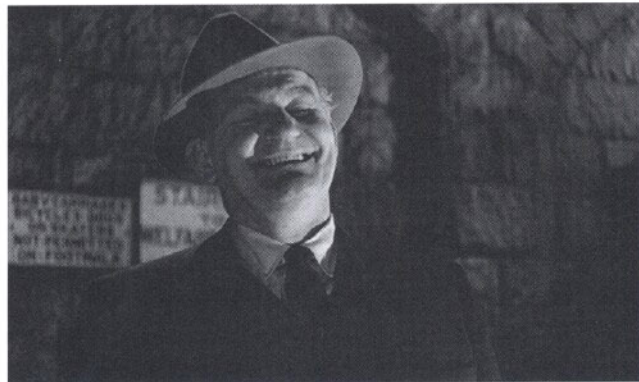

Figure 2.26 *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Underlighting transforms a policeman into a threatening image.

The effects of lighting in the mise-en-scène range from a **hard** to a **soft** lighting surface that, in conjunction with the narrative and other features of the mise-en-scène, elicit certain responses. **Shading,** the use of shadows to shape or draw attention to certain features, can explain or comment on an object or person in a way the narrative does not. Hard and soft lighting and shading can create a variety of complex effects through highlighting and the play of light and shadow that enlighten viewers in more than one sense. The Italian romance *Enchanted April* (1991) depends on its soft natural lighting, and the shaded eyes of Jake in *Chinatown* (1974) indicate problems with his perspective well before the plot describes them. In a movie like *Barry Lyndon* (1975), the story is conspicuously inseparable from

VIEWING CUES: Elements of Mise-en-Scène

- For your next assigned film, turn off the sound and analyze a single scene in the movie. What is communicated just through the elements of the mise-en-scène?

- Identify the single most important prop in this film. Why is it significant?

- Distinguish two props: one instrumental and the other metaphorical. Describe how the props reflect certain themes in the film.

- Focus on a central character/actor. How would you describe his or her acting style in the film? Does that style seem compatible with the story?

- If there are stars in this film, describe what you know about each star and the expectations associated with him or her. How does the presence of stars control the mise-en-scène and your understanding of the film? How do they contribute to the meaning of the movie?

- Are there specific scenes in which the blocking is especially important? How?

- How do costuming and make-up play a role in this film? Do they tend to add scenic realism, highlight character, or mark the narrative development? How so? Select a specific example, and make a short argument for why the costuming or make-up is important to understanding the movie.

- Where in the film does lighting dramatically add to a scene? Where does it work less obtrusively but in an equally important way?

From Props to Lighting in *Do the Right Thing* (1989)

I n Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, characters wander through the theatrical space of Bedford-Stuyvesant, a multicultural neighborhood in Brooklyn. Here, life becomes a complicated negotiation between private mise-en-scènes (apartments, bedrooms, and businesses) and public mise-en-scènes (city streets and sidewalks crowded with people). With Lee in the role of Mookie, who acts as a thread connecting the different characters, stores, and street corners, the film explores the different needs that clash within a single urban place by featuring a variety of stages—rooms, stores, and restaurants with personal and racial associations. On the hot summer day of this setting, lighting creates an intense and tactile heat, and this sensation of heat makes the mise-en-scène vibrate with energy and frustration.

However much it appears to use a real location, *Do the Right Thing* carefully constructs a setting of interlocking sets. Mother Sister, in her window frame, "sees all" of this highly public place, where interior lives are constantly on display and frequently in conflict when they meet on the street. Walls and windows become especially significant for the sets of this film: DJ Mister Señor Love Daddy's window is a window to the entire neighborhood; a bright-red wall acts as a backdrop for the lounging, fast-talking Sweet Dick Willie and his two pals, who rhetorically perform as if on stage; and other building walls are painted with political slogans ("Dump Koch," "Tawana Told the Truth," and "*Our* Vote Counts"). Most importantly to the plot, the movie's mise-en-scène contains the pizzeria's "wall of fame" where Sal hangs his photos of celebrated Italian Americans.

The central crisis of *Do the Right Thing* turns on the drama of instrumental props that become loaded with cultural meanings and metaphorical powers. Early in the film, Smiley holds up a photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X as a call to fight against racism with both nonviolence and violence. Shortly after, Da Mayor nearly instigates a fight because the Korean grocer has not stocked a can of his favorite beer, Miller High Life. It is the photographs of famous Italians in Sal's pizzeria—photos of Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio, Liza Minnelli, Al Pacino, and others—however, that ignite the film. When Buggin' Out complains that there should be photos of African Americans on that wall because Sal's clientele is all black, Sal angrily responds that he can decorate the walls of his pizzeria however he wishes. Later, when Radio Raheem refuses to turn down his boom box (an object that has become synonymous with who he is), he and Buggin' Out confront Sal with the cultural significance of the photo-props and their social rights within this mise-en-scène: why, they demand, are there no photographs of African Americans on the wall **[Color Plate 13]**? Finally, at the climactic moment in the film, Mookie tosses a garbage can through the window of the pizzeria, sparking the store's destruction but saving the lives of Sal and his son.

The film's performances mobilize faces and bodies as active forces in the mise-en-scène. Rather than two or three star performers, *Do the Right*

Thing features numerous supporting roles: Ossie Davis as Da Mayor, John Turturro as Pino, Rosie Perez as Tina, Danny Aiello as Sal, Richard Edson as Vito, and Giancarlo Esposito as Buggin' Out, to name a few. Although they appear to work in a naturalistic style that accurately re-creates realistic figures from the streets of Brooklyn, the people in this neighborhood must constantly and consciously perform for each other in order to communicate and establish their identities. This leads to the often exaggerated stylized acting found in the gestures and grimaces of Turturro's portrayal of an angry Italian son and in Esposito's theatrical movements, declamatory speeches, and wild eyes as his character tries to provoke actions.

Lee's performance as Mookie is certainly the central role, one that draws on his then-emerging status as a star actor and a star filmmaker (a combination found in the work of such other director-actors as Clint Eastwood, Woody Allen, and Vincent Gallo). In fact, this double status as star and director indicates clearly that what happens in this mise-en-scène is about him. Physically unimposing, restrained, and cautious throughout the film, Lee's performance seems to shift and adjust depending on the character he is responding to: he is confrontational with Pino, defensive with Tina, and generous with the stuttering Smiley, for example. As the central performer in a neighborhood of performers, Lee's Mookie is a chameleon, surviving by continually changing his persona to fit the social scene he is in. By the end of the film, however, Mookie must decide which performance will be the real self he brings to the mise-en-scène—how, that is, he will "act" in a time of crisis by taking responsibility for the role he is acting.

Do the Right Thing features costumes that reflect the styles of dress in U.S. cities in the 1980s, and make-up that intends to suggest natural faces, thus adding to the scenic realism of the film. Yet their significance exceeds scenic realism because the costumes both highlight characters and mark the movie's narrative development. Da Mayor's dirty, rumpled suit contrasts sharply with the costumes that define the personalities of younger characters, such as Mookie's Brooklyn Dodgers shirt with the name and number of the legendary African American baseball player Jackie Robinson on the back [Figure 2.27], and Pino's white, sleeveless tee-shirt with its white working-class connotations. Jade, Mookie's sister, stands out in her dramatic hats, skirts, earrings, and noticeably more elegant make-up and hairstyles, calling attention perhaps to the individuality and creativity that allow her, uniquely here, to casually cross racial lines.

Two other examples in *Do the Right Thing* underline the cultural and political force of costuming. When a white man on a bicycle accidentally runs over Buggin' Out's Air Jordan sneakers, his apology doesn't sufficiently counter the effect of his Boston Celtics tee-shirt featuring the name of its white star-player, Larry Byrd, and the incident nearly results in a violent conflict. Besides the cultural play of clothing in instances like this one, among the more complicated pieces of costuming is Radio Raheem's hand jewelry, huge "love" and "hate" rings that recall *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), in which the central antagonist has those words tattooed on his knuckles. Among other resonances, Radio Raheem's rings transform the mysterious and psychotic connotations of the earlier movie into an explicit political message, akin to the opposing ideologies personified by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.
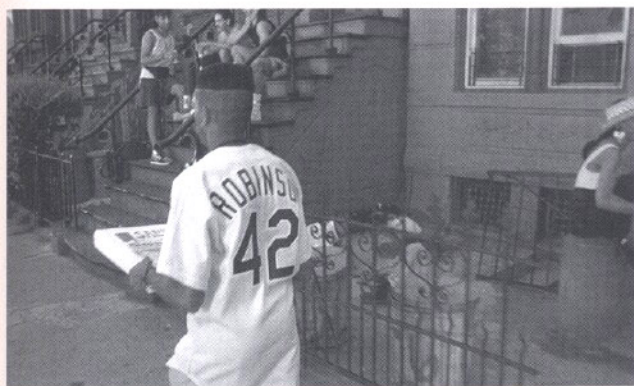

Figure 2.27 *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Mookie in the heritage of Jackie Robinson.

Both social and geometrical blockings become dramatic calculators in a film explicitly about the "block" and the arrangement of people in this neighborhood. Mother Sister sits in her window looking down at Da Mayor on the sidewalk, suggesting her dominance over and distance from the confusion in the street. In one scene, Pino, Vito, and Mookie stand tensely apart in a corner of the pizzeria as Mookie calls on Vito to denounce his brother's behavior and Pino counters with a call for family ties; their bodies are quietly hostile and territorial simply in their arrangement and their movements around the counter that separates them. This orchestration of bodies climaxes in the final showdown at Sal's pizzeria. When Buggin' Out and Radio Raheem enter the pizzeria, the screaming begins with Sal behind the counter, while Mookie, Pino, Vito, and the group of kids shout from different places in the room. When the fight begins, the bodies collapse on each other and spill onto the street as a mass of undistinguishable faces. After the arrival of the police and the killing of Radio Raheem, the placement of his body creates a sharp line between Mookie and Sal and his sons on one side and the growing crowd of furious blacks and Latinos on the other. Within this blocking Mookie suddenly moves from his side of the line to the other and then calmly retrieves the garbage can to throw through the window. The riot that follows is a direct consequence of Mookie's decisions about where to position himself and how to shatter the blocked mise-en-scène that divides Sal's space from the mob.

Do the Right Thing employs an array of lighting techniques that at first may seem naturalistic but through the course of the film are directional in particularly dramatic ways. Especially through the lighting, heat becomes a palpable feature of this mise-en-scène. From the beginning, the film juxtaposes the harsh, full glare of the streets with the soft morning light that highlights the interior spaces of DJ Mister Señor Love Daddy's radio station, where he announces a heat wave for the coming day, and the bedroom where Da Mayor awakens with Mother Sister. Here, the lighting of the interior mise-en-scène emphasizes the rich and blending shades of the dark skin of the African American characters, while the bright, hard lighting of the exterior spaces draws out the sharp distinctions in the skin colors of blacks, whites, and Asians. This high-key lighting of exteriors, in turn, accentuates the color of the objects and props in the mise-en-scène as a way of sharply isolating them in the scene: for example, the blues of the police uniforms and cars, the yellows of the fruits in the Korean market, and the reds of the steps and walls of the neighborhood [Color Plate 14].

Other uses of lighting in the film are more specifically dramatic and complex. For example, the dramatic backlighting of Mookie, as he climbs the stairs to deliver the pizza, adds an almost religious and certainly heroic/romantic effect to the pizza delivery. When Pino confronts Vito in the storage room, the scene is highlighted by an overhead light that swings back and forth, creating a rocking and turbulent visual effect. In the final scene, Mookie walks home to his son on a street sharply divided between the bright, glaring light on one side and the dark shadows on the other.

More charged with the politics of mise-en-scène than many films, *Do the Right Thing* turns a relatively small city space into an electrified set where props, actors, costumes, and lighting create a remarkably dense, jagged, and mobile environment. Here, the elements of mise-en-scène are always theatrically and politically in play, always about the spatial construction of culture in a specific time and place. To live here, people need to assume, as Mookie eventually does, the powers and responsibilities of knowing how and when to act.

the lighting techniques that illuminate it: extraordinarily low and soft lighting, with sharp frontal light and little fill light on the faces, creates an artificial intensity in the expressions of the characters, whose social desperation hides their ethical emptiness **[Color Plate 15]**. One particular version of this play of light is referred to as **chiaroscuro lighting,** a pictorial arrangement of light and dark that can create the uneasy atmospheres found in German expressionist films such as Paul Wegener's 1920 tale of magic and supernatural creatures, *The Golem.*

None of the elements of mise-en-scène—from props to acting to lighting—can be assigned standard meanings because they are always subject to how individual films use them. They have also carried different historical and cultural connotations at different times. While the shadowy lighting of German expressionist cinema, as in the 1924 horror film *Waxworks,* may be formally similar to that found in 1950s film noir, such as in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), the lighting has a very different significance, reflecting the distinctive perspective of each film and the cultural context that produced it. The metaphoric darkness that surrounds characters like Dracula and Jack the Ripper in the first film suggests a monstrous evil that may also be psychological; in the second, that shadowy atmosphere describes a corruption that is entirely human, a function of brutal greed and sexuality.

Points of View: Values and Traditions of Mise-en-Scène

Whether it presents authentic places or ingeniously fabricates new worlds, mise-en-scène consistently engages audiences. From the miniaturized reenactment of Admiral Dewey's naval victory in *The Battle of Manila Bay* (1898) and Georges Méliès's fantastic stage for *The Man with the Rubber Head* (1901) to the futuristic ductwork of *Brazil* (1985) **[Color Plate 16]**, located "somewhere on the Los Angeles–Belfast border," and the contemporary streets of Tehran in *The Circle* (2000), movie audiences have long prized both the views of real lands and landscapes as well as the sets, props, and costumes created with astonishing verve and style for fantasized worlds.

In this final section, we will describe two prominent sets of values that have been associated with cinematic mise-en-scène since the beginning of film history. We will then sketch two central traditions that have emerged from those values in different ways through different cultures. Whereas we earlier examined the historical foundations and formal strategies of mise-en-scène, in this third context we will argue how those formal elements impart emotional and intellectual values and meanings through a film. For most movie viewers, recognizing the places, objects, and arrangements of sets and settings has never been a formal exercise. The mise-en-scène has always been the site where viewers measure human, aesthetic, and social values, recognize cinematic traditions, and, in those interactions, identify and assign meaning to the changing places of films. In brief, values beget traditions, and traditions become the grounds for meanings.

To Condition and to Measure

The most fundamental value of mise-en-scène is that it defines our location in the material world: the physical settings and objects that surround us indicate our place in the world. Some people can live only in large cities with bright lights and active crowds; others find it important that their town

Movie Spectaculars

Throughout film history, audiences have often gone to the movies simply to see spectacular places and sights. IMAX theaters, where panoramas of nature and space appear through the extraordinary size and scope of the screen, are the most notable example of movies catering to this thirst for magnificent scenes. But the history of cinema and its use of mise-en-scène abounds with examples of movie spectaculars that aim, first and foremost perhaps, to thrill audiences with sights they have never before seen and can barely imagine.

Movie spectaculars are films in which the magnitude and intricacy of the mise-en-scène share equal emphasis with or even outshine the story, the actors, and other traditional focal points for a movie. Certainly, many kinds of films have employed spectacular sets and settings as part of their narrative, but what distinguishes a movie spectacular is an equal or additional emphasis on the powers of the mise-en-scène to create the meaning of the film or even overwhelm the story. If small arthouse films usually concentrate on the complexity of character, imagistic style, and narrative, movie spectaculars attend to the stunning effects of sets, lighting, props, costumes, and casts of thousands.

The history of movie spectaculars extends back to the 1914 Italian film *Cabiria,* an epic about the Second Punic War [Figure 2.28], which became a clear inspiration for the making of Griffith's *Intolerance,* with its four historical tales and sensational sets of ancient worlds. Since then, there have been many successful movie spectaculars and many colossal failures. Some of the most notable successes include *Napoléon* (1927), *The Ten Commandments* (1923, 1956), *Metropolis* (1926), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1943, 1989), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Gandhi* (1982), *The Last Emperor* (1987), and *Gladiator* (2000).

Movie spectaculars fit squarely into two cultural traditions: that of the sublime and that of the epic. The aesthetic tradition of the sublime has a long history, beginning with the writings of Roman philosopher Longinus and continuing with late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century thinkers, poets, and painters—from Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and J. M. Turner. The sublime usually suggests the power of scenes and places to dizzy (or simply humble) the human mind before their breathtaking size, beauty, or magnificence. Epics, from poetry like John Milton's *Paradise Lost* to novels like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick,* tell heroic tales of nations or spiritual communities and the moments and events that defined them. More often than not, epics are about the importance of cultural place as a large national or spiritual mise-en-scène.

Movie spectaculars often set epic stories about the birth or salvation of communities in a sublime mise-en-scène whose magnitude of place overwhelms and supersedes individual desires and differences. Through the last century, these sublime epics have tended to expand from spectacles of cities (*Metropolis*) to visions of nationhood (*Gone with the Wind*) to the stellar landscapes that surround our globe (*2001: A Space Odyssey*). In all their differences, however, movie spectaculars exploit one of the central traditions of film viewing: the desire to be awed by sublime worlds beyond our normal views.

Figure 2.28 *Cabiria* (1914). In perhaps the first movie spectacular, the eruption of Mount Etna begins the cinematic tradition of mise-en-scènes of disaster.

have a church as the visible center of the community. Much the same holds true for cinematic mise-en-scène in which the place created by the elements of the mise-en-scène becomes the essential condition for the meaning of the characters' lives. As part of this larger cultural context, there are two primary values associated with cinematic mise-en-scène:

1. The mise-en-scène describes the physical conditions and limits of our natural, social, or imaginary worlds.
2. The mise-en-scène measures the ability of individuals and social groups to control and arrange their world in a meaningful way.

On the one hand, mise-en-scène describes the limits of human experience by indicating the external boundaries and contexts in which people live. On the other, it reflects the powers of the characters and groups that inhabit it by showing how people can impact the space in which they live. While the first set of values can be established without characters, the second requires the interaction of characters and mise-en-scène.

Mise-en-scène as an external condition indicates surfaces, objects, and exteriors that define the material possibilities in a place or space. Some mise-en-scènes are magical spaces full of active objects; others are barren landscapes with no borders. In *King Solomon's Mines* (1937) and *The African Queen* (1951), deserts and jungles create a threatening landscape of arid plains and dense foliage, whereas in films like *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) and *The American Friend* (1977), the interior of a train and subways offer long, thin passageways, multiple windows, and strange, anonymous faces where an individual's movements are restricted as the world flies by outside [Color Plate 17]. In each case, the mise-en-scène describes the material terms of a film's physical world; from those terms the rest of the scene or even the entire film must develop.

With the second value, **mise-en-scène as a measure of character,** the mise-en-scène dramatizes how an individual or group establishes an identity through interaction with (or control of) the surrounding setting and sets. For Robin Hood, the mise-en-scène of a forest becomes a sympathetic and intimate place where he can achieve justice and find camaraderie; for Little Red Riding Hood, a similar mise-en-scène becomes an environment fraught with unknowable dangers that test her resolve and courage. In *Young Guns* (1988), boyish cowboys find themselves in the freedom and violence of the frontier around them [Figure 2.29]. In *Donovan's Brain*

Figure 2.29 *Young Guns* (1988). Where western plains offer the freedom of violent expression.

(1953), the vision and the personality of a mad scientist is projected and reflected in a laboratory with twisted, mechanized gadgets and wires; essentially, his ability to create new life forms from that environment reflects both his genius and his insane ambitions. In both these interactions, the character and the elements of the mise-en-scène may sometimes determine more about each other's meaning than even the interactions between the characters do.

Keep in mind that our own expectations about the material world inevitably determine how we understand the values of different mise-en-scènes. To modern viewers, the mise-en-scène of *The Gold Rush* (1925) might appear crude and stagy; certainly the make-up and costumes might seem more like circus outfits than realistic clothing. For viewers in the 1920s, however, it is precisely the fantastical and theatrical quality of this

mise-en-scène that makes it so entertaining: for them, watching the Little Tramp perform his balletic magic in a strange location is more important than the realism of the mise-en-scène.

Two Traditions: Naturalistic and Theatrical Mise-en-Scènes

Cinematic traditions represent historical variations on the implicit values. For cinematic mise-en-scènes, we can identify two prominent traditions, a naturalistic mise-en-scène and a theatrical mise-en-scène. A **naturalistic mise-en-scène** appears natural and recognizable to viewers. A **theatrical mise-en-scène** denaturalizes the locations and other elements of the mise-en-scène so that its features appear unfamiliar, exaggerated, or artificial. Throughout their history, movies have tended to emphasize one or the other of these traditions, although many films have moved smoothly between the two. From *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *Amadeus* (1984), settings, costumes, and props have been selected or constructed to appear as authentic as possible in an effort to convince viewers that the filmmakers had a clear window on a true historical place: the first movie re-creates the historical sites and elements of the Civil War, whereas the second reconstructs the physical details of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's life in eighteenth-century Europe. In other films, from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) to *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), those same elements of mise-en-scène have exaggerated or transformed reality as most people know it: *Caligari* uses sets painted with twisted buildings and nightmarish backgrounds, while *Edward Scissorhands*'s colorful suburban landscape erupts with the strange sculptures carved by a boy with scissors for hands.

Naturalism is one of the most effective and most misleading ways to approach mise-en-scène. If a mise-en-scène is about the arrangement of space and the objects in it, as we have suggested, then naturalism in the mise-en-scène means that how a place looks is the way it is supposed to look. We can, in fact, pinpoint several more precise characteristics of a naturalistic mise-en-scène:

- The world and its objects follow assumed laws of nature and society.
- The elements of the mise-en-scène have a consistently logical or homogeneous relation to each other.
- The mise-en-scène and the characters mutually define each other, although the mise-en-scène may be unresponsive to the needs and desires of the characters.

Naturalistic mise-en-scènes are consistent with accepted scientific laws and cultural customs. Thus, in a naturalistic setting, a person would be unable to hear whispers from far across a field, and a restaurant might have thirty tables and several waiters or waitresses. This kind of realistic mise-en-scène also creates logical or homogeneous connections among different sets, props, and characters. Costumes, props, and lighting are appropriate and logical extensions of the naturalistic setting, and sets relate to each other as part of a consistent geography. A movie set in Florence, Italy, such as *Hannibal* (2001), uses sets and locations that are more or less faithful to the layout of that city, and in the submarine film *Das Boot* (1981), the individual sets are necessarily small, cramped rooms and the characters wear the uniforms of World War II German sailors. Naturalism in the movies also means that the mise-en-scène and the characters mutually define or reflect each other. The gritty streets and dark rooms of a city reflect the bleak attitudes of thieves
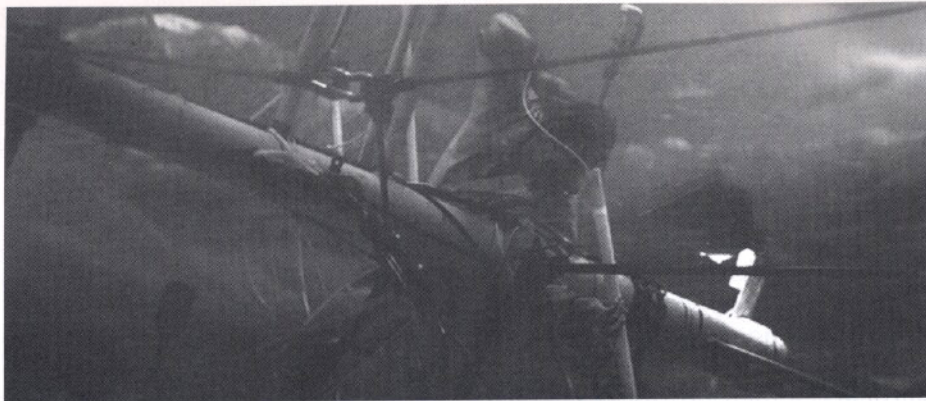
Figure 2.30 *The Perfect Storm* (2000). The natural ferocity of the ocean as test and measure of the characters.

and femmes fatales in *The Killers* (1946); in *The Perfect Storm* (2000) **[Figure 2.30]**, the ferocious battle with the sea reflects the personal turmoil and struggles of the characters and allows them to reach their full physical and psychological potential as human beings.

Two more specific traditions have emerged from the naturalistic mise-en-scène. A **historical mise-en-scène** re-creates a recognizable historical scene, highlighting those elements that call attention to a specific location and time in history: *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) can still stun audiences with its brutally accurate representation of trench warfare in World War I; *A Man for All Seasons* (1966) re-creates the sumptuous robes and august chambers of Parliament in the sixteenth-century England of martyr Thomas More. Calling attention to the ordinary rather than the historical, on the other hand, an **everyday mise-en-scène** constructs commonplace backdrops for the characters and the action. In *Louisiana Story* (1948), a swamp and its rich natural life are the always-visible arena for the daily routines of a young boy in the Louisiana bayous. In the Brazilian film *Central Station* (1998), a railroad station in Rio de Janeiro and a poor rural area in the Brazilian countryside are the understated stages in a touching tale of a woman's friendship with a boy in search of his father.

In contrast, theatrical mise-en-scènes create fantastical environments that display and even exult in their artificial and constructed nature. Films in this tradition define themselves in one or more of these terms:

- Elements of the mise-en-scène tend to violate or bend the laws of nature or society.
- Dramatic inconsistencies appear within one or between two or more mise-en-scènes.
- The mise-en-scène takes on an independent life that requires confrontations or creative negotiations between the props and sets and the characters.

Often violating the accepted laws of how the world functions, theatrical mise-en-scènes call attention to the arbitrary or constructed nature of that world. Horses change colors and witches melt in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and in movies from *Top Hat* (1935) to *Silk Stockings* (1957), Fred Astaire somehow finds a way to dance on walls and ceilings and transform spoons and brooms into magical partners. Dramatic inconsistencies within or between different mise-en-scènes in a film indicate the instability of those scenes, costumes, and props—and the world they define. The films of Monty Python offer innumerable examples. In *Monty Python's The Meaning*

of Life (1983), a pirate ship sails through the streets of Manhattan and a darkly costumed grim reaper interrupts a classy dinner party to announce that all of the chatting friends have died of food poisoning. In a theatrical mise-en-scène, props, sets, and even bodies assume an independent (and sometimes contradictory) life that provokes regular confrontations or negotiations between the mise-en-scène and the characters **[Figure 2.31]**. Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* (1985) describes the plight of Paul when he finds himself lost at night in the SoHo neighborhood of New York City. Characters suddenly die, a woman surrounds herself with the objects and clothing of a 1960s lifestyle, and

Figure 2.31 *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1983). A dinner party suddenly disturbed by the theatrical entry of Death.

a vigilante group mistakes Paul for a robber; in this film, each apartment or street corner seems to be another individual's personal stage and Paul becomes an unwilling participant in the play.

Two historical trends—expressive and constructive mise-en-scènes—are associated with the tradition of a theatrical mise-en-scène. In an **expressive mise-en-scène,** the settings, sets, props, and other dimensions of the mise-en-scène assert themselves independently of the characters and describe an emotional or spiritual life permeating the material world. Associated most commonly with the German expressionistic films of the 1920s, this tradition is also seen in surrealism, horror films, and in the magic realism of Latin American cinema. Since Émile Cohl's 1908 *Fantasmagorie* depicted an artist surrounded by sketches and drawings and whose life and activity are independent of him, expressive mise-en-scènes have enlivened the terrifying, comical, and romantic mise-en-scènes of *The Birds* (1963), in which birds become demonic; *Barton Fink* (1991), in which wallpaper sweats; and *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), in which the natural world of Ireland becomes a magical kingdom. In a **constructive mise-en-scène,** the world can be shaped and even altered through the work or desire of the characters. Films about putting together a play or even a movie are examples of this tradition as characters fabricate a new or alternative world through their power as actors or directors. In François Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973), for example, multiple romances and crises become entwined with the project of making a movie about romance and crises, and the movie set becomes a parallel universe in which day can be changed to night and sad stories can be made happy. Other films, however, have employed constructive mise-en-scènes to dramatize the wishes and dreams of their characters. In *Batman* (1989), spectacular costumes and electronic gadgets create a comic-book mise-en-scène in which good and bad characters battle each other for control, whereas the mise-en-scène of *Being John Malkovich* (1999) constantly defies the laws of spatial logic, as Craig the puppeteer and his co-worker Maxine struggle for the right to inhabit the body of the actor Malkovich.

We rarely experience the traditions of naturalistic and theatrical mise-en-scènes in entirely isolated states. Naturalism and theatrics sometimes alternate within the same film, and like our experience of mise-en-scène in general, following the play and exchange between the two can be one of the more exciting and productive ways to watch movies and to understand the complexities of mise-en-scène in a film—of how place and its physical

Values and Traditions in
The Bicycle Thief (1948)

The setting of Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* is post–World War II Rome, a mise-en-scène whose stark and impoverished conditions are the most formidable barrier against the central character's longing for a normal life. Antonio Ricci finds a job putting up movie posters, a humble but adequate way to support his wife and his son Bruno in an economically depressed city. When the bicycle he needs for work is stolen, he desperately searches the massive city on foot, hoping to discover the bike before Monday morning when he must continue his work. The winding streets and cramped apartments of Rome appear as bare, crumbling, and scarred surfaces, describing a frustrating and impersonal urban maze through which Ricci walks asking questions without answers, examining bikes that are not his, and following leads into strange neighborhoods where he is observed with hostile suspicion. In what was once the center of the Roman Empire, masses of people wait for jobs, crowd onto buses, or sell their wares. The most basic materials of life take on disproportionate significance as props: the sheets on a bed, a plate of food, and an old bike are the center of existence. In this mise-en-scène, the mostly bright lighting reveals mostly blank faces and walls of poverty.

Individuals have little power to change or even fully understand this mise-en-scène. When Ricci reaches a point of extreme desperation, he visits a woman—"The Santona" or "the one who sees"—who is supposed to have visionary powers and who he hopes will tell him where to find his bike. Of course, in a room filled with more impressive furniture and props than anywhere else in the film, she can only offer bromidic and useless advice: "Find it now or not at all" **[Figure 2.32]**. Neither visionary nor even human powers can affect the material reality and force of this mise-en-scène. Characters must mostly watch without affecting the world around them.

The Bicycle Thief is among the most important films within the naturalistic tradition of mise-en-scène, associated specifically with the Italian neorealist movement of the late 1940s. The laws of society and nature follow an almost mechanical logic that cares not at all for human hopes and dreams. Here, according to a truck driver, "Every Sunday, it rains." In a large city of empty piazzas and anonymous crowds, physical necessities reign: food is a constant concern; most people are strangers; a person needs a bicycle to get around town; and rivers are more threatening than bucolic. Ricci and other characters become engulfed in the hostility and coldness of the pervasive mise-en-scène, and their encounters with Roman street life follow a path from hope to despair to resignation. In the beginning, objects and materials, such as Ricci's uniform and his bed linens, offer promise for his family's happiness in a barren and anonymous cityscape. However, the promise of these and

Figure 2.32 *The Bicycle Thief* (1948). The Santona: distinguished more by her furnishings than her vision.

other material objects turns quickly to ironic emptiness: the bicycle is stolen; the marketplace overwhelms him with separate bicycle parts that could never be identified; and settings (such as the church into which he pursues one of the thieves) offer no consolation or comfort. Finally, Ricci himself gets caught in this seemingly inescapable logic of survival when, unable to find his bike, he tries to steal another one [Figure 2.33]. Only at the end of the day, when he discovers his son is not the drowned body pulled from the river, does he give up his search for the bicycle. Realizing that this setting and the objects in it will never provide him with meaning and value, he returns sadly home with the son he loves.

The Bicycle Thief is a superb accentuation of the common and everyday within a naturalistic tradition. Ricci and his neighbors dress like the struggling working-class population, and the natural lighting progresses from dawn to dusk across the various sets that mark Ricci's progression through the day. This film's everyday mise-en-scène is especially powerful because without any dramatic signals, it remains permeated by World War II. Even within the barest of everyday settings, objects, and clothing, *The Bicycle Thief* suggests the traces of history—such as Mussolini's sports stadium—that have created these impoverished conditions.

Along with these traces of history within its everyday mise-en-scène, we are reminded of a theatrical tradition that ironically counterpoints the film's realism. While performing his new duties in the first part of the film, Ricci puts up a glamorous poster of the movie star Rita Hayworth [Figure 2.34]. Later, the sets and props change when Ricci wanders from a workers' political meeting to an adjacent theater where a play is being rehearsed. In these instances, a poster prop and a stage setting become reminders of a world that has little place in the daily hardships of this mise-en-scène—a world where, as one character puts it, "Movies bore me." For many modern tourists, Rome might be represented by that other tradition—as a city of magnificent fountains, glamorous people, and romantic restaurants. For Ricci and his son, however, that tradition is only a strange place and a fake set like the restaurant filled with rich patrons eating ravenously before returning to face the reality of the streets. For Europeans who lived through World War II (in Rome or other cities), the glaring honesty of this mise-en-scène in 1948 was, understandably, a powerful alternative to the glossy theatrical tradition of Hollywood sets and settings.
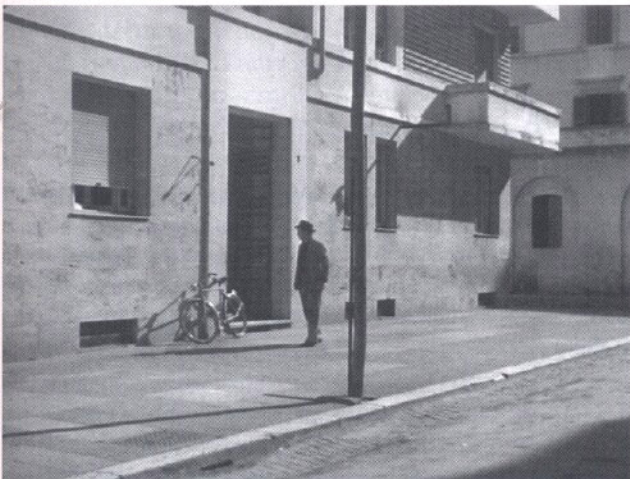

Figure 2.33 *The Bicycle Thief* (1948). Bare streets and a bicycle to steal.

Figure 2.34 *The Bicycle Thief* (1948). Reminders of different values and traditions: the Rita Hayworth poster.

Figure 2.35 *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). Leaving Hollywood to explore the "real" world.

contours condition and shape most experiences. In this context, Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) is a remarkable example of how the alternation between these two traditions can be the very heart of the movie. In this film, Hollywood director John L. Sullivan, after a successful career of making films with titles like *So Long, Sarong*, decides to explore the realistic world of suffering and deprivation (as material for a serious realistic movie he intends to title *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). He subsequently finds himself catapulted into a grimy world of railroad boxcars and prison chain gangs, where he discovers, ironically, the power of those fantastic places and people he once filmed to delight and entertain others **[Figure 2.35]**. The theatrical mise-en-scènes of Hollywood, he learns, are as important to human life as the ordinary ones people must inhabit.

VIEWING CUES: Mise-en-Scène Traditions and Values

- Examine the mise-en-scène of the film you are studying in class. Consider how it suggests fundamental values. Does it emphasize the force of the physical conditions of society or how those conditions can be transformed?

- Identify a tradition in which this mise-en-scène best fits: naturalistic or theatrical. How does thinking about the movie in terms of this tradition help you better understand it?

- In your own words, describe why this mise-en-scène fits best with a naturalistic or a theatrical tradition. If naturalistic, does it emphasize historical elements or everyday elements? Explain how this perspective helps you describe your experience of the film. Illustrate your position using two or three scenes as examples.

- Can you profitably compare the mise-en-scène of this film with that of other films in the same tradition? Select one other film that seems to use its mise-en-scène like this one does, and argue how these mise-en-scènes share certain traits. Do they end in similar visions of the world?

CRITICAL VOICES: BÉLA BALÁZS ON THE FACE OF GRETA GARBO

A scriptwriter, filmmaker, and professor, Hungarian Béla Balázs was an early film critic and theoretician. His *Theory of the Film*, first published in 1945, ranges over numerous topics, including the artistic complexity of the human face and body, reminding us of how important and complex these elements in the cinematic mise-en-scène can be. For him, an actor's face can carry much of the meaning of a film. Although his language is sometimes outdated and extravagant, he captures the almost mystical feeling we sometimes have gazing at film stars.

The hero, the paragon, the model . . . is an indispensable element in the poetry of all races and peoples, from the ancient epics to the modern film. This is a manifestation of the natural selection of the best, of the instinctive urge towards improvement, a postulate of biology, not of aesthetics. . . . In this age of film culture, when man has again become visible, he has again

1

become awakened to a consciousness of beauty, and the visual propaganda of beauty is again an expression of deep-seated biological and social urges.

The physical incarnation of the hero or heroine is beauty of a kind which exactly expresses the ideologies and aspirations of those who admire it. We must learn to read beauty, as we have learned to read the face. A scientific analysis of what we call sex appeal, for instance, would greatly enrich our knowledge of social psychology. . . .   2

Art snobs often affect to despise the beauty of film stars and tend to regard beauty as a disturbing secondary effect which rouses base instincts and has nothing to do with "real art." But such a universal cultural phenomenon as the film must not be measured solely by the standards of a purely artistic production. For beyond this the vital instincts and social tendencies of mankind manifest themselves in so significant a form in the film that they cannot be disregarded.   3

The film stars who have been most successful did not owe their popularity to their histrionic gifts, even if they happened to be excellent actors. The most popular of them did not act at all, or rather acted only themselves. Not only Charlie Chaplin remained always the same Charlie in every film, without changing mask, costume or manner. Douglas Fairbanks, Asta Nielsen, Lillian Gish, Rudolph Valentino and others of the greatest also remained the same. They were no creators of characters. Their names, costumes, social positions could be changed in their various parts, but they always showed the same personality and this personality was their own. For the dominant element in the impression they made was their personal appearance. They turned up as old acquaintances in each new film and it was not they who assumed the mask of the character they played—on the contrary, the parts were written for them in advance, were made to measure for them so to speak. For what the public loved was not their acting ability, but they themselves, their personal charm and attraction. Of course to possess such charm is also a great thing. But as an art it most resembles lyrical poetry, which also expresses the poet's heart and not things external. These great film stars were great lyrical poets whose medium was not the word, but the body, the facial expression and gesture; the parts they played merely change opportunities of exercising this their art. . . .   4

Up to now Greta Garbo was the most popular star in the world. This is said not on the basis of aesthetic considerations. There is a better, more exact, indeed absolutely accurate standard. This standard is the amount in dollars which was the reward of her popularity.   5

It was not the actress Garbo who conquered the hearts of the world. Garbo is not a bad actress, but her popularity is due to her beauty. Though even this is not so simple. Mere beauty is a matter of taste, of sex appeal, and for this one reason alone cannot have the same effect on many millions of people in the whole world to the same degree. And then there are so many perfectly beautiful women that the harmony of Garbo's lines could not in itself have ensured such a unique privileged position for her.   6

Garbo's beauty is not just a harmony of lines, it is not merely ornamental. Her beauty contains a physiognomy expressing a very definite state of mind.   7

Like the face of all other actors, Greta Garbo's face changes during a scene. She, too, laughs and is sad, is surprised or angry, as prescribed by her part. Her face, too, may be once that of a queen and once that of a bedraggled drab, according to what character she has to play. But behind this variety of facial expression we can always see that unchanged Garbo face, the fixed unchanged expression of which has conquered the world. It is not mere beauty, but a beauty of peculiar significance, a beauty expressing one particular thing, that has captured the heart of half mankind. And what is this thing?   8

Greta Garbo is sad. Not only in certain situations, for certain reasons. 9
Greta Garbo's beauty is a beauty of suffering; she suffers life and all the sur-
rounding world. And this sadness, this sorrow is a very definite one: the
sadness of loneliness, of an estrangement which feels no common tie with
other human beings. The sadness of reticent purity, of the shrinking of a sen-
sitive plant from a rude touch is in this beauty, even when she plays a down-
and-out tart. Her brooding glance comes from afar even then and looks into
the endless distance. Even then she is an exile in a distant land and does not
know how she ever came to be where she is.

But why should this strange sort of beauty affect millions more deeply 10
than some bright and sparkling pin-up girl? What is the meaning of the Garbo
expression?

We feel and see Greta Garbo's beauty as finer and nobler, precisely be- 11
cause it bears the stamp of sorrow and loneliness. For however harmonious
may be the lines of a face, if it is contentedly smiling, if it is bright and
happy, if it can be bright and happy in this world of ours, then it must of
necessity belong to an inferior human being. Even the usually insensitive
person can understand that a sad and suffering beauty, gestures expressing
horror at the touch of an unclean world, indicates a higher order of human
being, a purer and nobler soul than smiles and mirth. Greta Garbo's beauty
is a beauty which is in opposition to the world of today.

THE NEXT LEVEL: ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Affron, Charles and Mirella. *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative.* New
Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995. Concentrating on the work of set
designers, this study examines a number of films to demonstrate how sets do
far more than embellish a film, often becoming the center of its meaning.

Brewster, Ben, and Lea Jacobs. *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early
Feature Film.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. A careful scholarly inves-
tigation of the transition from stage to screen in early film history.

Dyer, Richard. *Stars.* Rev. ed. London: BFI, 1998. A landmark study of the many
ways that stars organize and focus a reading of film, through both their onscreen
presence and their offscreen activities.

Gibbs, John. *Mise-en-Scène: Film Style and Interpretation.* New York: Columbia Uni-
versity Press, 2002. A book devoted exclusively to the importance of mise-en-
scène, it is a historical survey of this critical dimension of film and a detailed
examination of its aesthetic powers.

Williams, Christopher. *Realism and the Cinema.* London: Routledge, 1980. A wide-
ranging examination of the arguments about film realism, this book also looks
at different filmic practices of realism and the ideological stakes implicit in
those movies.