Chapter 2:
The Shot: Mise-en-Scène

In Chapter 1, you learned all about the humans involved in filmmaking (Production) and about how narrative films function as works of art (Narrative Form & Meaning). Now it's time to dig into what makes film its own distinct art form. As a collaborative, multi-dimensional art form, film can easily be compared to other art forms: it has story, like literature; it's visual, like painting; it involves performance, like theatre; it involves intricately choreographed movement, like dance; it captures images of reality, like photography, and records music, like . . . well, like music. So is film really just a hodge-podge of all those other art forms?

No. No, it's not. Film is a singularly fascinating art form, and the thing that will distinguish it as different from other art forms – the thing that you will spend the rest of this class learning about – is its Stylistic Formal System (as opposed to its Narrative Formal System, which you learned about in Chapter 1). A film's stylistic formal system has four broad components:

> ➢ **Mise-en-Scène**
> ➢ Cinematography
> ➢ Editing
> ➢ Sound

In this chapter, we will explore the first of those components: **Mise-en-Scène** is a French term[1] that translates literally as *putting in the scene*. It refers, essentially, to everything that can be observed within the scene – or, more precisely, within the frame of film projected on the screen. It is therefore all about the shot.

Mise-en-Scène is the element of stylistic form that seeks to create *verisimilitude*, or the appearance or semblance of reality, plausibility, or believability. Mise-en-Scène is the aspect of filmmaking that, more than any other aspect, allows us to suspend our disbelief when we're sitting in the theatre (or in our living rooms). It allows us to forget that we're watching light and color projected on a screen and instead believe that we're in a forest or on a ship or tromping through Middle Earth, halfway to Mordor.

You see, film, like all art forms, is a lie. That is, it is not the literal truth. It is not real life. We understand this to be true on a basic level, in that we know that there's no real person named Richard Blaine who lives above a café in Casablanca waiting for his lost love to show up and break his heart – any more than there are real elves and hobbits. But film is a lie on a whole other level: while there may not be any hobbits and elves, we must agree that Elijah Wood and Orlando Bloom

---

[1] You probably knew that already.

and Cate Blanchett actually exist, right? So there are actors who can play hobbits and elves, and they're real . . . but still, when you're sitting in the movie theatre or your living room and you're watching *Lord of the Rings*, you're not actually in the same room with Elijah and Orlando and Cate.[2]

But here's the really cool part: it's just the form that's a lie. Underneath that form, which expresses content[3], is the underlying meaning of the film – and it's the meaning that's true. One way to keep this whole lies-vs.-truth thing in perspective might be to think of two types of truth: Big-T Truth and little-t truth. See, little-t truth is all about technical accuracy: Was Humphrey Bogart actually, really, truly a guy named Rick who lived in a café and hung out with a piano player named Sam? No. No, this is a lie. But the Big-T Truth is about the larger thematic significance of the film – it's about the complete statement that the film makes about the human condition. So: is it true that humans will sometimes sacrifice their own happiness in order to ensure the safety of others, as Rick does at the end of the movie? Of course it is! So *Casablanca*, like pretty much all art, is, as Pablo Picasso once said, ***a lie that makes us recognize the truth***.

Elements of Mise-en-Scène

There are seven elements to be considered in a film's mise-en-scène: setting, figures, props & costumes, light & shadow, color, perspective relations, and performance.

Setting

A film's **setting** is its visual representation of time and place. On a basic level, it's similar to the setting of a stage play in the live theatre, in that it's what we look at in order to determine where/when the characters are living out their story. But film isn't live theatre – a point that becomes vividly clear when we consider the three ways in which film creates settings that aren't quite possible on stage, even when a live theatre has a nearly infinite budget and the best creative minds available to create its world. The first of these ways is **landscape environment**, which takes the characters out into the big, wide world and films them so that the filmmakers can then bring the big, wide world to you inside a theatre or your living room, as seen in this shot from Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*:
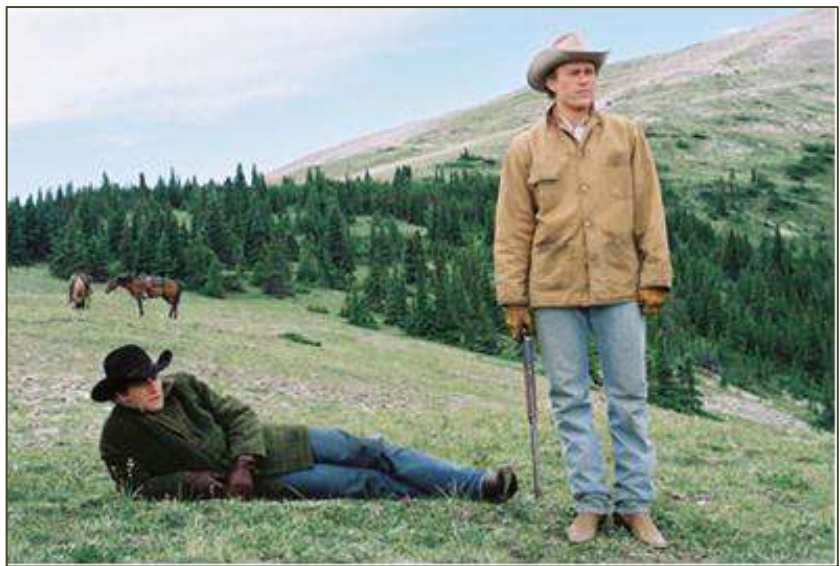
[2] You get that, right? I mean, this isn't a sad little surprise for you, is it?
[3] Remember this? Chapter 1?

A second way in which film does what live theatre can't quite accomplish is **spectacle**, which essentially takes the principle of landscape environment (big, wide world brought to you in your living room) and applies it to a world that doesn't actually exist. Spectacle landscapes are generally created by the visual effects team and then integrated into live-action sequences involving actual human performers during the editing process, as in this shot from James Cameron's *Avatar*:

But it's not all about big or fantastical visual images. Yet another thing that film can do better than live theatre is force the viewer to focus on minute detail through the technique of **directed attention**. Consider this: when you're sitting in a live theatre watching a play, how do the artists involved draw your attention to where they want you to look? Generally, they make use of light, sound and movement to encourage your observation of one location or another on stage. But really, that's all they can do: encourage you. Filmmakers can actually force your eye to observe a specific detail by showing you only that detail, as seen in this shot from Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*:
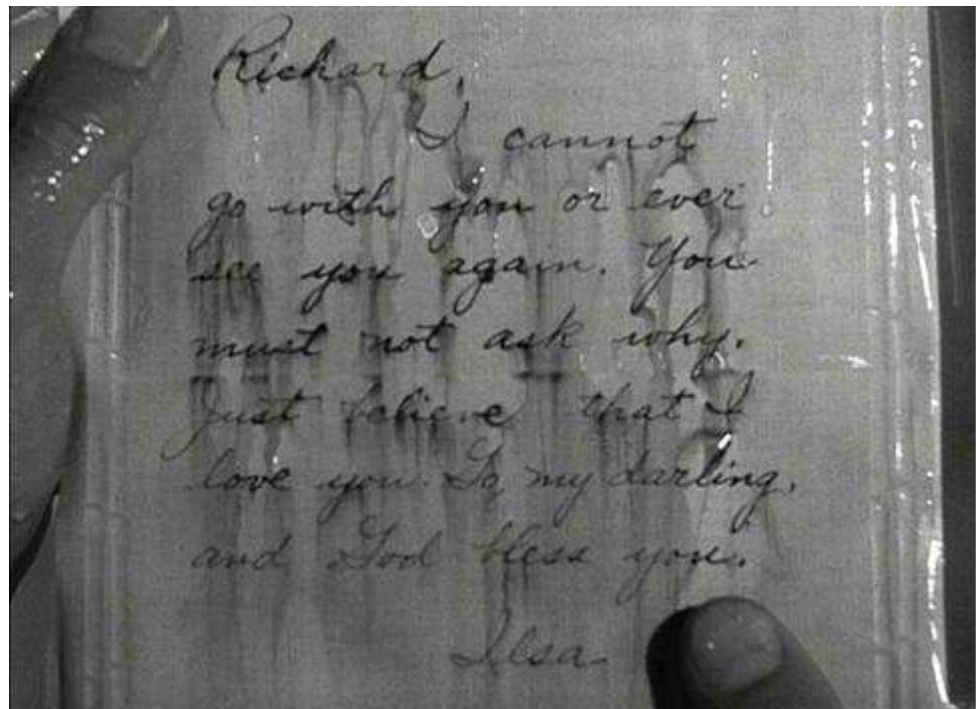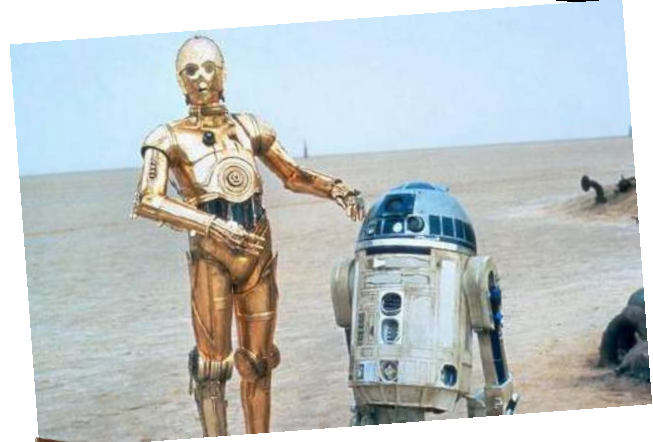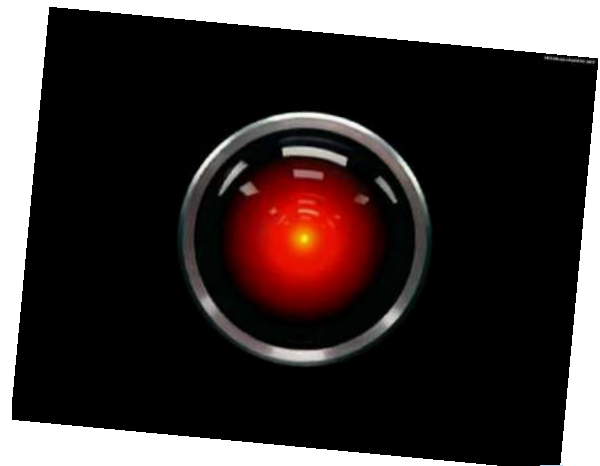
Figures

Figures in a film are entities that have behavior and motivation. *Wait*, you're thinking, *isn't that just another way of saying "characters"?* Well, yes, sort of. But filmmakers use the term **figures** rather than characters because as humans we have a bias – specifically, we are biased to think of characters as people (aka humans). But not all figures are humans. Oh, sure, most of them are, but figures can also be animals, machines, even objects . . . as long as they have behavior and motivation. In other words, as long as they perform actions for a reason of their own devising.

Figures in Film

Props & Costumes

Films are full of objects. But in order for an object to be a **prop**, a figure needs to interact with it. So, for example, in *Casablanca*, the bottles of booze in Rick's café are just objects while they're sitting on the shelf, but they become props when Rick, er, *interacts* with them.

Objects vs. Props

Likewise, an article of clothing is just a part of the setting if it's hanging over the back of a chair or something, but it becomes a **costume** when a figure wears it. But wait, there's more! A prop (or costume, for that matter) becomes a figure when it has behavior and motivation. See the examples of figures from a couple of pages back to remind yourself of some objects that become props and then figures – R2D2 is a near-perfect example: first he's just a broken-down machine gathering dust in the background (object); then Luke works on him (prop); and finally he becomes C3PO's little friend (figure).

Light & Shadow

Remember talking back in Chapter 1 about how many electricians are employed in the film business? Well, that's because lighting is absolutely crucial to a film's mise-en-scène, and therefore to its verisimilitude, its artfulness, and its ultimate success. There are many aspects of light (and its opposite, shadow) to consider. First, lighting can be hard or soft. **Hard lighting** is intense illumination from high-value (white) light instruments, while **soft lighting** is less intense and often from a lower-value (yellow) instrument. Lighting can also be classified as key or fill: **key lighting** is the primary illumination on a figure, object or setting, while **fill lighting** is the secondary illumination employed to eliminate the darkest of shadows. Check out the differences in lighting from within a single scene in Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* below.

Hard Key vs. Soft Fill

Another important consideration in film lighting is the light source – literally, the bright thing that is causing the illumination in the shot. There are two broad categories of light sources: natural and artificial. **Natural lighting** comes from those few light sources that exist in nature: the sun, the moon, fire . . . fireflies, maybe? In any case, most natural lighting comes from the sun, as in this shot from Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*:

Artificial lighting comes from human-made light sources (aka bulbs powered by electricity). Artificial lighting can be separated into two narrower categories: diegetic and nondiegetic. As you will recall from Chapter 1, if something is diegetic, it exists within the world of the characters/figures in the film. So an example of **artificial diegetic** light would be the lamps visible in this shot from *Casablanca*:

Finally, there's **artificial nondiegetic** light – the lighting that requires all of those armies of electricians. Most interior scenes are shot in artificial nondiegetic light because A) there's a lack of natural light, and B) most artificial diegetic light sources are insufficient to illuminate the shot in a way that will make the cinematographer happy. And how do we know that the shot below, again from *City Lights*, is illuminated with artificial nondiegetic light? Well, because it was shot on a sound stage in an essentially dark space (look behind Chaplin) and because Chaplin's face is pretty intensely illuminated from a low angle – and there's no diegetic light source that could account for the way he's lighted.


Yet another important aspect of light is **lighting direction** – that is, the directional relationship between the light source and the figure or object it is illuminating. There are five basic lighting directions. The first is frontal, meaning that the light source is in front of the figure and aimed pretty much dead-on. **Frontal lighting** tends to flatten facial features, as in this shot from Lasse Hallström's *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*

With **sidelighting**, the light source illuminates the figure from the side. The effect of sidelighting is artfully sculpted features, as seen in this shot from David Fincher's *The Social Network*:

Underlighting is pretty much what kids do with flashlights under their chins when they're telling ghost stories: that is, it illuminates the figure from below. Although this shot from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* is complex in its lighting – you can see the sculpting of a sidelight as well as the shine from a toplight (explained below), it's the underlighting that gives Marlon Brando that horror-movie vibe.
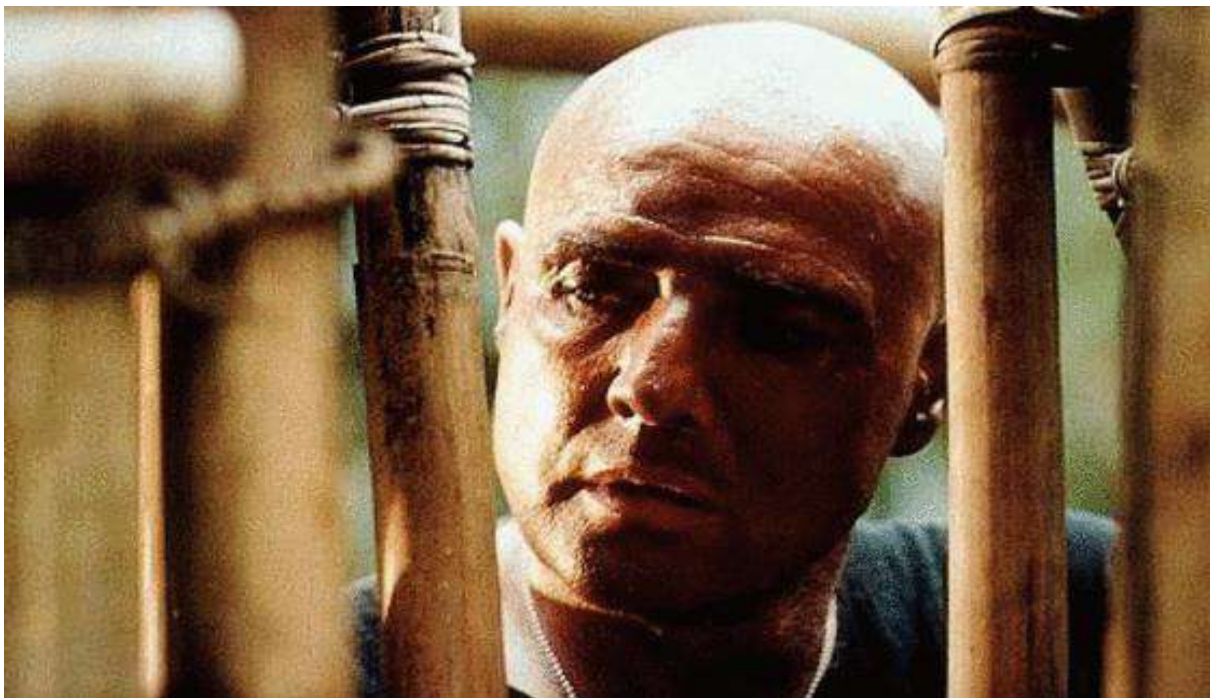
Backlighting is a little confusing, at least when applied to the shot below from Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. It's tempting to think that a backlight must be sourced behind a figure's back, but that's only true if the figure is facing the camera. The guy on the right here is backlit, but because he's facing away from the camera, the light source is right in his face. Either way, though, from our perspective he is backlit, and the effect, as you can see, is the creation of a silhouette.

Toplighting, like all of the other lighting directions, is exactly what it sounds like: lighting the figure from the top. The effect of toplighting is often something of a halo effect, creating a soft, light aura around the top of the head and a soft shadow on the neck and shoulders, as in this shot from Wim Wenders' *Paris Texas*.[4]

---

[4] An excellent movie that most people have never heard of. You should watch it.

Aside from the five basic lighting directions discussed above, cinematographers often make use of two very specialized lights to achieve a very specific desired effect. The first is the **hairlight**, which is essentially a toplight that's strategically aimed at a figure's hair in order to make it shine to the point of almost glowing, as seen in this shot from Barry Levinson's *The Natural*:

And then there's the **eyelight**, a tiny light aimed from the side, right at the eye (or, as is often the case, right at the tear that is escaping from the eye). This light creates the sad/sexy/intriguing sparkle that has made moviegoers fall in love with movie stars for nearly a century now. For evidence, take a look at Ingrid Bergman at the end of *Casablanca*:

On the flipside of light, there is shadow. Shadows in film don't happen by accident – they're very carefully created for artful purposes by cinematographers using specific lighting sources, intensities, and directions. Shadows come in two flavors: **attached shadows**, also known as **shading**, occur when illumination on a figure or object creates a shadow that falls upon the figure/object itself, as in the shot below from *Casablanca*.

The second type of shadow – the **cast shadow** – occurs when an object or figure casts its shadow on a different object or figure, as in this shot from John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*:

Two final terms related to light and shadow: **Chiaroscuro** is an Italian term (literally translating to "light/dark") that refers to areas of extreme light and dark in a single shot, as in this shot from *Casablanca*:

And **film noir** – a French term that literally means "dark film" – refers to films that are consistently dark, not only in terms of visual illumination but also in emotional quality. A classic example is Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, a shot from which is presented below:

Color

Color in film, as in all visual arts, functions on four levels: color can be descriptive, emotional, symbolic, or structural – or, of course, a combination of these functions. **Descriptive color** is used to describe, or represent, what something looks like. Trees are green, the sky is blue, clouds are white, skin (on white guys) is pinkish, horses are brown . . . as in this shot from *Brokeback Mountain*:


Emotional color is employed to create feelings in the perceiver. Blue, for example, is non-threatening, as James Cameron well knows – which is why he chose to give the Na'vi blue skin in *Avatar*. Green, on the other hand, is rather shocking, especially when it's on the face of the Wicked Witch in Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz*.

Color can also be **symbolic** – which means that it represents an abstract idea within the context of the film. Think about what the gold-yellow and red might mean in the shots below, from *The Wizard of Oz* and from Sam Mendes' *American Beauty.*
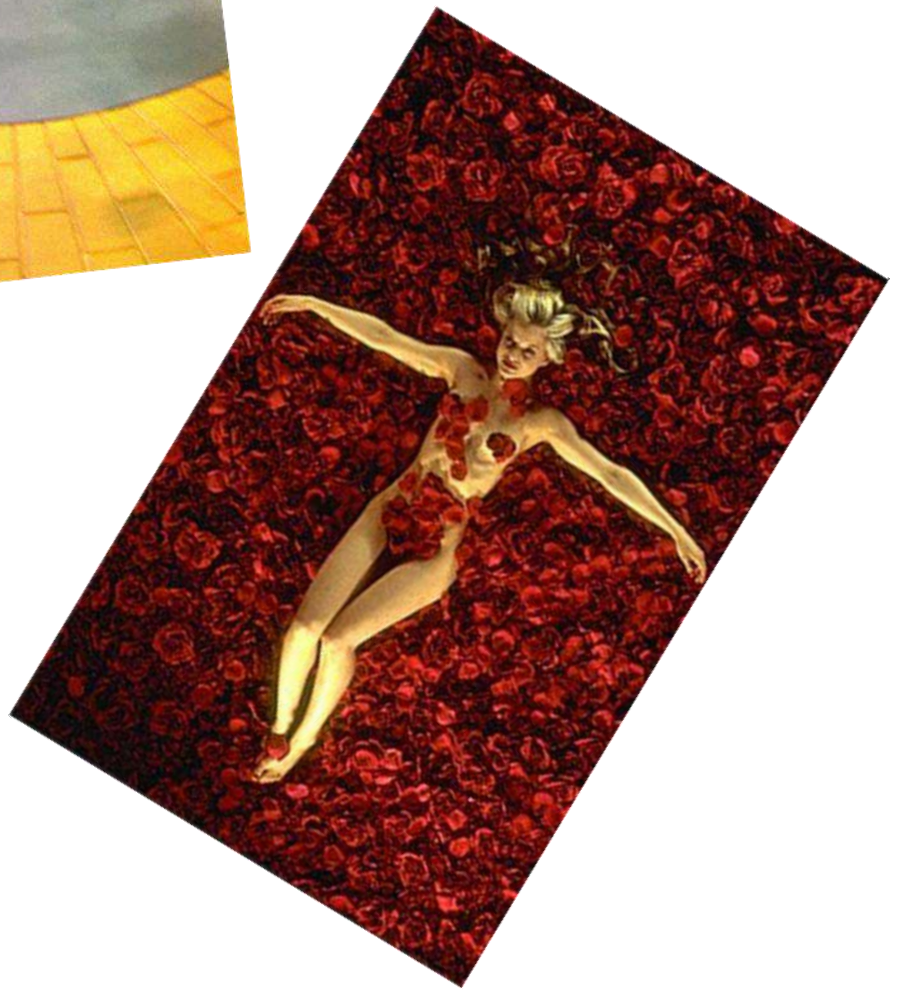
Be careful, though, about assuming too much about symbolic color – especially when you're viewing a film created in a culture other than your own. Most symbolic meanings related to color are cultural rather than universal. In Western culture (the one you're living in), white typically stands for purity, red for passion or anger, etc. But in Japan, for example, white represents death and red represents purity.

Finally, color can function on a **formal/structural** level, creating lines and areas of composition within the frame. See if you can determine how color is used to emphasize the structural components of this shot from Andrew Stanton's *Finding Nemo*.

Perspective Relations

Perspective relations in the mise-en-scène are all about the relative size and balance of elements viewable on the screen. It's easy to forget sometimes that film isn't three-dimensional. In fact, it isn't even two-dimensional, since it's ultimately just light. It doesn't even have the physical presence of the two-dimensional screen it's projected on, and yet we fully believe we're seeing all sorts of three-dimensional (and even four-dimensional) figures and objects cavorting around in front of us when we're all wrapped up in the movie we're watching.

When setting, figures, props, etc. are placed in the mise-en-scène and captured on film, the placements of those elements in relation to each other and to their surroundings create **depth cues** (which allow us to infer that one object is closer to us than another, for example) and **emphasis** (which allows us to make judgments about what's important in the shot). There are various types of depth cues – the clues we perceive that give us our sense of relative distances between and among the things we see on screen.

The simplest of depth cues is the **overlapping plane** – this is the visual cue that tells us that if one object or figure overlaps another (that is, if one object/figure *covers up* another), then the one being covered up is farther away. A parallel concept, working in tandem with the overlapping plane, is **size diminution**, which tells us that smaller objects are farther away and larger objects are closer. Look at how both overlapping planes and size diminution work together to create the illusion of depth in this shot from *Casablanca:*

Another means by which we perceive depth in a flat image is through **linear perspective** – the artistic principle which dictates that parallel lines will appear farther apart the closer they are to us and will seem to converge when they reach the horizon line, as shown in this scene from *Paris Texas*. Note that beyond the most obvious parallel lines (the railroad tracks), there are plenty of other examples of parallel lines to observe in this shot:
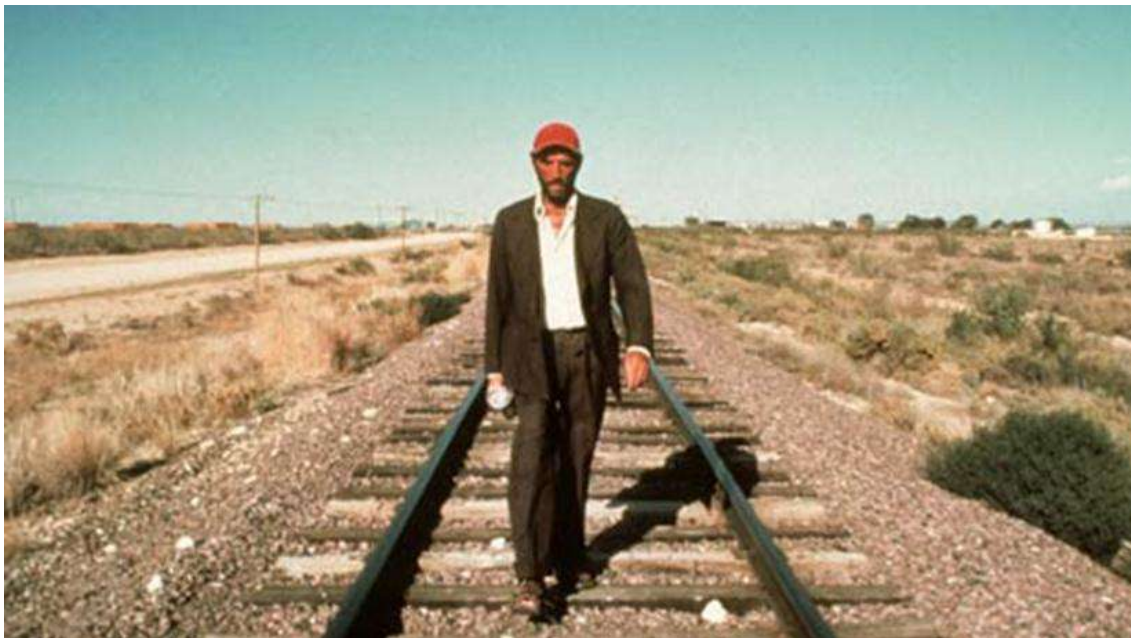
And a third means of demonstrating the illusion of depth is through **aerial perspective** – which, perhaps surprisingly, has nothing to do with the fact that there's an airplane in this shot from Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient*. Rather, the principle of aerial perspective asserts that planes (not airplanes, but planes of depth) will blur and grow hazy as they grow more distant.

A significant consideration in composing the mise-en-scène of the shot is the question of how many planes of depth will be viewable within the frame. A **shallow-space composition** is one in which there are very few planes visible – as in this shot from *The English Patient*, which contains just two planes: the figures in the foreground and the rock wall in the background:

At the other end of the spectrum from the shallow-space composition is the **deep-space composition** – which has nothing to do with *Star Trek* or any other outer-space story, but is rather about capturing several planes of depth that are clearly visible within the frame, as in this shot from *Citizen Kane*, which presents at least seven or eight planes (Mrs. Kane[5] in the foreground, her husband behind her on the right, the table a bit farther back, the lawyer holding his hat on the left, the piano behind him, the wall behind the piano, the hallway barely visible through the doorway at the extreme left . . .). This is deep-space composition at its clearest.

Performance

The final aspect of mise-en-scène is **performance**: the behavior and artistry used by figures in the film. Performance can be broken down into three considerations: blocking, choreography, and acting.

Blocking is essentially the same in film as it is in live theatre: the movement and positioning of figures within the frame. When a figure walks, stands, sits – or even swims, flies, or falls over – we are seeing the results of the blocking that has been carefully planned and executed by the director, designers, cinematography team, and actors. When blocking is detailed and intricate, it rises to the level of **choreography** – a term that we normally associate with dance. But film performance,

---

[5] That's Agnes Moorehead, by the way, who decades later became Endora, Samantha's mother, on *Bewitched*.

which does make use of choreography for dancing on occasion, makes its most significant use of choreography in fight scenes.

The final aspect of performance in film is, of course, **acting**. There are two aspects to an actor's performance: **visual elements**, which rely upon the actor's use of the body, including gesture and expression; and **auditory elements**, which rely upon the actor's use of the voice. It is through the use of these two tools (body and voice) that actors create memorable and highly individualized characters on screen. It's not just that actors have different body types/styles/sizes/shapes and different voice qualities – it's how they *use* their bodies and voices. Think about how Humphrey Bogart moves as Rick in *Casablanca.* Think of how he sits, how he walks, what kind of gestures he employs, the specific facial expressions he shows in different situations. Now think about how he uses his voice – yes, it's gravelly, and yes, it has a bit of a lisp, but beyond those innate characteristics, think about how his tone and his rate of speech changes depending on whether Rick is talking to Ilsa or Victor or Louis or Sam . . . Now go through the same exercise in considering Ingrid Bergman's performance as Ilsa, or Claude Rains' performance as Louis.

In broad terms, film acting can be classified as realistic or stylized. A **realistic performance** aims for verisimilitude – it's not that the actor is trying to make you believe that his/her character is actually a real person, but rather that his/her character *could be* a real person. Most of the performances in *Casablanca* are realistic. A **stylized performance** doesn't aim for verisimilitude in human terms, but rather aims for something heightened, fantastical, exaggerated, "stagey." Think of Michael Keaton in *Beetlejuice* or Jim Carrey in . . . well, in almost anything.

You'll note that I used the word "stagey" to refer to stylized performance, and for good reason. There are important differences between film acting and stage acting. For one thing, stage acting is necessarily more . . . well, more stagey. This is because there is a significant difference in **scale** between the two acting forms. When the actor is on a stage that's a hundred feet or more from the audience members in the back row, that actor needs to make bigger use of his/her tools (body and voice). Gestures must be broader in order to be seen, and voices must be louder in order to be heard. But film actors can make much more subtle, small, quiet use of their tools: a slightly raised eyebrow, the shadow of a smile, a quick glance away, a murmur, a quick intake of breath – these are all elements of acting that can be very powerful on the screen but would be utterly lost on all but the most intimate of live theatre stages.

Another crucial difference between film acting and stage acting is that the logistics are different, and this affects the relative **spontaneity** of the two types of acting. Film actors can try a particular scene over and over again until they get it just the way they want it, and only that version will be shown to an audience – while stage actors also try their scenes over and over again, but once they're past the rehearsal process, each of those performances is perceived by a live audience. Anything can happen in stage acting – but a film performance exists in only one iteration (aside from outtakes, of course).

And that's pretty much all there is to say about mise-en-scène. In Chapter 3, we'll explore the other half of The Shot: Cinematography.